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Approaching the Witness: Narratives of Trauma in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Literature and Film

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Approaching the Witness: Narratives of Trauma in Sub-Saharan Francophone African Literature and Film

Abstract

Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman’s pioneering work in trauma theory provided innovative critical frameworks for reading textual and filmic responses to mass violence. Yet trauma theory is rarely applied to African cultural production, despite the recent explosion of novels, memoir, and film from Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa grappling with civil war and genocide. In close analyses of child soldier novels, Rwandan genocide survivor memoirs, and Francophone African films, this dissertation effects such a theoretical rapprochement while simultaneously probing the limits of trauma theory’s assumptions concerning speech, temporality, and political representation. The first chapter, entitled “Giving Voice to the Icon: The Child Witness to Violence in Francophone African Fiction,” rereads Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma’s child soldier novel Allah n’est pas obligé (2000) arguing that Kourouma creates a “language of trauma,” which reveals how discourses of collective suffering risk limiting our understanding of violence’s psychological impact on individuals. The second chapter, “Listening to the Limit: Reading Paratext in Francophone African Trauma Memoirs,” redeploy Gérard Genette’s formulation of the “paratext” to read Rwandan Tutsi survivor Esther Mujawayo’s memoir SurVivantes (2011). I argue that the multiple introductions to SurVivantes function as a form of hospitality, inviting the reader to become a part of a virtual community of supportive listeners. The third chapter, “Hierarchies of Witnessing: Pan-African Celebrity and the Marginalization of Survivor Testimony,” investigates why Tutsi survivor memoirs have received so little attention from scholars. Using Rwandan survivor Vénuste Kayimaghe’s 2001 memoir France-Rwanda: Les coulisses du génocide (2001) as a case study, I argue that the marginalization of Rwandan survivor testimonies bears troubling similarities to survivor’s difficulties being heard in the real world. The fourth chapter, “African Trauma On (and Off) Screen: Temporality and Violence in Francophone African Cinema,” argues that in leaving graphic scenes of subjective violence off-screen, African filmmakers actively bear witness to the insidious long-term effects of events such as the Rwandan genocide or the daily reality of occupation under radical jihadist groups in Northern Mali as seen Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2014 film Timbuktu.

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APPROACHING THE WITNESS: NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA IN SUB-SAHARAN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN LITERATURE AND FILM

George S. MacLeod

A DISSERTATION

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French

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To Clara, for her love and support
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ABSTRACT

APPROACHING THE WITNESS: NARRATIVES OF TRAUMA IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN LITERATURE AND FILM

George S. MacLeod
Lydie Moudileno

Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman’s pioneering work in trauma theory provided innovative critical frameworks for reading textual and filmic responses to mass violence. Yet trauma theory is rarely applied to African cultural production, despite the recent explosion of novels, memoir, and film from Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa grappling with civil war and genocide. In close analyses of child soldier novels, Rwandan genocide survivor memoirs, and Francophone African films, this dissertation effects such a theoretical rapprochement while simultaneously probing the limits of trauma theory’s assumptions concerning speech, temporality, and political representation. The first chapter, entitled “Giving Voice to the Icon: The Child Witness to Violence in Francophone African Fiction,” rereads Ivorian author Ahmadou Kourouma’s child soldier novel *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000) arguing that Kourouma creates a “language of trauma,” which reveals how discourses of collective suffering risk limiting our understanding of violence’s psychological impact on individuals. The second chapter, “Listening to the Limit: Reading Paratext in Francophone African Trauma Memoirs,” redeploy Gérard Genette’s formulation of the “paratext” to read Rwandan Tutsi survivor Esther Mujawayo’s memoir *SurVivantes* (2011). I argue that the multiple introductions to *SurVivantes* function as a form of hospitality, inviting the reader to become a part of a virtual community of supportive listeners. The third chapter, “Hierarchies of Witnessing: Pan-African Celebrity and the Marginalization of Survivor Testimony,” investigates why Tutsi survivor memoirs have received so little attention from scholars. Using Rwandan survivor Vénuste Kayimahe’s 2001 memoir *France-Rwanda: Les coulisses du génocide* (2001) as a case study, I argue that the marginalization of Rwandan survivor testimonies bears troubling similarities to survivor’s difficulties being heard in the real world. The fourth chapter, “African Trauma On (and Off) Screen: Temporality and Violence in Francophone African Cinema,” argues that in leaving graphic scenes of subjective violence off-screen, African filmmakers actively bear witness to the insidious long-term effects of events such as the Rwandan genocide or the daily reality of occupation under radical jihadist groups in Northern Mali, as seen Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2014 film *Timbuktu*.
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INTRODUCTION

While the colonial-era literature of Sub-Saharan Francophone Africa frequently focused on questions of hybridized identity and nationality, post-independence literature has been preoccupied to a large extent with questions of violence. As Jacques Chevrier writes in *Littératures d'Afrique Noire de Langue Française*, “À la passion de la négritude succède le temps de la désillusion, donnant naissance à une nouvelle littérature… [qui] cèdent progressivement la place à la mise à nu de l'imposture postcoloniale et de son cortège d'infamies” (45). Such works as Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Les soleils des indépendances* (1970), which describes an authoritarian state’s abuses of power, and Sony Labou Tansi’s *La vie et demie* (1979) with its graphic accounts of dismemberment and murder sought to represent a violence that could be viewed both as a legacy of colonialism and a result of new and disturbing political and sociocultural practices. In the years after the publication of Kourouma’s and Labou Tansi’s novels, African literature has continued to engage with these questions of violence, in large part because of the tragic conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, the genocide in Rwanda, and, most recently, atrocities committed in the name of radical Islam in Mali and Nigeria. Novels, such as Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000), Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi* (2000), and testimonial literature, such as Rwandan survivor Esther Mujawayo’s *Survivantes* (2004), are emblematic of this trend as they grapple with a cycle of violence, which has continued decades after the continent’s fraught transition to democracy in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Kourouma’s *Les soleils des indépendances* is largely credited with initiating the disillusionment genre in which African authors began to detail in graphic form the corruption and failure of post-independence states. These could be said to lay the
groundwork for the subsequent explosion in representations of violence in Francophone African literature and film. *Les soleils des indépendances* centers on Fama, the last of a decaying line of Malinké nobles who have been displaced by new postcolonial power structures. Written in a hybridized French, which combined French prose with the words and speech rhythms of Kourouma’s native Malinké,¹ *Les soleils* broke with the tradition of using classical French prevalent among previous Francophone African novelists and memoirists.² However, even as critics acknowledged the groundbreaking nature of Kourouma’s formal and linguistic innovations, interpretation of his novel mostly followed a familiar paradigm for Francophone fiction, which considered this literature as a reflection of a certain historical and political reality. In these interpretations, Kourouma’s use of language reflected the fractured identity felt by Africans living with the legacy of colonialism.³ In addition, the violence done to the French language through its fragmentation was said to mirror the violence and instability of the corrupt African postcolonial government modeled on Kourouma’s home country of Côte d’Ivoire.⁴

Published 34 years after *Les soleils*, Kourouma’s 2002 novel *Allah n’est pas obligé* contains a similar form of hybridized French, albeit in a radically different context. *Allah* is narrated by Birahima, a former child soldier who does not know his real age and who has witnessed first-hand the atrocities of the civil wars which gripped West Africa in the 1990s. As the first person narrator of Kourouma’s novel, Birahima bears witness to unspeakable

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² Canonical examples include René Maran’s *Batouala: véritable roman nègre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1921), considered the first Francophone African novel, the classically inspired poetry of Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’aventure ambiguë* (Paris: Julliard, 1961).
suffering, describing the gruesome deaths of his child soldier comrades as well as the torture of Liberian warlord Samuel Doe, a real event, which was filmed and continues to be viewable on the internet. Birahima recounts these atrocities in an obscenity-laden version of Kourouma’s distinctive style of Malinké-inflected French, and critics have tended to view Birahima’s story as more commentary on split identity and postcolonial language politics.5 This move to view novels as bearing witness to a complex and fraught geopolitical reality of colonialism and its aftermath has historically been the dominant reception paradigm in Francophone African literature. In his meta-study of Francophone African literary criticism, *La littérature africaine et sa critique* (1986), Locha Mateso sums up this tendency as follows:

L’une des caractéristiques du discours critique consacré à la littérature africaine est la recherche des phénomènes extérieurs dont l’œuvre serait le reflet… [La critique] recherche les signes conventionnels qui permettent d’affirmer avec certitude que l’œuvre renvoie au monde extérieur. Elle postule une liaison linéaire et univoque entre l’univers littéraire et la réalité. (189)

What, then, is lost when we evaluate works, such as Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé*, according to this critical perspective? In turning the child soldier narrator Birahima into a metaphorical figure, what productive interpretive possibilities are ignored? One such loss is a failure to account for Birahima’s status as a witness to trauma, an individual subject attempting to bear witness in the moment to the singular events of atrocity which he has seen and experienced, and at times, perpetrated. The language he speaks, which contains the

repetition of certain words and phrases, often obscenities, is also a language of trauma, an affect which lies outside any historical or political determinism. Birahima also interpolates an implied reader directly (often telling his reader to “Allez vous faire foutre!” or “Foutez-moi la paix!”) creating an emotionally charged dialogic relationship between the witness of trauma and an implied addressee.

This consideration of the way in which the author constructs the subjectivity of the trauma witness, as well as that of his or her implied interlocutors, is necessary for a broader understanding of any text which deals with traumatic events. And yet such readings do not fit into the traditional paradigm of Francophone African literary criticism, which has tended to privilege historical and political context. The way African writers and filmmakers have represented atrocity in the African context is especially crucial to consider since Africa, in the collective imaginary, has long been coded as a space of cruelty or barbarism. In this dissertation, I propose a mode of reading Francophone African literature and film which, while acknowledging the importance of this literature’s inscription of colonial and postcolonial violence in collective memory, also considers the way in which it represents and interpolates subjective agents who do not function merely as metaphors for a larger historical truth. My analysis brings the critical tools of trauma studies and narratological analysis to bear on African cultural production, something that has been done sparingly, and

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6 Perhaps the most provocative example of this is Fredric Jameson’s sweeping claim that all “third world” literature is necessarily a sort of national allegory. He writes: “Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic—necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society. Need I add that it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading?” (69).
in ways that tended to privilege collective over individual memory. A response to the first person testimony and literature emerging from the Holocaust, trauma studies foregrounded the question of how works depicting what have been dubbed “limit events” might give access to historical understanding that went beyond empirical knowledge and gestured towards more profound truths containing the psychological impact of trauma and the unspeakable nature of violence. In her pioneering 1996 work *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth called for a mode of listening to stories of suffering that saw in their lacunae and even their factual inaccuracies a call to listen attentively and an ethical imperative to respond that might ultimately foster some form of cross-cultural understanding.

And yet even as trauma studies tried to understand the process of bearing witness as something that did more than give access to historical fact, this perspective implicitly placed another burden on the witness. As a medium to this non-empirical psychological and historical understanding, the focus remained not on the individual witness but on the greater truths concerning the nature of traumatic experience and the unspeakable nature of suffering. If African literary and film criticism have looked to literature and film for historical knowledge, trauma studies was initially premised on a similar move, viewing the individual witness as the key to unlocking some form of abstract but no less objective truth.

Indeed, in reading the novels and eyewitness accounts that have chronicled recent violence in Africa, it became clear that many authors were in fact contesting, if not openly mocking, the very notion that some kind of greater knowledge, whether concerning the nature of trauma or national and Pan-African histories, was the end goal of listening to and

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responding to stories of suffering. While trauma studies’ valorization of the individual and their trauma represented a step towards a more sophisticated way to listen to and respond to survivor testimony, it did not address the question of how viewing the witness as a “medium,” to quote Shoshana Felman, uncomfortably echoed some of the instrumentalizing discourse that might lead to violence in the first place, in that such discourse entails a minimizing of individuals, as well as the family and social structures that give their lives stability and meaning, for the sake of a larger, transcendent political or ideological ideal. My goal is not to suggest any malicious intent on the part of scholars who privilege historical readings of testimony, but rather to suggest some unsettling discursive parallels of instrumentalization that deserve to be addressed and unpacked.

Examining child soldier testimonies, Rwandan genocide survivor narratives, and Francophone African films on war, my dissertation thus focuses on what it means to privilege testimony as an individual rather than a collective act. I do this in part by employing conceptual tools from narratology, an analytical model which privileges interpreting texts based on identifying the nature of the narrative “voice,” a practice that can be employed with both fiction and nonfiction texts alike. In using, and reshaping, the concept of the “witness,” as theorized by trauma studies, I propose a reading of Francophone African literature which considers the historical context, the violent event which has been witnessed, as well as the event of bearing witness itself.
CHAPTER 1

Giving Voice to the Icon: The Child Witness to Violence in Francophone African Fiction

Introduction

“La vérité sort de la bouche de l’enfant,” (107) asserts the cynical western journalist Rodney in Guinean writer Tierno Monénembo’s novel L’aîné des Orphelins (2000), as he tries to convince his skeptical camera crew that a fifteen year old Rwandan boy’s sensational tales of genocide are true. Rodney has in fact been coaching the boy Faustin, the protagonist of Monémbo’s novel, to lie about his experiences, since the traumatized Faustin has no recollection of what happened during the genocide. Rodney’s cynical use of a child survivor and his trauma is more than a critique of the Western media’s voyeurism and commodification of African suffering. It also implicates Monénembo himself who has chosen to narrate his novel about the Tutsi genocide in the voice of a child whose reliability as a narrator has now been called into question. What precisely is the “truth,” Monénembo seems to ask, that a child narrator can reveal to us? And why privilege the child as a witness to mass violence when he or she may be the least equipped to fully articulate and contextualize what has occurred?

Monénembo’s self-reflection on his choice of a child-narrator is especially pertinent in the context of Francophone African literature where the figure of the child has often stood as a metaphor for the continent itself. Senegalese Ahmadou Mapaté Diagne’s Les trois

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volontés de Malic (1920), arguably the earliest example of Francophone African fiction, tells the story of a young Senegalese boy’s “successful assimilation into a colonized environment” (Moudileno, 126) in a narrative which sought to reinforce the positive values of a colonial education. The notion of the child representing Africa’s dependence on France’s economic and cultural superiority can be found, albeit in more nuanced form, in several Francophone African fiction’s canonical works, including Camara Laye’s L’enfant noir (1953) and Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s L’aventure ambiguë (1961). Laye’s fictionalized memoir has in fact been critiqued for its largely uncritical stance on the colonial system, presenting his young protagonist’s embrace of French education and culture as a more benign metaphor for coming of age. Even as authors such as Kane and Bernard Dadié offered cutting appraisals of the effects of French cultural hegemony, the recourse to the child as an allegory for colonial Africa’s sense of existential confusion nonetheless risked reinforcing the western perception of the continent as a space of arrested development or perpetual adolescence. Implicitly or no, contemporary representations of the child in the Francophone African context, such as L’aîné des orphelins or Ahmadou Kourouma’s Allah n’est pas obligé (2000) evoke the specter of these earlier texts, raising questions about why the child should be a privileged literary device for translating an African reality to a largely Western reading public. Since these works are often published in France and read and taught outside of

11 For further discussion of Laye’s novel in the broader context of Francophone African fiction see Mohamadou K. Kane, Roman africain et traditions (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1982).
12 In addition to Monénembo and Kourouma’s novels, prominent examples of these novels and memoirs in the Francophone tradition include Emmanuel Dongala, Johnny Chien Mèchant (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 2002); Abdourahman Waberi, Transit (Paris: Gallimard, 2003); Lucien Badjoko and Katia Clarens, J’étais enfant soldat (Paris: Plon, 2005); Serge Amisi, Souvenez-vous de moi, l’enfant de demain (La Roque d’Anthéron: Vents d’Ailleurs, 2011). Some Anglophone examples are Ken Saro-Wiwa, Sozaboy (Oxford: Saros International Publishers, 1985); Chris Abani, Graceland, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); Song for Night (Brooklyn: Akashic Books, 2007); Uzodinma Iweala, Beasts of No Nation (London: John Murray, 2005); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Half of
Africa, the way in which the figure of the child recurs in Francophone literature raises concerns about an essentializing of African as a perpetually ‘under-developed’ space that has yet to achieve a certain Western standard of social and cultural maturation.

In addition, several prominent examples of these works, such as Kourouma’s novel and Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002) are written from the perspective of the child soldier, a choice which risks, according to some critics, further essentializing Africa as a space of never-ending conflict and cruelty. Indeed the phenomenon of the child-soldier narrative has become so widespread that it bears special attention in any study of contemporary African literature. In a 2011 special issue of *Études littéraires africaines* entitled “L’enfant-soldat, langage et image” Nicolas Martin-Granel identifies over forty current titles corresponding to the child soldier genre. These narratives represent children’s participation and engagement with extreme violence in the latter half of the 20th century, principally in Liberia, Sierra Leone, as well as the conflicts in the two Congos and in Rwanda. This abundance of child-soldier narratives reflects (as well as contributes to) the rise of the child soldier as arguably the most visible icon of modern day Africa. If the image of the starving child with a bloated stomach became synonymous with African poverty and conflict in the 1960s, so the image of the child soldier has become synonymous with both extreme violence and the failure of post-independence African states to construct a stable, civil society. As a global symbol of modern Africa, the child soldier has achieved a dubious, if undeniable, notoriety. Birahima, the child soldier protagonist of Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* suggests this when he says “l’enfant-soldat est le personnage le plus célèbre de cette fin

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The literary representation of the child soldier is thus inescapably bound with contemporary African history as the continent continues a struggle with extreme violence.

It is essential to question whether or not these literary representations constitute, as Daniel Delas speculates, a form of western exoticizing of the child figure, in other words the “nouvelle manifestation d’un afropessimisme qui ne serait tant mis en valeur que parce qu’il relève d’une esthétique de l’horreur et d’un goût bien actuel pour le trash” (55). Indeed, the machine-gun toting child who stares blankly at the reader from the cover of Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* does evoke the grotesque shock value of the sort of pulp writing which Delas mentions. And yet, as Martin-Granel points out, the child soldier is first and foremost an historical figure, one whose literary representation bears witness to an undeniable reality of conflict. How, then, can an author transmit this reality to a European educated reading public without creating the “retour en force du vieil exotisme occidental” that seems implicit in the disturbing image of the blood-thirsty child killer? More specifically, what are we to make of the rise to prominence of the child soldier as a privileged witness to, and agent of, the violence in postcolonial Africa?

In this chapter I will analyze three novels narrated in the first person by a child soldier or child perpetrator of violence: Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000), Tierno Monénembo’s *L’aîné des orphelins* (2000), and Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2002). The respective narrators of these novels all occupy the “borderline” position that Nicolas Martin-Granel claims as characteristic of the child soldier:

> Doublement subalterne, comme ‘boy’ à tout faire et comme enfant vulnérable, à la fois victime et bourreau, tantôt muet (*infans*), tantôt doué d’une gouaille verbale inépuisable, le plus souvent masculin mais parfois féminin, l’enfant-soldat est un
personnage “borderline”, une chimère, voire un monstre qui traverse les catégories, les langues et les genres. (8-9)

While Martin-Granel's list of co-existing opposite characteristics suggests the complexity of representing the child soldier, it also speaks to his or her privileged status as a witness. The term borderline evokes the term “medium” or go between which for Shoshana Felman in Testimony defines the figure of the witness.16 By this definition, the witness acts as a sort of conduit for a larger historical truth which he or she makes present to their interlocutors. And yet, even as these child narrators bear witness to a larger historical truth of violence, they also bear witness, on the level of narrative to a personal, subjective experience. To reduce the child witness of trauma to either a “medium” or a “monster” thus risks ignoring the way in which these authors strive to humanize the image of the child soldier, restoring his or her right to be viewed as precisely not a medium or an icon, but as an individual human subject who has witnessed and suffered trauma.

One of the principal ways in which these authors establish the subjectivity of their protagonists is through their use of first-person narration, which often directly addresses an implied reader or “vous.” To fully grasp how these narratives function, it is thus critical to consider not simply the historical or historically-inspired events represented, but the manner in which the child tells his story in the diegetic present. What sort of reader is being spoken to? How might he or she position him or herself in relation to this literary construction of a child’s voice? My analysis of these texts will consider both the way in which the child soldier is represented textually as well as the way in which these child soldier characters represent themselves to the literal or implied addressee of their first person narration.

In addition, I will focus on the formal techniques that Kourouma, Monénembo, and Dongala employ in order to establish their narrators’ individual subjectivity while also examining the moments when the author speaks through their narrator, using the voice of their young protagonist as a rhetorical tool to express a particular point of view. I will also reflect on the fundamental question of what it means for an adult author to simulate the voice of a child witness to violence. Is this an ethically questionable literary strategy which shares troubling similarities with the exploitation upon which the practice of child soldiers is based? Or rather is this instrumentalization of the child, through the author’s appropriation of his or her voice, in fact an effort to remind the reader that these children cannot speak for themselves, a literary strategy which reinforces their essential powerlessness? It is this ethically-fraught but necessary attempt to give a voice to the voiceless icon that I will examine in the analyses that follow.

Part I: Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé*

One cannot write about ‘voice’ in African literature without considering the Ivorian novelist Ahmadou Kourouma (1927-2003), perhaps the most decorated and mythologized of all 20th century Francophone African writers. Born in 1927 in current day Ivory Coast, Kourouma, an accountant by trade, was an unremarkable student of French in his youth with no professed literary inclinations, making his ascension into the pantheon of African novelists all the more remarkable. He began writing his first novel, *Les soleils des indépendances* (1968) following his politically motivated imprisonment by the Ivorian dictator Félix Houphouët-Boigny in 1963. Having left the Ivory Coast for Algiers, Kourouma completed

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Les soleils in 1966 and, after a spate of initial rejections, was accepted by the press of the Études françaises at the University of Montreal. Kourouma’s recognition by the main-stream literary establishment came soon after as Les soleils’ reputation spread quickly within both French and African literary circles, culminating in its publication by Seuil in 1970 and its subsequent receipt of the Prix de l’Académie Française that same year.

Les soleils des indépendances tells the story of Fama, the last of a decaying line of Malinké nobility increasingly marginalized by the new post-independence governments, who imprison him on a fabricated charge of political treason. More than the novel’s political content, it was Kourouma’s innovative prose style that lead to his almost mythic status within Francophone African literature.\(^{19}\) Breaking with the classically inspired French of pre-independence authors such as Léopold Sédar Senghor and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Kourouma wrote in an orally-inflected, hybridized French which mixed French prose with Malinké proverbs and speech rhythms.\(^{20}\) Kourouma’s significance and mythic status are due in large part to his privileged place in the master-narrative of Francophone African literature in which his novel indicates a pivotal shift away from the linguistic orthodoxy of pre-independence Francophone African literature.\(^{21}\) In addition Les soleils’ acerbic critique of postcolonial dictatorships is perhaps the earliest example of the “disillusionment” novel which chronicled the African intellectual’s dismay with the failure of post-independence governments, often detailing their abuses in graphic detail. Despite a 22 year gap between the publication of Les soleils and his second novel, Monnè, outrages et défis (1990), Kourouma’s

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\(^{20}\) The very title of the work “Les soleils des indépendances” was a play on the multiple meanings of sun in Malinké.

\(^{21}\) This included the classically inspired poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor as well as canonical novels such as the previously cited L’aventure ambiguë and L’enfant noir.
formal and generic innovation assured him a place of privilege within Francophone African literary history.\textsuperscript{22}

As Christiane Ndiaye points out in her meta-analysis of Kourouma’s mythologization and reception, critical response to Kourouma has overwhelmingly privileged the historical significance of his novels, including that of his distinctive language:

\begin{quote}
Le discours de la réception s’engage donc lui-même dans une impasse en voulant ainsi assimiler le langage de Kourouma à un seul discours social (histoire, politique, tradition et culture africaines, etc.: chacun fait son choix) afin d’en dégager ‘le sens,’ ‘la vérité.’ (31)
\end{quote}

The way in which Kourouma’s language reflects a particular sociological reality (that of a hybridized society composed of African traditions and the French language) continues to define his critical reception, often reducing his novels to the status of ethnographic or sociological documents.\textsuperscript{23}

This critical lens largely framed the reception of Kourouma’s final, completed novel \textit{Allah n’est pas obligé} (2002), the fictional first-person account of the former child soldier Birahima. Kourouma’s distinctive prose style becomes the voice of the young Birahima (who isn’t sure if he is 10 or 12) who describes his experience as a child soldier in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia in the 1990s. Encountering Kourouma’s familiar prose style in an updated historical context, critics have noted its relationship to African identity formation in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century (Coulibaly, 22) as well as the way in which it contests the hegemonic authority of the French language (Walsh, 194). Affin Laditan’s contends that \textit{Allah} is in fact a

\textsuperscript{22}In his book \textit{La langue d’Ahmadou Kourouma} (Paris: ACCT; Karthala, 1995), Makhily Gassama writes: “C’est cette Afrique moribonde que Kourouma décrit dans un style nouveau, un style né de la rencontre de deux civilisations—la française et la négro-africaine—et de deux langues—le malinké et le français. Tout se passe comme s’il n’envisageait rien de moins que la volonté délibérée d’illustrer la francophonie” (12).

\textsuperscript{23} A typical example would be Madeline Borgomano’s monograph \textit{Ahmadou Kourouma: Le Guerrier Griot} (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1998).
combination of history and war reportage (239) while Liana Nissim claims that the novel represents the “l’aterité absolue” of Francophone African identity (110). These critical responses to Allah thus build both on previous Kourouma criticism, beginning with the canonical Les soleils as well as a longer tradition of Francophone African criticism that privileged the novel’s relationship to historical or sociological reality. 24 However, I propose that to consider Kourouma’s style in Allah n’est pas obligé simply as further commentary on African civil conflicts or postcolonial African identity and cultural hybridity risks ignoring the way in which the demands of traumatic representation shape his text. In this section, I propose that Kourouma’s distinctive prose style in Allah also functions as a “language of trauma,” using a deliberately ambiguous frame narrative as well as the rhetorical device of repetition to suggest the psychological impact of trauma on his young protagonist. I will further show that Kourouma deploys this language of trauma to create a distinctive sort of historical writing, one which aims to create the “empathic unsettlement” which Dominick LaCapra describes as a privileged mode of representing violent events. 25 Overall, I will argue that Kourouma seeks not so much to create the authentic testimony of a child soldier, but to explore the rhetorical possibilities of speaking in the child soldier’s voice.

Who speaks? Kourouma’s Frame Narrative

Kourouma’s narrator is Birahima a former child soldier who doesn’t know if he is 10 or 12 (“il y a deux ans grand-mère disait huit et maman dix” (10)) and who claims to have had very little formal education. After his mother dies from an infection (the result of a botched circumcision), Birahima leaves Guinea with Yacouba, a profiteering marabout, to

24 In La littérature africaine et sa critique (Paris: A.C.C.T; Karthala, 1986), Locha Mateso describes this phenomenon: “L’une des caractéristiques du discours critique consacré à la littérature africaine est la recherche des phénomènes extérieurs dont l’œuvre serait le reflet…Elle recherche les signes conventionnels qui permettent d’affirmer avec certitude que l’œuvre renvoie au monde extérieur” (189).
find his aunt in Liberia. During his journey he witnesses and participates in various “guerres tribales” in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone before finally learning that his aunt has died. The novel includes long passages giving sardonic accounts of the corrupt and bloodthirsty warlords and dictators who are responsible for the conflicts in which Birahima participates. A deliberately ambiguous frame narrative suggests that Birahima is speaking to an individual or group (a “vous” that Birahima addresses throughout the text) over a period of several days, although this “vous” could equally be directed at an extradiegetic implied reader who makes no appearance in the text.

This interpellation of the reader, a device often associated with an African tradition of oral story-telling, features prominently in Kourouma’s previous works. Christopher Miller points out that “the implied fiction of the reader’s role” through the narrator’s use of “vous” was a central feature of Les soleils des indépendances in which the heterodiegetic narrator spoke to an extradiegetic “vous,” giving him or her information about Malinké culture. Unlike Les Soleils, however Allah n’est pas obligé does give some indications that this “vous” may in fact be a character in the text. (We learn at the end of the novel, for instance, that a certain Dr. Mahmadou had encouraged Birahima to tell his story.) The first mention of the “vous”, on the novel’s second page, suggests a possible face to face encounter. “…Je veux bien m’excuser de vous parler vis-à-vis comme ça” (10) while the final reference to an interlocutor at the end of the novel’s introductory section is somewhat unclear. “Asseyez-vous et écoutez-moi. Et écrivez tout et tout. Allah n’est pas obligé d’être juste dans toutes ses choses. Faforo (sexe de mon papa) !” (12-13) These imperative commands suggest a listener who is present with Birahima in a face-to-face encounter and who is transcribing his speech (Allah

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26 “Je me suis bien calé, bien assis, et j’ai commencé : J’ai décidé. Le titre définitif et complet de mon blablabla est : Allah n’est pas obligé d’être juste dans toutes ces choses ici-bas. J’ai continué à conter mes salades pendant plusieurs jours” (224).
n’est pas obligé etc. being the title of the work). It also could be said to address the reader directly, giving him or her the fictive role within the narrative which Miller identifies in Les soleils. However, the key difference between the two texts is the possibility of a literal face-to-face encounter between narrator and addressee (the narrator in Les soleils is heterodiegetic and no such encounter is implied). Speaking about Les soleils, Miller observes that:

Between the vous and the nous [in the novel] is the space of dialogue; the difference necessary for dialogue and dialectic is given a particular character: it is a cultural, ethnic difference between the Mande and everything outside of it. (214)

Kourouma establishes a similar dynamic in the opening pages of Allah. And yet while Birahima is Malinké he is also defined by his exposure to traumatic events and his past experience as a child soldier. Thus while the difference between the first person narrator, Birahima’s “je,” and the “vous” of “asseyez-vous” is certainly cultural, as found in Les soleils, it is also experiential and epistemological one: the difference between a human subject who has witnessed certain traumatic events and an interlocutor who is called upon to listen to and possibly transcribe the witness’ story. We can thus observe from Les soleils des indépendances to Allah n’est pas obligé a transition to a more complex form of dialogism based on both cultural difference and the ambiguities of an intersubjective personal encounter.27

But if Birahima speaks so much like Kourouma, are we really meant to consider Allah a fictional reconstruction of a child-soldier narrative? Is the novel simply a further vehicle for the author’s critiques of postcolonial African governance and culture? Initially Kourouma appears to write in the plausible voice (or its written transcription) of an

27 Alexandre Dauge-Roth examines the ethical implications of this personal encounter as it relates to literature in Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010).
undereducated child narrator. The novel’s second paragraph reads, “Et d’abord… et un… M’appelle Birahima. Suis p’tit nègre. Pas parce que suis black et gosse. Non! Mais suis p’tit nègre parce que je parle mal le français. C’é comme ça” (9). Here Kourouma mocks and criticizes the racist formulation of “p’tit nègre” to describe non-fluent French. The incorrect grammar and spelling appear an attempt to establish the authenticity of the text as the testimony of a barely literate child soldier. However, the use of “p’tit nègre” French ceases almost immediately in giving way to a highly stylized but nonetheless grammatically and orthographically correct French. This abrupt transition is not explained, nor is it ever clear if Birahima is meant to have written this text himself, or when or where he might be telling his story. Certainly, the “petit nègre” French that opens the text can be read as Kourouma mocking the notion that his style of French is bad (when held to an arbitrary standard of linguistic purity) and then abruptly undermining this critique with an abrupt change to correct spelling and grammar. However, this transition also signals Kourouma’s deliberate decision not to recreate the plausible testimony of an adolescent child soldier. Thus from the opening page, Kourouma makes clear to his reader that he is simultaneously speaking as Birahima and through Birahima, using the narratological possibilities of the child soldier’s voice to add nuance to his critiques of contemporary African culture.28

While Kourouma’s writing style suggests the novel does not aspire to be a plausible transcription of a child soldier’s testimony, Kourouma frames the narrative to suggest that his fictional text was indeed told as a face-to-face encounter over the series of several days although the exact circumstances are left ambiguous. (Birahima gives no indication where

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this encounter could be taking place, over exactly what period of time etc…) The first suggestion of this encounter occurs in the final lines of the first chapter. Birahima says, “Voilà ce que j’avais à dire aujourd’hui. J’en ai marre; je m’arrête aujourd’hui/Walahé! Faforo (sexe de mon père)! Gnamokodé (bâtard)!" (49) The “aujourd’hui” is the first moment in which the novel establishes a chronology of the story’s recounting in the present (and by implication a physically present interlocutor). Similar declarations occur at the end of the second and third chapters as Birahima becomes progressively more exasperated with his implied listener: Aujourd’hui, ce 25 septembre 199… j’en ai marre. Marre de raconter ma vie, marre de compiler les dictionnaires, marre de tout. Allez vous faire foutre. Je me tais, je dis plus rien aujourd’hui… A gnamokodé (putain de ma mère)! A faforo (sexe de mon père)! (130)
The reference to the dictionaries further confuses the method of production of the narrative. The mention of a date and the use of “raconter” implies a specific time and place in which the story is being recounted orally, while the reference to using dictionaries to look up words suggests an after the fact rewriting. Furthermore, is it the reader or a silent interlocutor physically present within narrative who is told “Allez vous faire foutre?” This passage encapsulates the way in which Kourouma actively works to create ambiguities of meaning and framing, conflating Birahima’s implied interlocutor with an implied reader, and also conflating his own narrative voice with that of Birahima. It is not until the novel’s final pages that Birahima gives a possible identity of this interlocutor and provides more specifics about how the narrative we are reading came into being. After relating that he obtained the four dictionaries he refers to in the text from a
former UN interpreter, he describes how a Dr. Mamadou, whom he meets during his travels, asks him to tell his story:

‘Petit Birahima, dis-moi tout, dis-moi tout ce que tu as vu et fait; dis-moi comment tout ça s’est passé.’

Je me suis bien calé, bien assis, et j’ai commencé : J’ai décidé. Le titre définitif et complet de mon blablabla est : *Allah n’est pas obligé d’être juste dans toutes ces choses ici-bas*. J’ai continué à conter mes salades pendant plusieurs jours. (224)²⁹

Kourouma thus gives more concrete information about the frame narrative which had been implied by his ambiguous references to an interlocutor and to the time and place of the story’s telling. In retroactively framing the entire narrative within the space of this intersubjective encounter between witness and interlocutor Kourouma draws the reader’s attention away from his own authorial voice (which dominates the latter half of the narrative) back to the presence of the child Birahima. This reference abruptly shifts the reader’s attention from the past of the narrated events, to the present of their recounting, a present which seems doomed to repeat itself *ad infinitum* since the story ends with the paragraphs that open the novel. It is important to note that Kourouma gives no other information concerning Birahima’s present situation. Where is he now? What are his future prospects? Is there a chance that he could be reintegrated into society? Does he want rehabilitation or to continue as a child soldier? That these questions remain unanswered force the reader to reflect critically on the extent to which Birahima is to be considered a

²⁹ Étienne-Marie Lassi makes the debatable but nonetheless interesting conjecture that Birahima’s narrative, if indeed recounted to a doctor, could be seen as a form of talking cure in "Récit et catharsis: La conjuration de la malédiction postcoloniale dans *En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages* et *Allah n’est pas obligé*," *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 21.1 (2006): 109-27.
representation of an authentic child soldier and to what extent his voice functions as a rhetorical tool which Kourouma uses to voice certain critiques of modern day Africa.

That the text ends with a repetition of the novel’s opening lines is significant. Kourouma’s text is in fact defined by a series of repetitive phrases including the Malinké obscenities, certain phrases ("c’est la guerre tribale qui voulait ça", “commençons par le commencement”) as well as the dictionary definitions which frequently interrupt the narrative. These repetitions are suggestive both of how a child might speak while also creating the impression of orality. John Walsh posits that Birahima’s speech is a commentary on the use of French in an African context:

Birahima's profanity and the blunt repetition of his speech interrupt the authority of the French language… Left in the wake of such an explosive text, the reader must ask new questions about the authority of the French language in the space where Birahima speaks it. (194)

However, I would argue that these repetitions take on a deeper significance given the speaker Birahima’s past exposure to, and perpetration of, violence. Repetition is in fact closely associated with trauma, and the traumatized subject’s reliving of the event in the present moment. It is thus essential to reflect on what it means for an author to employ repetition as a rhetorical strategy within a narrative that represents traumatic events. To attribute Birahima’s repetitive use of language to a commentary on the role of French in contemporary Africa risks ignoring the way in which Kourouma works to establish Birahima’s status as a witness to trauma who may be suffering in the present. I would argue

30 Freud foregrounds the discussion of repeated flashbacks in his studies of traumatic neuroses in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, first published in English in 1922 (London, Vienna: International Psycho-Analytical). In Unclaimed Experience (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996), her seminal work on trauma and literature, Cathy Caruth notes repetition as perhaps the defining feature of traumatic discourse.
that the repetitions, especially the Malinké vulgarities show the failure of language to convey
the extent of what the fictional narrator Birahima claims to have seen.

**Traumatic Repetition Within the Narrative: Dictionaries, Obscenities, and the**

*Oraison Funèbre*

As previously mentioned the continuity of Birahima’s narrative is frequently
interrupted through his use of dictionary definitions. In the opening pages of the novel,
Birahima explains this practice for the reader. He claims that in order to tell his story in a
“français passable,” he has four dictionaries: the Larousse, the Petit Robert, the Inventaire
des particularités lexicales du français en Afrique noire and the Harrap’s dictionary. In the
novel’s opening pages, he tells the reader:

*Ces dictionnaires me servent à chercher les gros mots, à vérifier les gros mots et
surtout les expliquer. Il faut expliquer parce que mon blablabla est à lire par toute
sorte de gens : des toubabs (toubab signifie blanc) colons, des noirs indigènes
sauvages d’Afrique et des francophones de tout gabarit (gabarit signifie genre). (11)*

In his article “Allah, fétiches et dictionnaires” Xavier Garnier views the dictionaries as an
example of a sort of “fétiche” which will allow Birahima to “trouver une porte de salut” in
order to articulate his story (167). John Ouédraogo further links the dictionaries to the fetish
claiming that they signal “multiplicité, subversion et duplicité,” suggesting that the constant
definition of words throws their meaning into question, showing the slipperiness of
language. Christine Ndiaye further emphasizes the dictionaries role in showing the way in
which duplicitous language is used to justify violence. “[Les dictionnaires] servent bien
davantage à confronter les discours afin de faire ressortir les non-dits, les préjugés, sinon le
vide des discours au moyen desquels les uns et les autres justifient leurs actions” (82).

Beyond what they may say about Kourouma’s attitude towards language, the reference to
this wide array of dictionaries has the crucial function of defining Birahima’s intended audience, one that is composed of both white and black French speakers with various degrees of education. The use of definitions is not new in Kourouma. The extra-diegetic narrator of *Les soleils des indépendances* frequently interrupts the narrative to explain Malinké words to his reader. In *Allah*, however, Birahima defines both French and Malinké words as he targets this more pluralistic, if not overtly universal audience. The novel thus performs not simply the gap between a European Francophone reader and a Francophone text, but the gap between an individual speaking subject and his interlocutors who, regardless of their cultural background, may have trouble understanding the individual subject’s narrative. The difference between the narrator and his implied addressee becomes epistemological and experiential in addition to cultural.

Birahima’s stated intention to refer to the dictionaries for clarity is nonetheless undermined by their inconsistent, at times nonsensical usage. Long passages contain no definitions at all and it is not clear why certain words are explained and others are not. (A few examples of arbitrary definitions: “Pressurer c’est exploiter”, “Arborer signifie déployer, hisser.”) In fact, the command of French necessary to understand the novel would render definitions of words like “pressurer” and “hériter” superfluous. Even as the definitions remind the reader of Birahima’s desire to bring clarity to his diverse Francophone audience, they also bear witness to the narrator’s own inability to tell his story, signifying the failure of language and meaning which the definitions seek to remedy. One could also argue that the definitions occur so frequently in text (almost one per page for over 200 pages) as to slowly become devoid of meaning. Their referential function diminished, they thus increasingly serve as signs which interrupt Birahima’s narrative of his past and instead return our

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attention to the what the potentially traumatized Birahima is unable to express verbally. Kourouma draws the reader’s attention to this incessant repetition when Birahima says parenthetically “(Leitmotiv signifie parole, formule, qu’on répète sans cesse)” (158). The leitmotiv of the repeated definitions thus work stylistically to suggest not only the multiple linguistic codes within the text but also Birahima’s status as a human subject who is a potential victim of trauma. The definitions, often superfluous and increasingly meaningless, interrupt the narrative in a way which foregrounds the individual suffering and current plight of Kourouma’s protagonist rather than the past events he is recounting.

**Obscenity as a Marker of Trauma**

In addition to the repetition of the parenthetical dictionary definitions, Birahima uses a series of Malinké obscenities which return constantly within the novel, interrupting the flow of the narrative. As a means of communicating the psychological impact of violence through repetition, the use of this vulgar register in Kourouma’s novel bears special attention. In the African context Achille Mbembe points to the colonial and its aftermath as fundamentally obscene, while also positing obscenity as a means of subverting or deconstructing existing power structures. Certainly, Birahima’s frequent Malinké obscenities could be seen as reflecting the obscene nature of his experience as a child soldier and of the postcolonial governments that were responsible for his fate. Jean Ouédraogo and Yves Dakouo see in Birahima’s “insolent” language a rhetorical strategy intended to show the way in which rules of “bienséance” governing classical literary forms are used to mask

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33 Jacques Derrida discusses the ethical implications of letting oneself be interrupted during an intersubjective exchange in his Adieu à Emmanuel Levinas (Paris: Galliée, 1997).

social hypocrisy (65). In terms of the problematics of language, John Walsh has pointed out how the Malinké obscenities, words such as ‘faforo’ and ‘gnamaokdé’ also interrupt the narrative, seeming to question the possibility of French to adequately express a certain African reality. However, it is my contention that Birahima’s language must also be contextualized within the specific narrative he is telling. They should also be viewed as a Koukouma’s attempt to represent not simply an obscene postcolonial reality but Birahima’s specific emotional state related to the violence he has experienced and perpetrated.

The Malinké obscenities that occur throughout the text relate to the sexual organs, the most common being ‘faforo (sexe de mon père), ‘bangala’ and ‘gnoussou-gnoussou’ (both ‘partie honteuse de la femme’). ‘Walahé’ (au nom d’Allah) also features prominently. Birahima comments on his use of this Malinké vocabulary on the novel’s second page, declaring “suis insolent, incorrect comme barbe d’un bouc et parle comme un salopard. Je dis pas comme les nègres noirs africains indigènes bien cravatés: merde! putain! salaud!”

(10) This initial presentation establishes several functions for the obscenities. They serve as markers of Birahima’s cultural heritage, reminding the reader of the limits of language for a non-native speaker, while also suggesting the protagonist’s young age (crowing about his insolent language being the sort of rebellious posturing one associates with adolescents). More significantly, his refusal to use French _gros mots_ suggests that the affectively charged moments which call for obscenity are the moments within the text when the ability of French to translate Birahima’s Malinké story fails most completely. This is borne out by Birahima’s recourse to these terms following passages that have especially graphic content. I thus propose that the use of these Malinké obscénités in _Allah_ constitutes not simply a signal of the French language’s inability to express an African reality, but as Koukouma’s

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35 John Walsh, _Coming of Age with an AK-47._
demonstration of the limits of language’s signifying power when faced with extreme forms of atrocity. In turn their repetition throughout the text, in conjunction with the dictionary definitions, calls the reader’s attention to the narrator’s affective state in the present, acting as markers of how his traumatic experience may affect him as he speaks.

The first instance in which Birahima’s “incorrect” language is juxtaposed with graphically violent descriptions occurs at the start of the first chapter. Birahima has left Guinea in search of his aunt in Liberia. The convoy he is riding with shoots a child soldier who tries to stop them. Birahima relates, “Les gars qui étaient sur la moto avaient cru que c’étaient des coupeurs de route. Ils ont tiré. Et voilà le gosse, l’enfant-soldat fauché, couché, mort, complètement mort. Walahé! Faforo!” (53) The use of the final obscenities (“Walahé! Faforo!”) suggest orality which in turn bring the reader’s attention back to the present space of the narrative and to the human subject who is speaking to the reader. The “walahé” and “faforo,” while their exact meaning in this context is ambiguous, suggest a strong emotional reaction on the part of Birahima and their meaning is now linked to the traumatic event he has just witnessed. By bringing our attention to Birahima’s affective state, Kourouma also asks us to reflect not only on the disturbing nature of the event described but its psychological impact on the person recounting the text to an implied reader. This in turn suggests the gap between the lived experience of the event and the reader’s encounter with it through the text. When the terms “walahé” and “faforo” are repeated later they are thus not simply the aggressive utterances of an “insolent” child but the potential markers of the trauma the child has suffered, a trauma which he has failed to fully assimilate but which continues to express itself. My point is not that Kourouma’s stylistic choices are a realistic depiction of a potentially traumatized subject recounting his story but rather that the use of repetitive phrases within a narrative of trauma can function discursively as a sign of that
which lies outside language, bearing witness, within the context of the narrative, to what the speaker himself has seen and suffered.

Following Birahima’s discussion of his friend Kik’s violent life story (before becoming a soldier, Kik had found his entire family murdered by rebels) the obscenities are used again. However in this instance they are directed towards Birahima’s implied reader. In the chapter’s final sentences he exclaims:

Moi non plus, je ne suis pas obligé de parler, de raconter ma chienne de vie, de fouiller dictionnaire sur dictionnaire. J’en ai marre ; je m’arrête ici pour aujourd’hui.
Qu’on aille se faire foutre ! Walahé (au nom d’Allah) ! A faforo (cul de mon père)!
Gnamokodé (bâtard de bâtardise). (97)

Ending the chapter in this manner brings the reader’s attention back to the frame narrative of the text’s recounting, the ambiguous space established by Kourouma from which Birahima tells his story in the present. The “qu’on aille se faire foutre” is significant in that it is the most aggressive speech in the novel directed towards his interlocutor suggesting a relationship of hostility between himself and the text’s narratee. The reference to his “chienne de vie” suggests a self-loathing which recalls Kourouma’s use of a rhetoric of African self-loathing, ironizing on the feeling of black inferiority articulated by Fanon in *Peau noire, masques blancs*. However, given the traumatic event which Birahima has just recounted, his hostility and use of obscenity also suggest the affective barriers to recounting traumatic events as well as the emotional impact of witnessing the events themselves. That the obscenities are directed towards his implied addressee, to whom Birahima has just recounted this traumatic story, give the words an emotional significance that goes beyond the interruption of a Malinké obscenity in a French language story or a critique of Mbembe’s

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“obscene” postcolony. What is obscene is not simply the events themselves, and the historical context which produced them, but also the protagonists inability to express himself fully or gain recognition from his suffering from an invisible interlocuteur whom he actively spurns.

The *Oraisons Funèbres*: Commemoration in an Institutional Vacuum

Despite the frequent presence of vulgarity, Birahima also makes gestures towards the sacred, such as when he declares his intention to provide the “oraison funèbre” of fellow child soldiers who were killed. His use of “oraisons funèbres” shows Birahima’s recognition of the importance of ritualized mourning even as his irreverent tone suggests that he is unable to distinguish between the different registers of formality that should accompany such a gesture. His first *oraison* is for a girl named Sarah, who is shot during an argument with her lover, the child soldier Tête Brûlé. Birahima offers a justification for his funeral oration, defining the child soldier as an exceptional and exemplary figure:

D’après mon Larousse, l’oraison funèbre c’est le discours en l’honneur d’un personnage célèbre décédé. L’enfant soldat est le personnage le plus célèbre de cette fin de vingtième siècle. Quand un soldat-enfant meurt, on doit donc dire son oraison funèbre…Je le fais pour Sarah parce que cela me plait, j’en ai le temps et c’est marrant. (90)

The framing of the *oraison funèbre* (Birahima tells the reader what it is and why it is necessary) has several functions. First it brings the reader’s attention to the present of the narrative’s recounting, a move which focuses the reader’s attention as much on the act of commemoration as on the story which Birahima is about to tell. Second, the *oraison* functions as an *a posteriori* act of mourning, reminding the reader of the lack of social institutions in the war zone, a lack which risks depriving Sarah of dignity in death. That the *oraison*, which
would normally be part of a more formal commemoration, occurs so far removed from the original death reinforces the futility of Birahima’s gesture, even as instinct to give recognition and meaning to his friend’s death is a laudable impulse. That the child soldier is the “personnage le plus célèbre de cette fin de vingtième siècle” acknowledges this iconic figure’s visibility, while the oraison (which speaks of Sarah’s life before she becomes a soldier) underscores how the iconic image (the machine-gun-toting boy from the novel’s cover) does not grant recognition to the individual child soldier’s humanity.

Several pages later, on the final pages of the novel’s second section, Birahima says another funeral oration for Kik, a child who steps on a mine, has his foot amputated, and is left behind by the other soldiers to face the wrath of the village they have just destroyed. In his speech, Birahima describes how Kik’s entire family was killed leaving him no choice but to become a vagabond. “C’est seulement le lendemain matin, quand il n’y a plus de bruit, que les enfants s’aventurent à la concession familiale et trouva son père égorgé, son frère égorgé, sa mère et sa sœur violées et les têtes fracassées. Tous ses parents proches et éloignés morts” (96). Kik’s story is shocking and tragic, the sort of experience of loss, fear, and pain which resist both representation and explanation. Birahima attempts to explain Kik’s life with a reference to Allah “qui n’est pas obligé d’être juste dans toutes ces choses.” As with the dictionary definitions this explanation about life’s divinely sanctioned injustice is meant to clarify a point to the reader (the tragedy of Kik’s life) but in fact has the opposite effect, suggesting the inability of organized religion or belief systems to account for the presence of such horrific events.

Indeed, the inability of the oraisons to provide definitive closure for Birahima is suggested by the fact that they do not occur in the latter half of the text. They are not a commemorative act that he is capable of doing systematically owing to the extent of
suffering which he has witnessed. As the narrative progresses Birahima himself states the psychological toll of telling his story and his inability to continue. Speaking of his dead former companion Sekou he says “comment Sekou mérita le qualificatif de terrible est une autre histoire et une longue histoire. Je n’ai pas le goût de raconter parce que je suis pas obligé de le faire, que ça me faisait mal, très mal” (119). The emotional burden of recounting the deaths of his former companions thus explains in part the disappearance of the oraisons from the latter half of the text. This placement at the beginning of the text also reinforces the inability of these gestures to bring closure to Birahima. He may attempt to commemorate the deaths’ of his companions but the traumatic memory lives on in his present. The oraisons thus function as additional reminders of the burdens placed on the 10 (or 12) year old Birahima which exceed both his physical and mental capacities. As with the repeated dictionary definitions and the use of obscenity, the oraisons shed some light on Birahima’s fraught process of articulating his past trauma.

**The Child as a Witness to History**

The oraisons represent moments of personal commemoration linked to Birahima’s own subjective experience. However, much of what Birahima relates in the novel describes historical events for which he was not present and where he is seemingly reduced to a mouthpiece for Kourouma’s indictment of the warlords and politicians who are responsible for the violence in the novel. The precision with which Birahima recounts the history of certain countries, for instance, appears to contradict his assertion that he is undereducated, a move which arguably detracts from Kourouma’s framing of the novel as narrated by a child soldier. The following example is typical of passages in the latter half of the novel:

La Sierra Leone est un petit État africain foutu et perdu entre la Guinée et le Liberia.

Ce pays a été un havre de paix, de stabilité, de sécurité pendant plus d’un siècle et
demi, du début de la colonisation anglaise en 1808 à l’indépendance, le 27 avril 1961.

(Un havre de paix signifie un refuge, un abri de paix.) Les choses étaient simples pendant cette longue période. (163)

Birahima then goes on to detail Sierra Leone’s various presidents and coups d’état, demonstrating an impressive grasp of the country’s history. Richard Priebe criticizes these passages as detracting from the novel’s vraisemblance, claiming that “the author grants far too much understanding to the narrator of the real and historical and social details of the violence” (51). However, such criticisms of Kourouma miss the larger point that he did not intend his novel as the authentic testimony of a child soldier, a fact indicated on the novel’s first page by the abrupt transition from the pidgin French of an undereducated child to Kourouma’s idiomatic but grammatically correct prose. Rather than criticize Kourouma for giving Birahima “too much understanding” it seems more productive to ask what understanding the reader gains from the narration of historical events through the voice of the child soldier? What are the affective and historiographical implications of recounting an historical event in the voice of a child witness to trauma?

An example of this strategy occurs in the latter half of the novel when Birahima’s begins describing traumatic events for which he was not present. It is not clear how Birahima knows the details of these events, including the dismemberment of Liberian dictator Samuel Doe and the mutilation of workers at American-controlled rubber plantations, nor are they situated within his own experiences as a child soldier. As Birahima continues his journey, the vast majority of the narrative does not concern his personal experiences, instead detailing the origins of the wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone along with stories of the warlords in large part responsible for the violence. It is a reasonable assumption that many of Kourouma’s readers, Africans or otherwise, would be already
familiar with some of the moments he describes. Millions have watched a video showing the torture and death of Liberian president Samuel Doe, and the amputation of civilian’s limbs in Sierra Leone have received international media attention. Given the distance between the lived experience of the protagonist and the content of the novel, it is thus crucial to note the historiographical dimension of Kourouma’s writing, and the way in which he uses the device of the child narrator to provide alternative accounts of some of the iconic moments of atrocity of the African continent.

What then is gained through the use of the child soldier voice in recounting political and historical events? It is, I would argue, in large part a technique for provoking the “empathic unsettlement” which LaCapra suggests as a privileged mode of historical writing for conveying traumatic limit events. In Writing History, Writing Trauma, LaCapra describes the role of empathic unsettlement which he defines as:

an aspect of understanding which stylistically upsets the narrative voice and counteracts harmonizing narration or unqualified objectification yet allows for a tense interplay between critical, necessarily objectifying reconstruction and affective response to the voices of victims. I would even entertain the possibility of carefully framed movements in which the historian attempts more risk-laden, experimental overtures in an attempt to come to terms with limit events. (60)

While Kourouma’s novel is not strictly speaking historical writing, his narration of real events that have little bearing on the story of Birahima, function as de facto moments of historiography. Describing the events through Birahima’s voice can be viewed as calculated

to create “an affective response” to the voice of a victim, while avoiding the “objectifying reconstruction” that would not elicit a sufficient critical response on the part of the reader.

Perhaps the most striking example of Kourouma’s engagement with history through the voice of his young narrator is the account of the torture and dismemberment of Samuel Doe at the hands of his rival warlord Prince Johnson. The reader is struck not simply by the disturbing facts themselves, but also by the tone of the child narrator:

Le Prince Johnson commanda qu’on coupe les doigts de Samuel Doe, l’un après l’autre et, le supplicié hurlant comme un veau, il lui fit couper la langue. Dans un flot de sang, Johnson acharnait sur les bras, l’un après l’autre. Lorsqu’il voulut couper la jambe gauche, le supplicié avait son compte : il rendit l’âme. (Rendre l’âme, c’est crever). (138)

The final definition (“Rendre l’âme c’est crever”) serves as a marker that identifies the narrative as being told in the present, shifting the reader’s attention from the passé simple of the distant historical event, to the human subject who is recounting this information. It appears irrelevant whether or not Birahima himself saw or fully understands what he is saying. What is important is the way in which the reader must engage with the act of the story’s recounting (reflecting on the human subject who is speaking to him) as much as with the events themselves. That the event which Kourouma chooses to relate could quite possibly be known (if not witnessed in video) by his reader is significant in that it suggests that Kourouma sees the novel in part as a retelling and recontextualizing of certain iconic moments in recent African history. The empathic unsettlement created by this retelling also comes from Birahima’s ambiguous attitude towards what he describes. Is he too young to understand the full horror of what he says or is he simply hardened to it? The reader’s affective response and understanding of the historical event is thus shaped by the presence
of Birahima’s voice, a move which avoids an “objectifying” account of the event itself. The voice of Birahima is instrumentalized for historiographical purposes, adding new complexity to the reader’s understanding of events he may have encountered before, through a frame calculated to create this reaction of empathic unsettlement.

**Conclusion**

Kourouma’s use of child-soldier testimony as frame narrative thus works to deconstruct the iconic image of the child soldier, creating a space for reflection on the way in which the figure of the icon obscures the subjectivity of the individual human actors upon whom it is based. If, as Christopher Miller notes, *Les soleils des indépendances* indicated the space of cultural difference between a Malinké and non-Malinké reader, *Allah* also invokes the space of the interpersonal, subjective encounter through the novel’s dialogic narration which addresses an ambiguous “vous” (seemingly both a person present in the text and extra-diegetic reading public). Repetitions within the text, in the form of dictionary definitions and Malinké obscenities serve as further markers of the trauma which Kourouma’s narrator attempts to communicate to his implied addressee. In addition Birahima’s attempts at commemoration in the form of funeral orations further reinforce his suffering in the present moment, as his orations inevitably devolve into an invective-laden tirade against his implied listener. Considering how these rhetorical strategies address the problematic of traumatic representation is crucial as it also allows *Allah n’est pas obligé* to be considered outside of a critical lens which ascribes any linguistic innovation in Francophone African fiction to a commentary on postcolonial language politics. Kourouma’s decision to draw the reader’s attention towards his protagonist’s suffering in the present moment can thus be read as an effort to prevent an overly historicized interpretation that would foreclose

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38 See Locha Mateso, *La littérature africaine et sa critique.*
a more nuanced reflection on the broader psychological impact of the trauma suffered by child soldiers. The focus on violence in *Allah* is not solely a response to specific regional conflicts in recent West African history, but a rhetorical strategy which forces the reader to reflect on his or her own positionality towards individual voices of suffering. Indeed, the representation of trauma in *Allah* functions discursively to foster the “cross-cultural understanding” which Cathy Caruth claims as a privileged goal of traumatic representation. In other words, traumatic experience being common to all cultures, attentiveness to another’s suffering can break down the tendency to “otherize” which represents a barrier to cross-cultural human connection. In forcing his reader to “listen to the trauma of the other,” Kourouma thus guards against an essentializing interpretation of his work as an historical document, forcing his reader to reflect in turn on what is lost in representations that fail to invoke the psychological toll of violence on the individual who both experiences and perpetrates it.

**Part II: Tierno Monénembo’s *L’aîné des orphelins***

If *Allah n’est pas obligé* explores history through the story of an individual, Guinean author Tierno Monénembo’s novel *L’aîné des orphelins* (2000) takes the opposite approach, foregrounding an individual personal story at the expense of the broader historical context of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda. Monénembo’s seventh novel, *L’aîné* was his contribution to the *Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire* project, (explored at length in the next chapter) a grant-funded writing project that brought ten Francophone African writers to Rwanda in

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39 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.*

40 Ibid

1998 to produce literary works about the 1994 Tutsi genocide.42 One of the most prolific authors of the post-independence era,43 Monénembo was born in the present day country of Guinea in 1947 which he left in 1969 to escape the dictatorship of Sekou Touré. After studying biochemistry in Lyon, he taught in Algeria, Morocco, and Normandy before committing himself to writing full-time in 1991.44 His early novels reflect his experiences both of dictatorship (Les crapauds-brousse (1979)) and of his life as an exilé in France (Les écailles du ciel (1986), Un rêve utile (1993) and Pelourinho (1995)). In 2008 Monénembo received the prestigious Prix Renaudot for his novel Le roi du Kahel (2008), cementing his reputation as one the most significant contemporary Francophone novelists.

As with Kourouma, scholarly writing on Monénembo’s focuses greatly on his use of language, often noting his proclivity for first-person narrators. Remarking on the prevalence of satire in Monénembo’s work, Adama Coulibaly sees a particular attention to speech, a usage he likens to Bakhtine’s definition of the “romanesque démocratique, un genre flou aux limites mouvantes, ‘un carnaval de genres,’ dont, l’objet principal […], c’est l’homme qui parle et sa parole, selon le mot de Bakhtine” (Coulibaly, Des techniques, 18). 45 This preoccupation with language and the carnivalesque is evident in L’aîné des orphelins, in which the young narrator Faustin recounts his exploits in an irreverent style, reminiscent of

44 For more on Monénembo’s life and work see Adama Coulibaly, Des techniques aux stratégies d’ériture dans l’ouvre romanesque de Tierno Monénembo (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2010).
Kourouma’s narrator Birahima. However, the decision to apply his sardonic “Rabelaisian” writing style to the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda raises certain ethical questions related to traumatic representation which Michael Syrotinski defines as follows. “How does one react to a writer, indeed, who responds to the genocide by producing a largely fictionalized narrative, written with all the Rabelaisian wit, verve and coarseness of his previous novels?”

While I would dispute Syrotinski’s characterization of Faustin as antipathetic, it is true that Monénembo’s response to the genocide lacks the “painful introspection and clear-cut ethical language” (Syrotinski 432) that characterize other fictional responses to the Rwandan genocide. This choice results in part from Monénembo’s desire to represent the psychological impact of experiencing violence on an individual human subject rather than the cultural and political factors which lead to the genocide. As Josias Semujanga observes:

 Ce faisant, son esthétique du roman vise moins à expliquer, à illustrer par la voie de la fiction le génocide, qu’à tenter de révéler, par les procédés spécifiques au roman, les aspects humains de cette tragédie qu’aucun autre discours ne saurait dire sans tomber dans le pathétique. (104)

Since Monénembo eschews larger explanatory frameworks for the genocide, it seems most productive to analyze his text in terms of the encounter he produces between his narrator and his reader. This encounter between narrator and reader suggests the convergence described by Hans-Robert Jauss in his discussion of reception theory:

 The aesthetics of reception and effect precisely do not any longer have as their goal the tracing of a text back to its “statement,” to a significance hidden behind it, or to

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its “objective meaning.” Rather, they define the meaning of a text as a convergence of the structure of the work and the structure of the interpretation which is ever to be achieved anew. (84)

In this section I will explore the formal and narratological techniques which Monénembo uses to achieve a convergence between reader and text, arguing that the extradiegetic space between the narrator and the implied reader is privileged as the only space in which Faustin can bear witness to the most traumatic events of the genocide. Indeed, the relationship, between the narrator and the reader, is unlike any of the relationships with Faustin forms with the other characters within the narrative.47 *L’aîné des orphelins*, explicitly or implicitly, calls for the reader to reflect critically on his or own positionality towards witnesses of trauma, both through the dialogic nature of the first-person narrative as well as the fictional representation of various interlocutors who themselves fail to create the sort of dialogic space in which Faustin might recount his testimony. *L’aîné des orphelins* thus demonstrates the traumatized subject’s inability to articulate his or her trauma by establishing the discursive space of the text (the extra-diegetic space occupied the narrator and the reader) as the only place in the narrative in which the traumatic events can be described. My analysis will examine the formal techniques Monénembo uses to create this dialogic space between narrator and the implied reader. In addition, I will explore the way in which the various testimonial encounters within the narrative fail to elicit the testimony that might have a reparative function for Monénembo’s protagonist and narrator.

47 This recalls Dominick LaCapra’s contention in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* that forces operative between readers and texts can mirror those of an intersubjective exchange (5).
The Prisoner Speaks: Monénembo's Narrative Framing

Though Faustin is not strictly speaking a child soldier, his young age, violent behavior, and strident, cynical tone place him with the protagonists of other child soldier novels. He is a victim of the 1994 Tutsi genocide turned killer who finds himself condemned to repeat the destructive cycle of violence which the genocide initiated. When the novel opens, Faustin is on death row. In a non-linear, first-person narrative he tells of how his deceased parents failed to heed warnings of the genocide, his subsequent walk to Kigali following the massacres, and his association with a group of child thieves. Not until the end of the narrative does Faustin reveal his near-death experience in the Nyamata church in which he was only saved because of the dead bodies that covered him, making him invisible to the killers. Faustin alludes to the avènements, as he terms them, of the genocide though appears unwilling or unable to remember the specific incident in the church. Throughout the novel Faustin meets various Westerners who take an interest in him for both altruistic and self-serving reasons. Claudine, a Rwandan refugee from Uganda takes pity on him but is unable to keep him from staying with his gang of juvenile petty criminals. An Irish woman tries unsuccessfully to integrate Faustin into her orphanage for genocide survivors. Finally Rodney, an English journalist, encourages Faustin to lie about his experience in the genocide on camera thus making him an international star. Faustin’s tenuous attempts to create a life for himself after the genocide are undone when he shoots another child criminal whom he finds having sex with his sister.

As Seloum Gbanou remarks, the use of a child narrator is not new for Monénembo. Several of his previous novels (including Cinéma and Un attiéqué pour Elgass) involve a child character, who, like Faustin, is forced from home as a victim of violence and must attempt
to reconstruct a sense of identity and social belonging. Indeed, Faustin’s itinerary at first glance appears similar to Monénembo’s other child protagonists who, according to Gbanou “donne à voir et à lire une course contre un destin tragique tramé par les haines et les violences que porte en elle la société” (55). He states further that these children are “constamment happés…par le goût du départ, prêts à prendre tous les risques pour échapper à tout ce qui les fixe dans un espace donné” (55). What is particular to Faustin, however, is precisely how such an escape is rendered impossible by his severe post-traumatic stress. The violence which Faustin lives out through several flashbacks in the novel renders any notion of “départ” superfluous as he appears condemned to relive his experience during the genocide no matter where he travels. *L’ainé des orphelins* thus transposes this theme of exile and lost childhood into the context of the extreme traumatic event, questioning the possibilities for departure and renewal in the wake of such catastrophes.

Indeed, the narrative is constructed to show the way in which Faustin remains trapped by his past, unable to conceive of a future for himself outside of the genocide’s legacy of vagrancy and violence. The narration of his story thus foregrounds his own confusion, or willful obfuscation, and the reader must piece together how much of the story is credible. This task is further complicated by the fact that text is directed towards an outsider, as Faustin’s narration suggests an implied reader who is not Rwandan, a choice which creates a dialogic space between narrator and implied reader based on cultural difference. Faustin illustrates this difference through his definition of the Kinyarwanda words within the text. (“Ainsi appelle-t-on la grande saison des pluies dans notre langue le..."

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Kinyarwanda.”) He also uses a “nous” referring to Rwandans generally although unlike Kourouma, this occurs infrequently. That Faustin speaks to the reader in French is not problematized (Monénembo does not present his novel as an authentic testimonial document), even when the narrator says that he speaks Kinyarwanda, as opposed to French. (“Eux, ils sont francophones, belgeophones ou suissophones. Nous, on parle seulement Kinyarwanda” (92).) The text thus does not perform the cultural and linguistic difference between reader and narrator implied by the text’s “nous.” There are rare examples in the text of a direct interpellation of an implied reader (“Je vous l’ai déjà dit: il y a rien de plus sacré qu’un mourant” (141).) This reference does not imply the frame narrative of a transcribed oral document, but rather works to create that space of difference between a French-speaking non-Rwandan reader and the Rwandan protagonist.

Despite the lack of a frame narrative referring to the text’s space of production and articulation, the articulation of Faustin’s story is situated both spatially and temporally. On the novel’s second page, he introduces himself, speaking in the present tense. “Je m’appelle Faustin, Faustin Nsenghimana. J’ai quinze ans. Je suis dans une cellule centrale de Kigali” (14). There is no implied interlocutor for these present-tense passages (the vast majority of the novel is in the past tense) and the reader is meant to recognize the literary convention of a homodiegetic narrator telling a story in the present directly to an extra-diegetic reading public.

Though the text is not presented as the transcription of an oral testimony, its tone is suggestive of orality. Faustin often uses an informal register, marked by exclamation points and verbal tics suggestive of spoken French. (“Ouf,” “Eh bien, ce n’est toujours pas fini!” (25.)) Similarly, the “vous” within the document does not refer to the reader or to a present
interlocutor, and instead contributes to the conversational tone of the narrative. (“C’est le genre de personne qu’il vaut mieux oublier. Elle vous aborde en souriant et avec un tel naturel que, au début, vous croyez qu’elle se moque de vous (27).” Other similar turns of phrase (“Figurez-vous” etc.) or incorrect grammar suggestive of orality (“Fallait du temps pour que tout ça se reconstruisse” (95).) create an intimacy with the reader through the approximation of spoken French without addressing the implied reader directly. Thus that Faustin’s tone is suggestive of orality should be understood not as an attempt to simulate an actual spoken testimony but as a literary convention meant to create a more intimate dialogic space between his narrator and the reader. Monénembo does not make any gestures that would frame his protagonist’s voice as an authentic representation. He instead uses the literary convention of the survivor’s voice, à la Kourouma, to cause the reader to reflect on the complexities of representing the genocide as well as his or her relationship to the voices that speak of it.

Faustin does use occasional words in Kinyarwanda as well as acronyms of the military organizations in the genocide, which are defined by footnotes. As previously stated the narrative itself does not self-consciously reflect on the implications of a novel narrated in French by a child whose native tongue is Kinyarwanda. However, there are several deformations of language which are central to the text. The first is Faustin’s use of the word *avènements* to refer both to the genocide and to the traumatic events which he himself has witnessed and repressed. As Koffi Ayinefa writes:

Il est très intéressant ici que le protagoniste n’en parle que de cette façon euphémique. Il est non seulement conscient que ce sont ces événements qui ont
More than a simple euphuism however, the substitution of the word “avènements” for “événements” is significant. On one level it infuses the notion of “event” with a certain temporality and agency, emphasizing how the genocide “arrived” so abruptly in Faustin’s life, and the way it risks re-appearing in the form of flashbacks. The idea of arriving and thus motion inscribed within the word can be read as representing the violent incursion a traumatic memory within Faustin’s psyche. In a broader sense, recourse to a euphuism suggests the inability of conventional language to adequately express the personal, subjective experience of Faustin’s trauma. Finally, and most significantly, it constitutes one of the clearest examples of how Monénembo’s text bears witness, in a performative sense, to Faustin’s trauma through a variety of linguistic signs. The use of avènements parallels his own murky understanding of what he saw during the genocide and why he continues to suffer in the present moment. Its repetition periodically throughout the text performs his trauma and bears witness to his continued suffering in the present.

Faustin’s deformation of the French word “traumatismes” into “taumatrismes” is especially relevant as it indicates the difficulty of applying western psychological vocabulary in a different cultural context. Faustin does not fully understand the term but also rejects it claiming that it is inappropriate because it is European and thus cannot be applied to a Rwandan. Speaking of his night terrors in prison, he says:

Au début, je pensais que cela venait, comme le disait souvent la Hirlandaise, des taumatrismes que j’avais subis. Mais la Hirlandaise, elle ne pouvait pas comprendre. Avec les Blancs, c’est difficile de parler, nos mondes ont été faits comme si les pieds
de l’un étaient la tête de l’autre. Eux, ils sont francophones, belgeophones ou suissaphones. Nous, on parle seulement kinyarwanda. (92)

This could be read as a continuation of the critique, advanced recently by Stef Craps in *Postcolonial Witnessing*, that the Western idea of trauma is misapplied in other cultural contexts. However here it seems that the failure also lies in Faustin’s inability to recognize the productive potential of this intercultural dialogue. The failure of communication (represented by the misspelling of "traumatisme") is Faustin’s inability to recognize himself as traumatized, which conforms to Freud’s early definitions of those suffering from traumatic neuroses.

Further repetitions within the text perform Faustin’s trauma, bearing witness to a continued suffering to which Faustin never refers explicitly. Most prominent of these is the kite that the reader knows to be associated with Faustin’s experience during the *avènements* of the genocide, even though the connection is not made explicit until the end of the text. The reader intuits that the kite has a certain significance related to a traumatic experience, but its meaning remains inaccessible just as it remains inaccessible to Faustin himself. When Faustin rediscovers his brothers and sisters whom he had assumed to be dead (he subsequently has a nervous breakdown) the kite surfaces as he attempts to piece together his hitherto inaccessible memories. “Il me vint comme un éclair qu’ils [his siblings] n’étaient pas à l’église quand le brigadier Nyumurowo s’empara de mon cerf-volant” (75). His later reference to the kite suggests its association with a significant event although the exact nature of the event is still unclear. “Ce n’est pas parce que ce phacochère de brigadier m’a ôté mon cerf-volant à l’église….que je délire la nuit” (92). The repeated mentions of the kite suggest Faustin’s

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trauma while also adding a hermeneutic dimension to the narrative as it is not until the very end of the text that the full complexity of the kite’s signification is revealed. As Fausting stands in the severely overcrowded church of Nyamata, a Rwandan army officer snatches away his kite in just moments before those sheltering in the church, including Faustin’s mother and father, are massacred. The incident with the kite thus marks the Faustin’s imminent traumatization, a moment hinted at, but never articulated, until the novel’s final pages. In this way even as it functions metaphorically (the loss of his toy suggests the loss of childhood innocence and sense of security), the repeated references to the kite also functions metonymically, as a sign of his trauma. Its recurring mentions in the narrative bear witness to Faustin’s suffering in the present moment, and the inaccessibility of memories.

The novel’s final paragraph is the narration of what occurred after Faustin’s kite was taken away, a textual unveiling of the memory that has been tormenting Faustin throughout the novel. The revelation of what precisely the kite signified offers no narrative closure, both because Faustin’s fate on death row remains unknown and because of the sheer horror of what he describes. In the novel’s devastating and climactic final paragraph Faustin relates what he can now remember of the Nyamata massacre and his parents’ death:

On entendit hurler des ordres. Les vitraux volèrent en éclats, les icônes tombèrent en poussière, des dizaines de cervelles échiquetées éclaboussèrent le plafond et les murs. Ils jetaient des grenades. Mes souvenirs du génocide s’arrêtent là. Le reste, on me l’a raconté par la suite ou alors cela a rejailli tout seul dans ma mémoire en lambeaux, par à-coups, comme des jets d’eau boueuse jaillissent d’une pompe obstruée. Je ne sais pas qui, de mon père ou de ma mère, succomba le premier. Sont-ils morts foudroyés par une grenade ou achevés à coups de machette et de marteau ? Quand je
repris mes esprits, je constatai que leurs corps étaient en morceaux sauf la poitrine de ma mère dont les seins en parfait état dégouлинаient encore de leur sang. (157)

Unlike the false descriptions of his parents’ death, which Faustin will later give to exploitative Western journalists, Monénembo gives no indication that the reader is not meant to see this as a credible attempt on the narrator’s part to reconstruct his lost memories. That he speculates on how his parents died without making a definitive pronouncement (rather than give a grotesque invented description as he does for the journalists) creates a relationship of intimacy with the reader. The dialogic space between narrator and reader is the privileged location in which Faustin is permitted to speculate and give voice to this traumatic memory.

The repressed memory of the horrific events in the church is present throughout the novel, both in the form of certain semantic markers (the references to the kite, the italicized words such as avènement etc.) and within the diegesis itself. The most dramatic example is Faustin’s reunion with his siblings whom he believed to be dead. The initial encounter itself is not represented, only the details of Faustin’s nervous breakdown, upon seeing his siblings. Tellingly Faustin relies on another orphan, Hitimana, to describe his own behavior:

Bien plus tard, Hitimana, celui qui avait son lit au-dessus du mien, m’expliqua comment j’étais tombé en syncope: ‘L’infirmière s’était saisi de l’arrosoir pour nous chasser du couloir où l’on t’avait allongé. Mais moi, je refusai de partir. Je dissimulai derrière un pilier pour attendre que tu crèves.’ (69-70)
Later the shock of seeing his siblings manifests itself through the repetition of words in Portuguese that the children had learned from a Brazilian nun living in their village.52

“Doucement les brumes s’éloignèrent de mon esprit: les mots se firent plus précis, les images plus claires, plus évocatrices...Salsiche, queixa, rizotto, cafe com leite, ciao, certo, arrivedeci, muito obrigado, grazie...” (71) A reader familiar with Portuguese or Romance languages will recognize the words as representing types of food as well as salutations and polite speech (“please”, “thank you” etc...). In evoking food and simple language of the everyday, Faustin evokes a nostalgia for simple domestic pleasures and the daily interactions of a community setting. However, these terms are now “foreign,” suggesting his estrangement from his childhood and past. Furthermore, these words are uttered entirely out of context, thus stripping them of their signifying power (even for a reader who knows Portuguese) and made to bear witness to what Faustin has suffered as well as his inability to find adequate language to express it.53 The text thus continually represents the aporetic nature of testimonies, with the lacunae (what Faustin saw during the avènements, the experience of seeing the siblings he thought dead etc.) structuring much of the narrative.54 These aporia also become present in the dialogic space between narrator and reader created through Monénembo’s conversational prose addressed to a non-Rwandan implied reader. Both Faustin and the reader’s knowledge of, as well as their incapacity to comprehend, these non-representable moments place narrator and reader in a position of epistemological

52 According to Adele King, the presence of a Brazilian monastery near Nyamata is fictional. King speculates the reference to Brazil may be related to Monénembo’s interest in Brazil following a trip there that was his inspiration for his novel Pelourinho. "Introduction," The Oldest Orphan. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004).

53 Michael Syrotinksi uses the Derridian term of the “originary supplement” to explain the relation of Faustin’s narrative to the past traumatic event, a narrative which can only “accede indirectly” or “stand alongside” the events to which they refer. ("Monstrous Fictions: Testifying to the Rwandan Genocide in Tierno Monénembo’s L’aîné des orphelins," Forum for Modern Language Studies 45.4 (2009): 427-440).

54 Both Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub in Testimony and Georgio Agamben in Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive (New York: Zone Books, 1999) suggest the importance of aporia and lacunae within the survivor’s testimony as bearing witness to those aspects of his or her experience which lie outside of language.
uncertainty, a familiarity and intimacy that cause Monénembo’s reader to reflect on his subject position vis-à-vis the fictional character of Faustin, and by extension the events of genocide and their representation.

**Representations of Testimonial Encounters Within *L’aïné***

The reader’s struggles to understand Faustin and his experience parallel that of several characters within the text itself. Through various encounters between Faustin and characters who seek to hear his testimony, Monénembo explores the implications of bearing witness and how the respective subject position of a witness and his addressee influence the nature of the testimony. The first time in which Faustin relates (and is able to at least partially remember) what he saw during the genocide occurs when he has been captured by the RPF (the Uganda trained Tutsi army which put an end to the genocide) who mistake him for a genocide perpetrator. In an interrogation that mirrors the opening of the text (in which Faustin introduces himself to the reader) Faustin is asked to identify himself and then explain his whereabouts during the genocide. The captain who questions him adopts a harsh accusatory tone which immediately softens when Faustin tells his story. Faustin’s initial difficulties recounting come not simply from the emotionally charged nature of the events but because he himself does not fully remember them. In the following passage, Faustin describes the moment in which he is finally able to speak about his past to the RPF commander:

Était-ce pour sauver ma peau ou simplement pour souscrire à sa magnétique influence? Je fis un effort surhumain pour revenir sur les fameux avènements que ma mémoire ne voulait plus revoir. Soudain, tout s’éclaircit. Ma bouche s’ouvrit toute
seule et je parlai si vite qu'il m'arrêta pour faire venir mon vieux compagnon de route. (46)

Even as Faustin speaks for the first time, his description suggests his lack of agency faced with his overwhelming memories. His mouth opens on its own and he speaks so fast that it appears that he is now aware of what he is saying, an image that evokes demonic possession. Indeed, Faustin’s failure to relate this testimony to the reader suggests that the details may be lost to him in the present moment of the narrative. His memories thus function as the “unclaimed experience,” to quote Cathy Caruth, the inaccessible memories of the traumatic experience to which the traumatized individual does not have access.55

Rather than relate the details of his testimony to the RPF commander to his extradiegetic interlocutor, Faustin instead narrates the reaction of the other soldiers in the camp after he had told his story. “Le camp entier parla de moi. Dans le remue-ménage incessant des soldats et des grades, il y avait toujours une voix amicale pour me sortir de mes rêveries” (46). Telling his story thus grants Faustin a measure of social belonging and a place within the (albeit temporary) community of the army unit he is moving with. However, the reasons that his testimony is so compelling to these soldiers is still unclear to the reader. The passage underscores the concrete real world implications of the testimonial act and the act of narrating itself, as Faustin’s relation of his “unclaimed experience” temporarily grants him the sense of social belonging which the genocide had obliterated.

And yet even at this point it is unclear if what Faustin recounts is truthful, in part because, as the narrative continues, we learn that he has still not recovered all of his memories of the genocide. What is important for Monénembo here is less the literal

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55 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.*
truthfulness of what his narrator says then the very real consequences of the act of retelling which legitimates his status as a survivor. Thanks to this status he is accepted by the other soldiers, even going so far as to say, “J’avais trouvé une nouvelle famille. Je ne demandais pas mieux que de finir mes jours-là” (46). However, the reader is denied the contents of the testimony itself, the events which Faustin recounts and which elicited such a strong reaction from the FPR commander. Thus on a referential level, it is the event of testimony and its consequences, rather than a narrative of his experience, which serve as a marker of the event itself. In fact, as previously noted, there is the implication that Faustin himself is not fully aware of what he is saying (“ma bouche s’ouvrit toute seule et je parlai si vite”) so that in the present of the narrative’s telling he may not have access to the testimony which granted him special status in the community of soldiers. While this scene seems to reinforce Felman’s notion of testimony as being impersonal, Monénembo turns our attention not to that within the testimony which escapes the witness’s notice, but rather the consequences of the telling on the witness itself, in other words, the “personal” consequences of this “impersonal narrative.” We see the significance of the testimony not from a larger historical or political perspective but rather for the individual human subject who is recounting it, and the way this recounting influences his relationship with his group of addressees.

**False Witness and the Western Media**

While giving his testimony to the RPF soldiers grants Faustin a sense of community, this new status is short-lived. Once the conflict ends and the army unit dissolves, Faustin finds himself on the street using petty theft to survive. It is not until he encounters Rodney, a Ugandan-born English cameraman, that he again is asked to tell his story. However, this
time he lies, giving false testimony in order to gratify Western media outlets in search of voyeuristic accounts of African suffering.

His initial attempts at telling his story to the journalists are met with skepticism. Taken to what he claims to be his hometown, he is asked to introduce himself and describe his experiences. Their exchange begins with an introduction (“Comment t’appelles-tu, jeune homme? Faustin! Faustin Nsenghimana, Madame!” (105)) which reminds the reader both of Faustin’s previous interview with the FPR as well as his present-tense introduction to the reader on the novel’s second page. In each instance, Faustin’s self-presentation indicates the creation of a testimonial space in which he will speak about his past traumatic experiences. The repetition of these scenes of testimony (always preceded by Faustin introducing himself) suggest the multiplicity of possible narratives of Faustin’s experience, each shaped by the specific limitations of every encounter. In the case of his interviews with the Western media, Faustin responds to the incentive to sensationalize, producing a false testimony which ingratiate with the Western journalists. In the following passage Faustin describes how his fabricated stories bring about a sudden celebrity status:

Je devenais intéressant. Ils abandonnèrent tous leurs grandes bouteilles de Primus et leurs sandwiches pour se précipiter sur leurs caméras et sur leurs appareils photo. On me fit asseoir au milieu sur une vieille chaise en fer. J’étais devenu aussi célèbre que Roger Milla. (106)

However, his privileged status proves precarious and Faustin overplays his hand by offering too much invented detail. The journalists become skeptical, asking him increasingly pointed questions. Rodney intervenes claiming that Faustin’s status as a survivor should in effect
shield from such an interrogation. After declaring that an Auschwitz survivor would not be
held to such a strict standard of proof he exclaims:

Je suis sûr que son témoignage sera meilleur que celui de tous ces adultes qui ne
manqueront pas de nous bassiner avec le pourquoi et le comment de tout ce qui est
arrivé. Il a vécu les choses, lui, et avec des yeux d’enfant. La vérité sort de la bouche
de l’enfant ! (107)

In this instance Rodney’s comparison of Faustin to an Auschwitz survivor, regardless of its
accuracy, underscores the way in which Faustin is occupying a sort of pre-determined
subject position (the witness to genocide) which in effect determines the expectations of
what he is meant to recount. Tellingly, Rodney’s self-serving appropriation of the well-
known aphorism (“la vérité sort de la bouche des enfants”) in the final sentence can be read
as calling into question the use of child narrators in contemporary African conflict narratives,
as well as an ironic commentary on Monénembo’s own choice of child narrator. What do we
make of the fact that Rodney, a character who shamelessly exploits the genocide and knows
Faustin to be lying, is the one character in the text who makes the claim for the child as the
privileged witness to genocide? Through Rodney’s exploitation of Faustin, we can see a
larger meta-discursive commentary on the way in which the child narrator trope is used to
frame narratives as “truthful” (since the child is purportedly guileless and innocent) and thus
better equipped to expose the hypocrisy of other forms of discourse. In this way,
Monénembo cautions his reader that the child-narrator trope is a form of discourse that can
be just as easily co-opted and manipulated, in turn asking his reader to reflect critically on the
novel’s narratological and formal elements. Although not overtly historical, this questioning
of his own authority as author can be seen within the larger context of encouraging the sort
of critical reflection necessary to combat the essentializing, institutionally sanctioned discourses that lead to state-sponsored violence.

On a purely discursive level, Rodney’s manipulation of Faustin also calls into question the narrator’s reliability, forcing the reader to reflect on how much of the narrative is believable. As Faustin spends more time with Rodney, the other journalists’ skepticism regarding the boy’s credibility vanishes. The reporters are happy to believe his stories since it makes for such good television. In this way, Faustin’s testimony becomes a performance meant to satisfy the Western media’s voyeuristic desire for images of African suffering. His willingness to please his interlocutors shows how the expectations of the addressee shape the content of “authentic” testimony, in this case the journalists whose own expectations and financial interest help create the very testimony which they claim to be spontaneous and truthful.

However, Faustin’s false testimony is not only meant as a critique of Western voyeurism. It also bears witness to his own ongoing trauma within the dialogic space between narrator and reader. The cavalier way in which Faustin invents stories of seeing his parents murdered, tortured, and even eaten, suggest his inability to remember or come to terms with what he has seen and experienced. At one point he gives a detailed account of the almost poetic language that he uses with the journalists when inventing his stories:

Dans des endroits où je n’avais jamais mis les pieds, je reconnaissais tout de suite la masure calcinée d’où l’on avait extrait mes parents; la cour entourée d’hibiscus où on leur avait coupé les jarrets; le préau de l’église où on les avait éventrés;… le fourneau où l’on avait grillé leurs cœurs et leurs intestins avant de les assaisonner de piment pour le déjeuner des assaillants qui s’étaient montrés les plus braves. (109)
Certain aestheticizing gestures within the passage “la cour entouré de hibiscus,” for instance, suggest how the process of story-telling can work to obscure the brute, obscenity of the genocide. The references to cannibalism bring to mind the voracious appetite of the news media for voyeuristic fare, often in the form of commodified African suffering. On a more personal level, however, Faustin’s false stories show his failure to assimilate his own trauma and his inability to recognize his own emotional pain. The reader sees his lack of awareness most poignantly when he shows the journalists his machete wounds. The wounds are real, but Faustin, has so distanced himself from the event of their infliction that they are incorporated into the lies he has grown used to telling. “J’enlevais mon calot pour montrer la cicatrice qui me barrait la tête…Certains réalisateurs versaient des larmes. Alors, je m’inventais des hauts faits pour les attendrir davantage” (109). The scars bear incontrovertible witness to Faustin’s suffering, and yet are a vivid example of the way in which his traumatic memories remain inaccessible to him. The reader is caught off guard by this casual mention of his wounds (Faustin had not previously alluded to them in the text) as well as Faustin’s exploitation of his injury. What is striking in this passage is the distance between Faustin and the indisputable marks of violence that are present on his body. The machete marks constitute another non-verbal form of bearing witness, one which escapes the notice of the narrating voice but signals to the reader a traumatic experience that the protagonist is incapable of revealing. The narrating of Faustin’s traumatic experience is constantly deferred, as Monénembo orients the reader’s attention toward markers of trauma (the misspelled words, the kite, the wounds) which function as non-verbal signifiers of an as of yet unknown event.

In so explicitly calling into question Faustin’s reliability as a narrator, Monénembo forces his reader to reflect critically on what sort of “truth” can be expected from the novel.
I would argue that by repeatedly undermining his protagonist’s credibility, Monénembo encourages the reader to focus less on the events being recounted than on the dialogic space created through this unreliable narration. In other words, the reader is forced to position him or herself vis-à-vis the literary voice of a traumatized, survivor of genocide, and in doing so must decide how to respond to his possibly falsified story. Monénembo does not dictate how the reader should respond but instead brings into being, through the text’s formal construction, the dialogic space in which the reader can envision his or her own subject position in relation to the voice of the traumatized witness.

The novel’s final act of bearing witness occurs in the courtroom during Faustin’s murder trial. The description of the trial has strong echoes of Camus’ L’étranger as Faustin refuses to give the answers that could save his life, preferring instead to comment on the absurdity of the entire trial. In a passage that recalls the final lines of Camus’ novel, a fellow detainee suggests that being condemned to death may in fact be the only way in which Faustin can achieve a measure of recognition that may give his life meaning. Speaking to Faustin the morning of his trial, he says:

T’en fais pas…s’ils te condamnaient à mort, c’est en fanfare qu’ils t’exécuteraient au stade de Nyamirambo avec une bande de grands caïds. Il y aurait plein de mecs pour t’applaudir et de jeunes filles pour te pleurer. Tu partirais de ce bas monde mais en sortant de l’anonymat. (130)

However, it is not only in being executed but in the act of testifying itself that Faustin can be granted a similar sort of recognition. His previous testimonies, to the RPF and the Western journalists both resulted in him achieving privileged status within the two communities.

56 “Pour que tout soit consommé, pour que je me sente moins seul, il me restait à souhaiter qu’il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu’ils m’accueillent avec des cris de haine” (121).
Similarly, his irreverent answers during his trial result in a strong reaction from the assembled crowd. As in the previous instances of testimony Faustin’s speech is a response to the expectations of those listening to him. He gleefully describes his early success at pleasing the assembled crowd at the trial. “C’était pour moi les éclats de rire complices et les regards admiratifs. N’en déplaise à ce crétin de Matata, je n’avais plus besoin du stade de Nyamirambo pour asseoir ma renommée” (136). The testimonial space appears as the only place in which Faustin can achieve recognition, even if this recognition remains contingent upon his giving answers that elicit a certain reaction from his onlookers. However, while the civilian audience in the court room is delighted with his irreverent responses to the judges’ questions, the judges themselves are infuriated. In an outburst that again evokes L’étranger, one of the judges exclaims, “Tu es un monstre, Faustin! Tu ne mérites pas d’appartenir au genre humain!” (137). It is only when the assembled spectators cease laughing at Faustin’s antics that he realizes that his performance was not sufficiently calibrated to meet the expectations of the crowd. Unlike Camus’ Meursault, who refuses to compromise his principles in order to save his life, Faustin’s invocation of the judge’s wrath stems more from his lack of self-awareness and a child-like ignorance of consequences. He describes how he is unable to stop speaking even as his words elicit an increasingly hostile reaction from the audience. “Je me rendais bien compte que les choses devenaient graves mais j’étais trop loin dans l’euphorie, je ne pouvais plus reculer” (137). As with previous instances of testimony, Faustin is not fully present to what he is saying, his euphoria blinding him to very real consequences of his actions. His speech appears completely dissociated from any kind of critical reflection. The very act defending himself in court (and his inadvertent failure)

57 In L’étranger the prosecutor at Meursault’s trial gives a similar condemnation of the accused. “Car s’il m’est arrivé au cours de ma longue carrière de réclamer des peines capitales, jamais autant qu’aujourd’hui, je n’ai senti ce pénible devoir compensé, balancé, éclairé par la conscience d’un commandement impérieux et sacré et par l’horreur que je ressens devant un visage d’homme où je ne lis rien que de monstrueux” (102).
constitutes another traumatic experience as Faustin faints. When he is revived the next day, he finds out that he has been condemned to death.

Conclusion

Faustin’s failure to defend himself in the courtroom foregrounds his unreliability as a narrator, foregrounding the traumatized subject’s inability to give a coherent account of his or her experience, while also calling into question the truth-claims of the child narrator trope. Unsure of what to believe, the reader must position him or herself in relation to the voice of the first-person narration, reflecting on his or her own response to this representation of a traumatized voice. This in turn brings the reader’s attention to the lacunae within the text, the aporia which represent Faustin’s trauma related to his past experience. The lacunae within the diegesis thus have a larger implications concerning the limits of speech to provide absolute and unitary meaning. In this way, Monénembo’s novel can be read as a reflection on the psychological impact of children and communities in post-genocide Rwanda, while at the same time questioning the limits of traumatic representation.

Part III: Emmanuel Dongala’s *Johnny Chien Méchant*

Unlike Kourouma or Monénembo, in his 2002 child-soldier novel *Johnny Chien Méchant*, Emmanuel Dongala refrains from using the sort of performative gestures such as repetition of particular words and phrases that indicate the trauma of his narrator and create a space of difference between his narrator and reader. Based in part on Dongala’s own experience during the civil war in his home Republic of Congo, *Johnny Chien Méchant* represents the atrocity committed by child soldiers in graphic detail while at the same time

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striving to grant some humanity to these children through a recognition of the cultural and political structures that exploit them. This affirmation of certain universal human values that transcend social and cultural contexts has been a constant presence in Dongala’s writing. Born in 1941 in what is now the Republic of Congo, Dongala’s novels and short stories offer unsparing critiques of the government in his native Congo, while at the same time celebrating the capacity of ordinary citizens to find meaning and compassion in the midst of repression and violence. His first novel, *Un fusil dans la main, un poème dans la poche* (1974), critiqued the intellectual’s complicity with postcolonial dictatorships while later works such as *Jazz et vin de palme* (1996) evoked the connection between the American civil rights movement and African movements for independence in the 1960s. Dongala’s decision to study at Oberlin College in the United States (as opposed to studying in metropolitan France) sets him apart from many of his Francophone African literary predecessors and contemporaries for whom the typical trajectory was the *aller-retour* from Africa to the French métropole. Dongala returned to the Republic of Congo in the 1980s to work as a professor of chemistry. In 1992, he participated in a national conference to craft a new government after the failure of the previous autocratic, socialist regime. The subsequent descent of the Republic of Congo into civil war and bloodshed forced him to seek asylum in the United States where he is currently a professor of chemistry at Bard College in Simon’s Rock.

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60 For more on Dongala’s biography and its impact on his work see Dominic Thomas, *Nation-Building, Propaganda, and Literature in Francophone Africa.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
Massachusetts. *Johnny Chien Méchant* is based on his final years in the Congo where Dongala observed first-hand the effects of civil war and the use of child-soldiers.\(^{61}\)

Dongala’s work is often viewed in light of his complex relationship to political and social engagement. In a 1979 article in PN-PA entitled “Littérature et société: ce que je crois,” Dongala affirmed his “right to indifference,” claiming that a writer did not need to be revolutionary or overtly ideological in order to show solidarity with oppressed people.\(^{62}\) Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier point out that this stems in part from Dongala’s disillusion at the failure of meaningful reforms to take place in his home country, leading to his skepticism regarding the power of ideological discourse to bring about political change. This, Cazenave and Célérier claim, has impacted his stance on the effectiveness of political engagement:

Dongala’s novels cast a particular light on the question of commitment as a dominant model of African literature because they simultaneously illustrate and elude that model… His novels manifest his humanistic stand against injustice while they are predicated on a reflexive literary self-consciousness that keeps dogmatic interpretations in check. (38)\(^{63}\)

This description of Dongala’s work in fact parallels the framing which Dongala gives his own novels, arguing for his right to chronicle injustice without espousing any particular sort

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\(^{61}\) In his contribution to the 2007 collection of essays *Afrique(s): écritures contemporaines* Dongala describes an encounter with a group of child-soldiers at a road block in the Congo which left him profoundly shaken, and began his reflection on the nature and genesis of this nascent child-soldier culture.

\(^{62}\) In this article, Dongala explains his position as follows: “L’engagement n’est pas nécessairement révolutionnaire. Être engagé, c’est choisir ses causes, bonnes ou mauvaises. On peut être écrivain révolutionnaire (comme défini plus haut) sans pour cela être engagé et vice-versa. Je me compte personnellement parmi les écrivains engagés mais je ne pense pas que jusque-là mes œuvres soient révolutionnaires” (61).

\(^{63}\) In her study of *Johnny Chien Méchant* Eloïse Brezault offers an almost identical assessment of Dongala’s work, suggesting that his novels have the power to “réveiller cette humanité inextinguible que l’horreur de la guerre et des genocides cherche constamment à éradiquer” (25).
of ideology. However, I would argue that an attentive reading of *Johnny Chien Méchant* calls into question Dongala’s assertion to be both a champion of the people while avoiding dogmatic interpretations of his work. A close reading of Dongala’s child-soldier novel suggest that his philosophy of universal human compassion, which he lays out through a largely unproblematized narration of traumatic events, functions in ways that shares several similarities with the ideological discourse he disavows.

**The Child Soldier Speaks, His Victim Responds. The Parallel Narration of Johnny Chien Méchant**

*Johnny Chien Méchant* is the story of two children: Johnny Chien Méchant, a child soldier, and Laokolé, an adolescent girl and refugee from the civil conflict in which Johnny is fighting. The novel takes place in a fictional country that appears modeled on Dongala’s native Republic of Congo. Unlike blood-thirsty Johnny, Laokolé, whose father had been killed in a previous conflict, is compassionate and carrying. Sheperding her disabled mother and brother to a refugee camp, she witnesses death and murder, eventually losing both remaining members of her family. Her encounters with foreign aid workers, including the American Tanisha, are the lone moments of compassion and sustainable human connection amidst the violence. The human rights workers thus function symbolically to illustrate the principles of compassion and attentiveness to suffering which Dongala’s novel seeks to praise. At the end of the novel, Laokolé leaves the safety of the refugee camp, only to be kidnapped by Johnny. Hardened by her experience, she resists his attempt to assault her and

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bludgeons him to death with a bible. The novel ends with Laokolé gazing at the stars and imagining a future free from violence.

Despite depicting Johnny as an agent of this violence and Laokolé’s torment, Dongala takes pains to humanize his child soldier protagonist through a series of narratological and formal choices, emphasizing Johnny’s similarity with Laokolé. The shared traits of the two characters are emphasized on a formal level through a structural dialogism in which the alternating first-person narratives respond to each other both by recounting the same events and expressing similar sentiments related to grief and loss in almost identical language.66 The dialogic nature of the two narratives (which continually echo one other) works in part through an evocation, and ultimately a subversion, of the romance genre, replacing the happy union of two initially opposed male and female figures with the male character’s murder. In this section, I will also explore the way in which Dongala represents the figure of the Western foreign aid worker and journalist, exploring the productive possibility of Western intervention even as he critiques the media’s penchant for voyeurism. Finally, I will reflect on how Dongala attempts to position his reader towards his representations of trauma, its witnesses and perpetrators, and the implications of an approach to traumatic representation that does not call into question its claims to be mimetic.

**Dialogic Framing and Textual Echoing**

In his sections of the novel (the characters narrate alternate chapters) Johnny tells his story with the guileless braggadocio of an adolescent. In his first-person narrative he

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describes his horrific exploits as well as the relationships (both friendly and antagonistic) with his similarly violent comrades. Johnny’s actions are monstrous. Yet Dongala’s takes pains to highlight that his protagonist, despite his cruelty, is still a child who is vulnerable and insecure and constantly seeking approval from his peers. At the end of the text, Johnny tries to impress Laokolé with his collection of outfits from his days as a sapeur. In another context, his clumsy adolescent courtship might even be touching. Dongala’s portrayal of Johnny is more nuanced than that proposed by Florence Paravy’s who claims that Johnny is a “monstre sans intelligence ni coeur, auquel le texte ne paraît pas accorder la moindre circonstance atténuante” (62). This reading suggests that Johnny and Laokolé are meant to be viewed as antithetical portraits of good and evil. However, the text highlights similarities between the two characters and even hints that Johnny has a value system, which, albeit hypocritical and selectively applied, suggests a child who is less a “monstre sans intelligence” than a product of his environment.

Discerning the ways in which Dongala establishes the killer’s humanity requires attention to the tone of the novel’s first-person narration. As in both Allah n’est pas obligé and L’aîné des orphelins, the passages narrated by Johnny Chien Méchant are suggestive of orality. Unlike Kourouma and Monénembo’s texts, however, there is no indication as to when, where or to whom the narrative is being addressed. Certain references to an implied interlocutor, (“Écoutez-le brailler à la radio) do not suggest a specific addressee. They are an attempt to create a tone of intimacy with the implied reader, a tone that simulates the directness and lack of attention to literary language that characterize an oral exchange. While the text is narrated in the past tense, the lack of any framing placing its recounting in the

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67 Sapeur is derived from the acronym of “Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes” referring to a sub-culture in the Congo which prizes expensive and outlandish clothing.
present, creates the impression of a story told as it is occurring. Neither Johnny nor Laokolé relate their stories in a way which suggests an *a posteriori* reflecting on a previously experienced event. This is reinforced by the fact that the narrative unfolds in a linear chronology, although in a subsequent chapter the alternate narrator will describe the same events from his or her own perspective. The novel therefore does not perform trauma as Kourouma and Monénembo’s texts do. It does not interrupt a linear narrative through a disordered chronology or through alternating between a past story and the present of the novel’s recounting. Neither does the text draw attention to the fact that it is narrated in French by two native speakers of an African language.

While the narration itself is not dialogic, Dongala’s juxtaposed first-person narratives, in which the same events are recounted by both narrators, have a dialogic effect. The text essentially dialogues with itself through the juxtaposition and re-narration of the same events from the perspectives of Johnny and Laokolé. In addition, Johnny and Laokolé’s similar styles of narration (both speak in an uncomplicated, informal tone) create an intimacy and relationship between the two characters in the mind of the reader. This is confirmed by the eventual meeting of Johnny and Laokolé at the end of the book, culminating in Laokolé mutilating Johnny’s genitalia with a bible in front of her infant daughter. Dongala’s text performs not on the level of narration but on the level of form, through the dialogic relationship between his juxtaposed narratives. The story of missed human connection between Johnny and Laokolé, acted out by the side-by-side narratives, parallels the destruction of social and affective bonds within the novel itself.

The effect of conflict on social relationships is also evident in the first-person plural narration which characterizes much of the novel, where Johnny uses “nous” to speak on
behalf of his band of soldiers. “Nous avons pris des risques et tout risque doit être accompagné d’une prime et notre prime nous la voulons tout de suite” (56). It is this strong sense of community, of speaking on behalf of a group, that is a key part of Dongala’s effort to make Johnny a compelling character. The reader understands that the allure of being a child soldier is linked not simply to violence. It is rooted in finding a sense of community and social belonging in a society where such structures are being constantly threatened. Dongala strives to nuance Johnny Chien Méchant’s character despite the heinous actions he relates by showing the genuine affection Johnny has for his fellow child soldiers. Speaking of his comrade Serpent, he says:

Celui-là, ouais, je l’aimais bien. Il n’emmerdait personne, toujours silencieux dans son coin mais pour repérer l’ennemi il n’y en avait pas deux. Rusé, visqueux, glissant entre les pièges tendus par l’ennemi comme une anguille entre les doigts, ne laissant aucune trace dans l’herbe, ça c’était Serpent. (54)

Through this éloge, Dongala portrays the esprit de corps that permeates Johnny’s gang, even as the group’s penchant for violence threatens its integrity at every moment. This focus on the esprits de corps humanizes Johnny, demonstrating the universal need for social belonging and peer group affirmation typical of any 15 year old, playing out grotesquely in the theater of conflict.

The implication is that Johnny is not monstrous by nature. Rather these instincts have been misdirected owing to a lack of structure and the unscrupulous politicians and warlords who manipulate children for material gain. There is no alternative social framework in which Johnny himself can integrate himself. As Corinne Blanchaud points out, Johnny Chient Méchant and other child-soldier novels “dénoncent l’absence de territoire et d’une
société constituée à partir d’une classification précise des objets du monde et de l’établissement de liens cohérent, et nécessaire, entre eux et entre les hommes” (156). It thus this lack of a stable territory onto which Johnny Méchant can root his identity that he turns to soldiering. The bonds that he forms with his fellow child soldiers are sincere, suggesting that the appeal of the soldier lifestyle is as much concerned with community belonging as a sadistic impulse to do evil. The strength of these relations is evident in the sincere grief that Johnny shows at the death of his friend Caïman. Johnny’s explanation of their friendship alternates between touching and self-aggrandizing. Bragging about their exploits together, he says:

Caïman est mon copain et il se range toujours de mon côté chaque fois qu’il y a bisbille et je lui rends la pareille en ne le laissant jamais tomber. C’est avec moi qu’il a partagé la première nana que nous avons faite prisonnière lors d’une razzia chez les Tchéchènes. (56)

Johnny is unable to see the contradiction in his genuine affection for Caïman and the suffering inflicted on the rape victim that he had his friend “shared.” At the chapter’s end the precariousness of these bonds forged through violence is once again revealed when Caïman is shot to death by a fellow child soldier for demanding a sum of money that had been promised the group. Johnny is devastated by his friend’s death. When after Caïman’s murderer, the commander Giap, tells them to “allez me jeter cet élément dans un trou” Johnny says bitterly “Cet élément, c’était mon ami Caïman. J’ai failli pleurer. On ne tue pas l’ami de quelqu’un. Vraiment, les gens sont méchants, ils n’ont pas de cœur” (57). The guilelessness displayed elsewhere by Johnny suggests that this is not a show of sympathy calculated to impress his reader. He attempts to hide neither the awful acts he commits with
his friends nor his genuine grief at a friend’s passing. As Odile Cazenave points out, this is a strategy designed to work against the usual voyeuristic or dehumanizing portraits of the child soldier since “at heart Johnny Chien Méchant is still a boy, a child who does not want to confront certain realities” (63). Thus while Johnny’s actions are reprehensible, Dongala takes pains to show how certain values (friendship, respect for the dead) persist in some form in the institutional vacuum of the conflict zone.

In the chapter that follows Caïman’s death, Laokolé encounters Johnny for the first time, describing him to the reader in her own words. While Laokolé and Johnny do not interact, she singles him out amongst the group of child soldiers, suggesting an interest that in other sorts of narratives might imply an imminent relationship of some kind. Her focus on Johnny in her descriptions signals to the readers that the two narratives will be responding to each other, a form of dialogism that foreshadows the two characters’ meeting at the end of the novel. In the following passage, Laokolé is observing Johnny from behind a hedge and gives a comic account of his manner of dress thus undermining his claims to be an intimidating soldier:

En tout cas je n’avais jamais vu façon plus bizarre de fagoter que celle de Chien Méchant. Affublé d’une casquette à visière retournée et d’un T-shirt sans manches, il avait autour du cou un collier formé de cauris enfilés et sur lequel étaient accrochés deux ou trois petits sachets…Il n’était pas costaud ni même très grand, et son pantalon vert olivé semblait trop grand pour lui. (64)

In giving a vision of Johnny that contests his self-presentation, Laokolé makes Johnny vulnerable in the eyes of the reader, asserting a certain narrative authority over her future tormenter. Her description is not simply directed at the reader. It constitutes a dialogic
response to the text’s other first-person narrative. Seeing Johnny through the eyes of Laokolé further humanizes him, making him vulnerable since he cannot escape Laokolé’s gaze and narrative authority. In this way, Dongala creates the grotesque contradiction of a confused and vulnerable teenager, who is also the perpetrator of unspeakable violence.

Unlike Kourouma and Monénembo, Dongala’s novel does not problematize language through the use of repetitive leitmotifs such as the obscenities and dictionary definitions in *Allah n’est pas obligé* or the italicized neologisms (*avènements* and *taumatrismes*) in *L’aîné des orphelins*. The few gestures that recall this type of repetition occur at the end of chapter seven. Here Laokolé’s language mirrors that of the end of chapter six, narrated by Johnny, at times word for word. While Johnny had lamented the death of his friend Caïman, Laokolé expresses her grief at the death of her friend Mélanie. “Quel est ce pays qui tuait de sang-froid ses enfants? Comment peut-on tuer la meilleure amie de quelqu’un? Vraiment, les gens sont méchants, ils n’ont pas de cœur” (70). (Johnny’s final lines of chapter six are “j’ai failli pleurer. On ne tue pas l’ami de quelqu’un. Vraiment, les gens sont méchants, ils n’ont pas de cœur” (57).) This repetition has several functions. On the one hand the reader must confront the irony that Johnny and Laokolé have similar value systems. In the case of Johnny, he is unable to see that his behavior contradict the very moral code which he blames others for not following. Moreover, on the level of form this repetition creates an implicit relationship between the two characters, recognized by the readers if not the characters themselves. The textual echoing performs, through its repetition, the common values which Dongala wants the reader to recognize in these two characters. It is noteworthy that the repeated line speaks of the importance of friendship and the tragedy of loss. This allows Dongala to represent Johnny’s violent actions without contradicting the existence of certain transcendant, humanist values of compassion and kindness which he lauds elsewhere in the
text (notably in the person of compassionate human rights workers). The final meeting between Laokolé and Johnny, an intersubjective connection within the narrative itself, is also foreshadowed through this textual echoing, recalling a more generic romance, where the reader would expect the male and female protagonist with unacknowledged similarities to be brought together for the sake of narrative closure. Thus unlike in Kourouma and Monénembo, the use of repetition in *Johnny Chien Méchant* illustrates not his characters’ trauma and estrangement but rather their shared humanity. This positive valorization of repetition reflects Dongala’s overall desire to emphasize the possibilities for human connection that exist in spite of traumatic experience.

The two characters meet for the first time near the end of the novel. Johnny has invaded the refugee camp where Laokolé is teaching a group of orphans. After she upbraids Johnny for his violent behavior, he becomes furious and kidnaps both Laokolé and her newborn daughter, taking them to an abandoned apartment where he is squatting. For the first moment, the protagonists speak to one another at length. The combative banter of their first meeting is evocative of two sparring love interests in a romance novel, in which the male and female protagonist initially quarrel before eventually succumbing to the mutual sexual tension. However, the circumstances of this dialogue make this connotation grotesque. The particular attention that Johnny pays to Laokolé is further suggestive of a romance narrative, as Johnny speaks of Laokolé as an exemplary woman, saying: “Étrange femme, étrange fille. Jamais je n’avais eu cette impression devant quelqu’un, surtout pas devant une femme” (352). Her exemplary nature is further reinforced by Johnny’s visceral

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68 These characters, such as the American Tanisha, shower Laokolé with affection and kindness. Dongala presents them as exemplars of the universal values of kindness and compassion that appear lacking within the war-zone.

reaction upon finding her in his room. “La lumière a jailli… et mon cœur a failli s’arrêter… Tourner les talons, fuir. Mais non, la frayeur est passée, je me suis ressaisi à temps. Diable, c’était elle!” (352-353) The rhetoric (the stopped heart etc.) recalls the clichés of sentimental writing. Johnny further reflects on the exceptional nature of his visitor wondering if she is perhaps a witch who has snuck into his home to seduce him. His respect for her grows as he sees his utter inability to scare her and realizes that his tactics of physical intimidation are useless. “Tu crois que je ne fais rien d’autre dans la vie que tuer, viens voir”, ai-je dit en colère” (355). After showing her all of his clothes from his days as a sapeur, Laokolé is still not impressed. This scene highlights Johnny’s emotional vulnerability, as well as a child-like neediness, both traits which draw the reader’s attention to his young age rather than to the acts he has committed. Indeed, his desire to be known for something other than being a killer, suggests that Johnny understands on some level, that in order to achieve the sort of human connection he desires with Laokolé, he must have different values.

Failing to achieve any sort of connection with Loakolé through his preening and posturing, Johnny becomes violent and moves to assault his captive. The shrewd Laokolé anticipates his attack, hurling a bible at his head which she then recovers and uses to bludgeon him to death. Narrated from Johnny’s perspective, the scene is intensely brutal, combining graphic imagery with Johnny’s own descriptions of his pain and suffering:

Et puis une furie s’est acharnée à me donner de violents coups répétés entre mes deux jambes. La douleur était insupportable; j’ai hurlé, j’ai plaidé pour que cela cesse mais la furie ne connaissait pas la pitié et a continué à cogner; je me suis mis à pisser.

[70 See note 60.]
du sang, puis mes testicules ont éclaté et mes couilles ont été en marmelade; j’étais émasculé. La furie n’a pas cessé pour autant. La douleur irradiait maintenant tout mon corps… J’ai mal… je meurs… je suis mort… je… je… (358)

This scene encapsulates Dongala’s unproblematized narration of traumatic events in which we are given first-person accounts which can make no real claims for authenticity. Johnny dies as he is narrating. Indeed, the “je meurs” is the only instance in the text when an event is told in the present tense. The “je…je…” are the only instance of performative speech meant to indicate the suffering of a character in the present moment of the narrator’s recounting, despite the dozens of scenes of graphic violence that preceded it. This choice to relate this unnarratable event therefore suggests Dongala’s use of these characters as mediums of a larger truth at the expense of his characters’ psychological complexity or interiority. In other words, by not problematizing his representation of graphic violence, Dongala does not ask his reader to reflect critically on the limits of representation, instead suggesting that the reader is to take the realism of the narrative and his characters at face value.71 Rather than critically reassess the problematic authenticity claims of the child-narrator trope, as Monénembo does, Dongala relies on these claims to make his broader points about the fundamental goodness of mankind, the corruption of children by unscrupulous politicians, and the wasted potential of Africa’s youth. It is this death scene, however, that exposes the limits to Dongala’s approach. Johnny’s almost matter of fact recounting of his extreme pain distances the reader from the event itself, foreclosing a more nuanced reflection on how one engages with suffering, as Dongala shifts our attention to Laokolé’s triumph, a clichéd telos of good triumphing over evil. It is worth asking if

71 These include most notably Johnny Chien Méchant’s murder of a young child selling fruit (67), and the graphic description of a gang rape (270).
Dongala’s lack of self-reflexivity in representing extreme trauma undermines his larger project which intends precisely to show the importance of compassion and attentiveness to human suffering.

The Western Media as Well-Meaning Voyeur

Dongala also interrogates the reader’s own position as a secondary witness to the suffering through his representation of the Western media. When Laokolé arrives in a UN refugee camp, she meets the Belgian journalist Katelijne who proposes interviewing her for a TV news segment. While he will subsequently critique the voyeuristic impulses of the Western media, Dongala takes pains to present Katelijne as well-meaning and sincere. Upon seeing Laokolé’s injured mother Katelijne appears genuinely moved. “Elle semblait très touchée et émue en voyant cette femme sans jambes, assise sur sa natte de réfugiée, le torse droit” (168). Katelijne then tells the two girls how the Western world ignores the tragedies that take place in Africa while underscoring the importance of bearing witness to them. “C’est une honte pour l’humanité entière. Nous devons témoigner. Je veux vous interviewer pour faire connaître au monde la tragédie qui se passé ici” (169). Lest the reader think that Katelijne is cynically spouting talking points, Laokolé tells us that Katelijne speaks these words with touching sincerity. “Quand une personne parle avec sincérité, il y a quelque chose dans sa voix et son visage qui vous le fait sentir. Il y avait quelque chose dans la voix de cette femme d’une certaine âge” (169). The journalist is portrayed as an unwitting cog in a larger media structure which gives the Western world misleading and voyeuristic stories concerning Africa. Unlike the cynical and disingenuous character of Rodney in L’aîné des orphelins, Katelijne does not embody an attitude of exploitation and indifference. Her naïveté
stems from an unwillingness to fully grasp the impact of her intervention in the conflict and a lack of self-awareness concerning her motivations.

It is not Katelijne’s interviews of Mélanie and Laokolé that are critiqued but rather the way they are filmed. Laokolé notes how the cameraman focuses on Mélanie’s face as she describes the loss of her parents. “Katelijne non plus n’osait l’interrompre pour poser des questions. Par contre le cameraman n’arrêtait pas de faire des gros plans dans tous les angles du beau visage de Mélanie ruisselant de larmes” (169). It is not the desire to tell Mélanie’s story that is questioned so much as its aestheticization through the cameraman’s focus on the “beautiful” face of suffering. That Katelijne is ignorant of this exploitation appears to stem not from any innate cruelty or thoughtlessness but rather from a lack of critical reflection on the consequences of her reporting. Katelijne is unaware of the contradiction between her sincere concern for the tragedy she is covering and her desire to show images of Laokolé’s mother and her amputated legs. After Laokolé says that her mother’s story will be redundant since it will contain no new information, Katelijne responds that the visual impact of showing the mother’s grief-stricken face and the stumps of her legs is the only way to reach an audience. “Les Américains disent ‘when it bleeds, it leads,’ en d’autres termes plus il y a du sang, plus c’est spectaculaire, plus ça marche” (171). Here Dongala’s portrayal of Katelijne becomes inconsistent. Does it seem plausible that this journalist who listened to Mélanie and Laokolé with such sincere attentiveness could be so unaware of how she is exploiting the mother’s suffering? It is up to Laokolé to set her straight, informing Katelijne that her mother’s pain should remain private. Katelijne appears chagrined by the news, apparently surprised that her request could provoke such a reaction. “Elle a compris que je n’étais pas contente. Elle s’est excusé, elle a dit qu’elle ne voulait pas du tout s’amuser de notre douleur” (172). That Katelijne is well-intentioned but voyeuristic suggests that
Dongala wishes her to represent the complex relationship of the Western secondary witness to African suffering, one who consumes, in a figurative sense, these images of suffering, while under the illusion that his or her voyeuristic interest in the continent is somehow productive. In this way, Dongala manages to reconcile voyeuristic or simplistic Western media portrayals of Africa with the aptitude for sincerity and compassion which the novel seeks to establish as human universals. It is a failure to see and to understand which causes Katelijne to perpetuate the “when it bleeds, it leads” mentality, not any sort of innate cynicism or cruelty.

In addition to the foreign journalists, the Western human rights worker is a central figure in Dongala’s novel, suggesting a positive role for outside intervention in the conflict zone. The workers in Laokolé’s refugee camp, such as the American Tanisha and the Swede Birgit, lavish Laokolé with kindness while standing up to entitled expatriates and wealthy citizens demanding special treatment. These characters can be read in terms of Dongala’s overall humanist project as he attempts to avoid a narrative of war that essentializes Africa as a space of unbroken cruelty and suffering. Nevertheless, Dongala’s hagiographic portrait of the human rights workers reveals some contradictions inherent to this universal humanism. Most strikingly, the compassion which the characters in the novel display toward Laokolé necessarily comes at the expense of other refugees. Dongala deplores the special privilege which wealthy refugees demand and yet Tanisha and Birgit lavish just such attention on Laokolé. No other refugees are permitted to tell their story or demand recognition. A notable example is Laokolé’s reflection on Tanisha’s kindness and the particular attention she gives to Laokolé and her mother during their stay at the refugee camp:
Elle nous a ensuite quittées en promettant de passer voir Maman. Sa présence m’avait réconfortée. J’ai d’autant plus appréciée que je la savais débordée par les centaines de personnes présentes dans ce lieu et malgré cela, elle me témoignait cette attention particulière. Une grande générosité découlaît de tout son être. (166)

Clearly the character of Tanisha is meant to illustrate the power of simple acts of compassion and tenderness amidst unimaginable suffering. And yet Dongala fails to interrogate what one might call the opportunity cost of compassion, why Laokolé, over the “centaines de personnes” who remain nameless and faceless is worthy of this special attention. In doing so, Dongala offers his reader exemplary models of human behavior in times of violence without interrogating how this ideal might be translated into workable action in the present. One is compelled to ask if the representation of these idealized, exemplary figures risk masking the complex range of psychological responses to extreme conflict.

Conclusion

In order to argue for the universality of certain traits of kindness and compassion, Dongala ironically makes his characters appear less human, their psychological interiority sacrificed to their function as allegories. The narration of graphic violence is not problematized, save for Johnny’s death scene, suggesting that the violence is largely metaphorical, coded as the “evil” in the teleological dialectic struggle between good and evil, which culminates in Laokolé’s murder of Johnny. While the echoing that occurs between Laokolé and Johnny’s respective first person narrations does cause the reader to reflect on the subjective and arbitrary nature of language, the repeated lines about friendship and loss are still coded with a clearly discernable meaning, functioning as illustrations of the unlikely
commonalities between a child soldier and an innocent young girl. A more nuanced reflection on the complexities of violent representation—the lacuna inherent in such narratives, the reader’s own positionality in relation to them—is absent from the text. *Johnny Chien Méchant* could thus be seen as working to inscribe a counter-discourse of hope and optimism that works against discourses that negatively essentialize Africa in the global imaginary. However, in order to achieve this end Dongala forecloses certain reflections on the way traumatic events are represented as well as the way in which ideological discourses can legitimize and perpetuate violence.

**Part IV: Conclusion**

An obvious concern with the use of a child narrator by an adult writer is the connotation of exploitation. This is especially heightened in the African context given a literary history in which the figure of the child has been linked to Africa’s status as a developing nation in need of guidance and assistance from a paternal colonizer figure. In the case of the child soldier, this rhetorical exploitation does not necessarily have a negative connotation as it could be said to remind the reader of the way in which real-world child soldiers are themselves victims of manipulation and exploitation. In addition, in the context of the child soldier, the literary device of a child narrator who speaks with the vocabulary and fluency of an adult can serve as a reminder of the way in which these young people are in fact no longer children in a conventional sense owing to the violence they have witnessed and perpetrated.

Of the three texts in this study, Monénembo’s *L’aîné des orphelins* is the most explicit in forcing the reader to reflect on the use of the child narrator as a literary device. In ironizing on the aphorism that “la vérité sort de la bouche de l’enfant,” Monénembo asks his reader to question the way in which child narrators can frame texts as authentic through
their supposedly uncomplicated understanding of language and the world. At the same time, even if the narrator in *L’aîné* is unreliable—both because of his mendacity and traumatized memory—the novel itself could be said to succeed in representing certain truths related to traumatic representation. The aporia and lacunae that structure the text suggest both the way in which trauma continues to haunt its victims in the present and the inevitable loss that accompanies events such as genocide. The reader is forced to critically reflect on his own position related to this disturbing, and possibly fabricated story of genocide, told from the perspective of a suffering child.

Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* also calls into question the truth of its narrator’s discourse, as Birahima frequently refers to his narrative as “mes salades” or “mon blablabla.” Kourouma differs from Monénembo, however, in giving extensive historical detail of events in recent African history, such as the politics of Sierra Leone or the videotaped torture of Liberian leader Samuel Doe. Even as the novel calls into question the reliability of its narrator’s “salades,” the text contains passages which appear calculated to complement contemporary historiography, recounting real events within the discursive framing of the child soldier’s voice. Birahima’s seemingly simplistic understanding (all politicians are indistinguishable ‘bandits’, for instance) is in fact meant to contain a certain profundity, exposing the hypocrisy and true nature of the politicians and institutions responsible for violence. However, even as Kourouma appears to exploit the cliché of the truth-telling child, his narrative is framed so as to bring the reader’s attention back to Birahima’s story in the present moment, the precise space where the reliability of the narrator is called into question. The novel ends with its opening lines (“M’appelle Birahima. Suis p’tit nègre…”) emphasizing the trauma of the young narrator, who appears condemned to repeat his story *ad infinitum*, forever a prisoner of his past. This final line emphasizes the
subjectivity of the narrator speaking in the present rather than the past historical events he describes. It suggests that Kourouma, like Monénembo, wishes his reader to consider the toll of mass violence on the human actors who must live with its haunting legacy.

Emmanuel Dongala’s text does not offer the same reflection on the truth claims of the child soldier narrative. Instead, it presents a realist text heavily informed by the humanist values that have long been a prominent feature of his work. The two child narrators give a chronological account of their experiences, detailing scenes of graphic suffering and violence as well as moments of humanity and compassion that manage to exist even within the conflict space. Dongala’s novel appears in many respects to be a response to discourses of afro-pessimism. The irony is that this representation of universal human goodness constitutes its own form of essentialization. Any of Dongala’s characters not contributing to the violence are represented as idealized avatars of kindness and compassion, devoid of any other flaws. As laudable as Dongala’s project of reshaping the representation of Africa in the collective imaginary may be, it is crucial to ask if these gestures do not risk further distancing the reader from the atrocities present in the novel. For instance, the straightforward narration of graphic violence at times borders on voyeuristic. The scenes are told in a realist mode which does not question language’s mimetic power in relating extreme events. Dongala’s desire to replace one ideology (that of the racial hatred and ethnic division that caused the conflict) with his own version hampers his ability to explore the full complexity of traumatic representation, which involves questioning language’s power to signify.

At the same time, Kourouma and Monénembo’s decision not to propose specific solutions to the violence they chronicle also deserves critical thought. Their narratives seek to make the individual reader attentive to the psychological impact of violence (both physical
and discursive) through a variety of literary techniques. Yet the plight of their narrators, who appear trapped within the confines of their traumatic past, seems to foreclose any possibility of rehabilitation. Is it sufficient to foster an awareness and engagement with suffering in the reader without proposing concrete ways in which that suffering might be ameliorated? This, according to Michael Rothberg, is where trauma studies, with its privileging of listening and the intersubjective encounter, may fall short. He writes, “Trauma theory helps make us attentive to suffering and thus, in principle, to justice and responsibility, but it needs to be supplemented by a positive vision of social and political transformation” (156). Dongala makes an initial attempt at this, suggesting that recognizing our common humanity can perhaps help forge a path out of conflict, but none of the authors offer programmatic solutions to the specific problems which their child narrators face. In a broader sense, it is possible to imagine the child soldier novel as an initial step to grant recognition to the ongoing suffering in many areas of contemporary Africa. Given the large stylistic similarities between the three texts in these studies it is difficult to imagine that the first person child soldier narrative will have staying power as a genre. Perhaps, then, its appearance within the last twenty years can be explained as a powerful literary technique to inscribe the violence in contemporary Africa in the collective imaginary. With ongoing conflicts in South Sudan and the Congo, it remains to be seen if Francophone African authors will now turn to articulating their own “visions of social and political transformation” to alleviate the suffering and societal dysfunction represented in the novels of Kourouma, Monénembo, and Dongala.
CHAPTER 2

Listening to the Limit: Reading Paratext in Francophone African Trauma Memoirs

Introduction

The 2011 edition of Rwandan author and Tutsi genocide survivor Esther Mujawayo’s memoir *SurVivantes* (co-written with the journalist Souâd Belhaddad) abounds in paratextual material.² Before the title page, one encounters an *avant-propos* by MétisPresses editor David Collin and a new interview of Mujawayo by her co-author. There follow two epigraphs, one from Primo Levi and another from Mujawayo herself; a series of dedications from Mujawayo to her daughters as well as the victims of the genocide (which include her husband, Innocent); two prologues, by Belhaddad and Mujawayo respectively; Mujawayo’s preamble before the book’s opening chapter and the memoir’s “Première Partie.” In addition, at the end of the 24th and final chapter is a list of single sentences in which Mujawayo accuses the génocidaires. Further, one finds a three-page list of 80 names of Mujawayo’s family members killed during the genocide. Then one finds Belhaddad’s joint interview (which has its own brief preface) of Esther Mujawayo and holocaust survivor Simone Veil, a postface by Alexandre Dauge-Roth concerning the necessity of bearing literary witness to violence, a brief history of Rwanda and the genocide, and, finally a page of *remerciements* from both Mujawayo and Belhaddad.

Even in the case of a re-edition which needs to justify its existence through the addition of new material, the abundance of paratextual material in Mujawayo’s 304 page text

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² Here I use Genette’s definition of paratext which he describes in *Seuils* (Paris: Seuils, 1987) as “un certain nombre de productions, elle-même verbales ou non, comme un nom d’auteur, un titre, une préface, des illustrations, dont on ne sait pas toujours si l’on doit ou non considérer qu’elles lui [le texte] appartiennent, mais qui en tout cas l’entourent et le prolongent, précisément pour le présenter” (7).
should not be dismissed as simply a matter of form or commercial necessity. Rather, the way in which the text is packaged and framed raises a number of pertinent questions concerning both the relationship of African writers to the European publishing industry as well as the way in which memoirs of limit-events such as genocide are “packaged” for Western audiences: What do we make of the fact that none of the writers and interviewees who contribute to the paratext are themselves Rwandan? Can we discern in Mujawayo’s memoir, co-written with a European based journalist and published in Switzerland, the dynamics of (post)colonial dependence and patronage which have always complicated the history of Francophone African literature? In terms of the representation of genocide, of what value is the authority of an editor or journalist who did not themselves experience the violence? Does this paratextual framing ultimately constitute a distasteful “packaging” of suffering for a Western audience, one which commodifies and aestheticizes the suffering of an exotic African other for a French-speaking European public?

The paratextual material of limit-event writing73 thus brings to the fore crucial questions regarding the implications and ethics of “packaging” suffering for a Western audience. In addition to examining the proliferation of paratextual material, as found in Mujawayo, the opposite situation, that is, the lack of such paratextual framing must also be examined. For example in the case of former Congolese child soldier Lucien Badjoko’s 2005 memoir J’étais enfant soldat (Plon), co-written with Belgian journalist Katia Clarens, the absence of packaging is blatant, reflecting a potential desire to let Badjoko “speak for himself.” Aside from the back-matter which casts the author as one of thousands of

73 Like Dominick LaCapra in Writing History Writing Trauma (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) I use this term, similar to the “expérience limite” which Maurice Blanchot describes in L’Entretien Infini (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) to describe events which approach the physical and psychological edge of what a human being can experience. Limit-event writing is the attempt to discursively represent or comment upon such experiences.
exploited child soldiers and a one-page _avant-propos_, in which Clarens describes the genesis of the memoir, there is little in the way of paratextual framing. While brief, both the memoir’s _avant-propos_ and back matter offer fascinating and troubling examples of the way in which the testimony of an African witness to (and in Badjoko’s case perpetrator of) violence is contextualized for a Western readership. What do we make of the fact that Clarens in her _avant-propos_ gives almost no detail as how her collaboration with Badjoko affected the memoir, which is told exclusively in Badjoko’s voice? How do we reconcile the back-matter’s characterization of Badjoko as a “petit Zaïrois” among the 30,000 children “cyniquement utilisés comme chair à canon” when Badjoko enlisted voluntarily and recounts with disturbing glee how his training as a soldier allowed him to bully a fellow student? More problematic is Badjoko’s use of politicized and racist rhetoric which the book’s preface does not mention. It is thus necessary to ask what elements of the text’s construction and production are being concealed from view, and what interests (ideological, personal etc.) such concealment might serve.

The goal of this chapter is to engage with the specific problematics of the paratext as it relates to contemporary limit-event memoirs in the African context. While testimonial literature that came out of the Holocaust was in many ways thought to constitute a new genre, memoirs such as _SurVivantes_ or _J’étais enfant soldat_ written by an African but published in Europe for a Western audience, engages with a long history of Francophone African literature, an affiliation which risks obscuring the specificities of the testimony in question.

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74 The text also includes a poem by Badjoko, a two-page chronology of the war in the Congo, and Badjoko’s remerciements.
76 For general information on literature of the Holocaust see Abraham J. Edelheit and Hershel Edelheit, _Bibliography on Holocaust Literature_ (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1986) and Alvin Hirsch Rosenfeld, _A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature_ (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1980).
through the deployment of tropes and codes meant to package the text for a Western reader. It is in the paratext where such codes are either reinforced or undone, and as such the paratext constitutes a privileged area of study. Of special interest here is the way in which Mujawayo’s and Badjoko’s works fall under a double sign of alterity, since they are written by an African “other” as well as a trauma survivor (and in the case of Badjoko, perpetrator).

How is this double marginality framed and packaged for a Western reader? How does this framing, in the form of titles, back-matter, prefaces, postfaces etc., engage with the double otherness of these texts?

Part I: Packaging Altery in the Postcolonial Context

As literature written for a largely European audience and small Western-educated African elite, Francophone African literature’s relevance and reception has long been defined by the question of cultural otherness. As Florence Paravy writes in her essay “L’altérité comme enjeu du champ littéraire africain”: “Or le problème de l’altérité, ou de l’identité, semble bien être au centre de ce qui se noue à travers le personnage romanesque dans la littérature francophone” (214). The “personnage romanesque” in semi-autobiographical works such as Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir* (1953) or Cheikh Hamidou Kane’s *L’aventure ambiguë* (1961) found himself estranged from both the culture of his ancestors and that of the French colonizer an existential dilemma that can be found in many other works from the period. It was in the paratext, in the form of prefaces and introductions often by colonial administrators, that the alterity present in these texts could be translated for a Western reader. As Locha Mateso wrote in his 1986 study “L’objet de la préface est de préparer le

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public français à son rôle de “récepteur” des œuvres des écrivains noirs” (84-85). In *Packaging Post/Coloniality* (2005) his highly informative study of colonial and postcolonial paratexts, Richard Watts describes how the prefaces of these colonial era texts, such as Ahmadou Diagne’s *Les trois volontés de Malick* (1920) or Paul Hazoumé *Doguicimi* (1937) “flatten” the texts in question working to control and mediate cultural difference for the supposedly uninformed Western reader. What is key for Watts is the way in which “the paratext to these early novels from sub-Saharan Africa instrumentalizes the text, making of it a strategic piece of evidence in favor of colonialism or part of an argument for its reform” (40).

Watts’ study is concerned essentially with what the paratexts to Francophone Africa works look to accomplish and the sort of readings they try and condition. He offers compelling analyses of the way in which early paratexts written by French writers for African-authored works reflect colonial era power dynamics and how later paratexts subverted these conventions. However, what a preface or introduction means to accomplish and what results from its juxtaposition and inevitable “mise en dialogue” with the main text is quite a different matter. I wish to take Watts’ analysis of the Francophone African paratext a step further by suggesting what kinds of meanings are produced when paratext and text are juxtaposed and how the paratext itself works in concert with the text to create reading experiences dependent on the reader’s horizon of expectations. A literary and cultural analysis of the paratextual material is limiting in the sense that it does not attempt to unpack the complex, and at times unintended, consequences of the paratext’s coexistence with the body text. These kinds of reading are especially relevant for African texts

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79 Watts gives the example of Henri Lopes’ preface to *Le Pleurer-rire* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1982) which “is a parody or burlesque of the hyperauthoritative prefaces of the colonial and decolonial periods” (122).

80 For more on the “horizon of expectations” see Hans Robert Jauss, *Towards an Aesthetic of Reception* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1982).
marketed to Europeans, where the “marginal” voices speaking within the narrative are still often considered in need of framing and orientating by the European publisher. As Graham Huggan notes in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001) it is precisely the commodification of this marginal quality that defines and legitimizes the culture industry which produces “postcolonial” texts. Huggan identifies an aestheticizing of cultural difference in which what is marginal and different must conform to certain preset codes delimiting it as such. In the specific case of African literature he writes:

African literature is best regarded as neither celebratory self-expression nor reprehensible Western imposition, but rather as a hybrid amalgam of cross-fertilized aesthetic traditions that are the historical outcome of a series of—often violent—cultural collisions. The anthropological exotic in which African literature is implicated is, in part, an attempt to convert this violence into palatable aesthetic forms. This attempt, perhaps, comprises what I would call the ‘postcoloniality’ of African literature: its global market-value as a reified object of intellectual tourism, or as the reassuringly educative vehicle of cultural difference seen and appreciated in aesthetic terms. (56)

Huggan’s assertion that the cultural difference of the African novel is aestheticized (and thus commodified) would suggest a troubling continuation of the instrumentalization which Watts identifies in his study of colonial era-literature and its paratextual material. Indeed, this attempt to discern the remnants of a self-effacing structure that reproduces neo-
colonial power dynamics is evident in studies such as Alec Hargreaves’ work on the co-authored literature of Maghrebi women living in France.\(^\text{81}\)

And yet, what are we to make of Huggan’s statement given that much of the literature now marketed to Western audiences concerns not the colonial history’s “cultural collisions” but rather the violence confrontations of the postcolonial present such as the Tutsi genocide or the violence in the Congo? Does this notion of “intellectual tourism” and “aestheticized cultural difference” apply to a child soldier or survivor memoir from the African context? Indeed, it seems that it is precisely at the interpretive margin at which lies such testimonial literature that Huggan’s broad explanatory framework proves insufficient. Further, I would argue, it is necessary to consider that even as certain texts, such as Badjoko’s *J’étais enfant soldat* are marketed under a sign of difference that a Western reader might recognize (narrative of African violence, child-soldier memoir, African childhood memoir etc.) the experience of reading these texts reveals the inability of this presentation based on present-codes of cultural difference to contain the totality of meaning which the text produces. It is precisely this attempt to contain or delineate the margin, to frame a text as “the story of an African childhood” (the phrase displayed prominently on the cover of Badjoko’s memoir) that reveals the arbitrary and unstable nature of these margins. In reading these works, it is thus necessary to consider not only the way in which a margin is being “marketed” but also the way in which the text, through its paratextual material, may in fact undo its own claims to marginality. In the case of Mujawayo’s *Survivantes* the prefaces and prologues may in fact problematize this marginality, producing a more sophisticated reading

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experience than that of a Western reader unreflectively consuming pre-packaged, sanitized narratives of cultural difference.

However for a Western reading public, Badjoko and Mujawayo’s memoirs are defined not only by their cultural otherness but by their exposure to the limit-events of war and extreme violence. This doubly marginal literature (both cultural and epistemological) belongs to what Edgard Sankara identifies as the third and most recent phase of Francophone African autobiographical writing which deals with contemporary events in the postcolonial period. “Recent political changes and events have generated a substantial number of memoirs written by survivors of these turmoils; thus the Rwandan genocide is recollected as a historical event to be recorded by memoir and testimonial literature” (Sankara, 449-450). These memoirs are firmly rooted in a certain historical experience while also representing limit-events which resist precisely the sort of packaging and aestheticizing gestures which Huggan identifies with African literature and postcolonial literature more broadly.

In addition to falling into the category of Francophone African autobiography or life-writing these works conform to what Kali Tal identifies as “literatures of trauma,” a generic classification dependent on the experiential, rather than cultural, experience of the author. Indeed, if autobiography is defined by a Lejeunian “pacte de lecture” in which the reader accepts that the author is a real person, basing the narrative on their own experience, the “pact” of literature of trauma involves the reader’s acceptence that the author has witnessed or been exposed to life-threatening events of a psychologically destabilizing

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82 Sankara cites as examples Maurice Niwese, Le Peuple Rwandais un pied dans la tombe: Récit d’un refugie étudiant (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001) and Venerand Ndegaya, Depression au Burundi: journal d’un prisonnier vainqueur (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993). Further examples include the child soldier memoirs discussed in the previous chapter as well as narratives concerning the Tutsi genocide such as Scholastique Mukasonga’s La femme aux pieds nus (Paris: Gallimard, 2008) and Inyenzi ou les cafards (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).
nature. Tal expands this notion however, to insist on the dialogic quality of this writing, which he claims to be participating actively in a larger discursive conversation.

Literature of trauma is defined by the identity of its author. Literature of trauma holds at its center the reconstruction and recuperation of the traumatic experience, but it is also actively engaged in an ongoing dialogue with the writings and representations of nontraumatized authors. (17)

Tal’s assertion that literature of trauma is author-centered further highlights the way in which traditional definitions of African memoirs and autobiography, which privilege the work’s relation to community, are thrown into confusion by the traumatic memoirs focus on the individual writer. In addition, this literature of trauma constitutes a literature of witness, a term with complex resonances in the African context, since African literature’s reception has often focused on its documentary quality at the expense of its aesthetic or literary merits.

The theorization of the “witness,” specifically in the context of a traumatic event which resists both representation and comprehension, was given a privileged place in literary studies in the 1990s as Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth, most notably, argued for the ethical imperative to listen attentively to the at times difficult and incoherent stories of the witness to trauma (the Holocaust survivor functioning as the witness par excellence). As testimonial literature, these Francophone African works thus align themselves with a broader

85 Locha Mateso examines this tendency to take African literature as a mimetic reflection of reality in Littérature africaine et sa critique (Paris: A.C.C.T; Karthala, 1986).
86 As discussed previously Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s Testimony (1992) and Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience (1996) along with her edited collection of essays Trauma: Explorations in Memory (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995) gave literature of trauma and witness a new prominence in literary studies.
spectrum of literature defined by epistemological and existential otherness, as the non-traumatized reader must navigate a complex set of affective responses as he or she encounters these testimonies. Bridging the gap between the traumatized other and the non-traumatized reader is thus one of the central problematics of these texts which paradoxically must forge an intersubjective connection through the enunciation of an “unspeakable” truth. As Christian Kegle writes in the collection of articles of survivor narratives, *Les récits de survivances*, “La transmission du symbolique s’avère donc au cœur de la démarche testimonial du paradigme de la survivance discursive puisqu’il s’agit par-là de surmonter désespérément l’expérience de l’indicible” (9). As it attempts to articulate this indicible to a Western reader who may not have had a comparable experience of trauma, this Francophone African literature of witness must confront two pre-set codes of otherness, one cultural and one epistemological, which will effect the transmission of its narrative. The double marginality of the African eye-witness complicates the subject position of both the author and the Western reader. Therefore the question becomes to what extent does the specificity of an individual trauma survivor’s experience become delimited by a set of pre-existing cultural codes? Indeed, the otherness of the trauma witness is subject to similar dynamics of instrumentalization a further parallel with the use of colonial writing in the European context. As Régine Waintraiter writes:

Interpeller d’emblée le survivant comme un témoin potentiel, c’est une fois de plus l’instrumentaliser et le priver d’une partie de sa subjectivité. Sommé de témoigner au nom du “devoir de mémoire,” il risque d’être assigné à une

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Thus the African eye-witness to violence who writes his or her testimony enters a fraught field in which both subjectivity and cultural specificity risk being masked by a series of desubjectifying moves in the form of a certain packaging or presentation for a Western readership. The fact that for the past several decades the space of Africa has been coded as violent and impoverished through voyeuristic media coverage of war and famine further complicates the barriers that an African memoirist faces to being granted a degree of subjectivity and recognition from a Western reader.88

It is this in this context of double-otherness that the paratextual material of Francophone African eye-witness texts takes on special importance. In the liminal space surrounding the text, the voice of the non-witness can contextualize the narrative, either mitigating or propagating the effects of those forces which would instrumentalize this testimony or strip it of its individual or cultural specificity. In her article concerning the prefaces to concentration camp narratives, Fransiska Louwagie suggests the role that the prénom can play in translating the otherness of trauma, which she likens to a sort of cultural otherness. “De ce fait nous aurons à notre tour recours au trope de la traduction pour analyser la façon dont le prénom ‘interprète’ les rapports entre les cultures sources, en l’occurrence celles des camps, d’où témoigne le survivant, et la culture cible des lecteurs” (355).89 This question of the prénom as a translator or mediator suggests the dialogic possibilities of the preface, which attempts to facilitate this encounter between reader and

89 Her extensive use of Watts is itself a confirmation of the overlaps between cultural and epistemological otherness.
the trauma survivor who is considered ‘other’ both because of his or her cultural experience and experience of trauma. Like Richard Watts, whom she quotes extensively, Louwagie is concerned with the literary form of the preface as well as the historical and rhetorical demands that shape its composition.

However, in my view it is imperative to broaden the discussion to the way in which the reader himself or herself may interpret this paratextual material and its relationship to the body of the text. The study of how these paratextual “translations” may be placed in dialogue with the text itself is crucial if we are to fully understand the meaning produced by this African testimonial literature. This interaction, I argue, can be viewed as having a dialogic function, with paratext and text informing their respective interpretations and creating a reading experience and possible meanings which neither the paratext, despite its stated aims, or the main text can completely control. This dialogic interaction between paratext and an eye-witness literature of trauma is of special interest since it is precisely the impossibility of creating such a dialogue, of eliciting a productive interaction between reader and text, which is the central problematic of literary testimony. The sort of dialogic interaction modeled between main text and paratext thus takes on heightened significance for this literature of trauma as the paratextual elements model, to an extent, the potential attitude which the western reader might adopt towards the discourse of the “other” which he or she will encounter. However, that is not to say that reader is bound to follow this model and indeed, being open to alternative reader responses to these paratextual gestures is precisely what I wish to explore.
In order to illustrate the sort of neocolonial lens that has often been applied to paratextual analysis in the postcolonial context, I turn briefly to Alec Hargreave’s 2006 article “Testimony, co-authorship, and dispossession among women of Maghrebi origin in France” which looks at the témoignages of North African women living in France that were co-written with French authors. In his study of these co-authored memoirs, Hargreaves identifies what he terms “dynamics of dispossession” which prevent the Maghrebi women’s voices from being heard. Looking at the paratextual framing of these works he observes how even as the texts champion women’s liberation, and allow marginalized female voices to speak, they in fact undermine these claims through the subaltern status which the women occupy in comparison to their French co-authors. These power dynamics, he claims, are evident in introductions which indicate that the texts were oral transcriptions in need of polishing as well as references to how the voice of the “other” may have been constructed by the co-author through editorial changes. In addition, Hargreaves observes that it is often unclear how much help the women received in writing these texts. He claims that the commercial considerations of these co-written memoirs trumped the personal agency of the women involved. The overall question for Hargreaves is to show the way in which the primary authors lose control of the texts through this filtering process in which its packaging and presentation are subject to the needs of the French marketplace, and the perceived demands of a French reading public. He writes, “it seems clear that there is also a danger of their testimony being subordinated to other purposes—commercial and/or ideological—by the intermediaries through whose hands it passes” (51).
Hargreaves rightly points out how the specter of colonialism and its paternalist discourse is raised by these co-authored texts. However, his own writing itself appears guilty of patronizing or exoticizing impulses such as his assumption of the complete lack of agency of the Maghrebi women who appear unaware of the potential misuse of their stories and who are depicted as unable to comprehend the way in which their narratives may be packaged and manipulated. “The answer [to why these women tell their stories] is in part that they have been encouraged or persuaded to do so by representatives of a publishing industry keen to capitalize on the marketability of these texts” (51). In addition, the author does not consider a broader view in which these initial attempts at allowing these women to speak could lead to a greater cross-cultural understanding between French and North African populations, and, ultimately, a degree of agency for these or future generations of women. His interpretation also assumes a certain naïveté on the part of the reader, who may be able to read these texts “against the grain” recognizing and validating the voice of suffering from within the text, even if they are indeed partially “dispossessed” by the layers of packaging which seek to co-opt these women’s voices for commercial or ideological reasons.

Especially when dealing with a text of trauma, readings which think of this collaboration primarily as an illustration of neo-colonial power dynamics are simplistic. The use of a European co-author must also be understood as evidence of the articulation of suffering as a dialogic process in which a non-traumatized intermediary plays a crucial role in bringing the traumatic speech into being. This collaboration can be productive, even if, through a certain lens, their mere presence as a European authoring a preface evokes a history of European paratextual mediation which often served to instrumentalize the text in

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question. Indeed, much as it is necessary to be aware of how such framing may limit the subjectivity of the "other" - the Maghrebi women in Hargreaves’ study--, it is also crucial consider the productive possibilities of this collaboration, as well as examining if the text possesses a certain agency which resists the framing gestures of its prefatory texts. To view such prefaces merely as a reproduction of colonial era power-dynamics forecloses other more nuanced meaning that can be produced by the interaction of preface and text, especially in the case of a literature of trauma and witness. Beyond the typical accusation of neocolonialism, how can we interpret these types of collaborations more productively as we seek to understand how the African “other” works to inscribe his or her speech and experiences within a European framework?

**Dialogic Paratexts: Questioning the Boundary Between Main Text and Its Liminal Discourses**

In order to understand the framing of limit-event memoirs in terms that go beyond the binaries of possessing and dispossessing, I suggest a way of reading paratexts which rethinks the distinction between the text and the paratextual material. I would argue that this reading is necessary in the case of traumatic literature as a way to ascertain whether or not the text promotes reconstructive dialogue or risks constituting a further kind of discursive violence. In the interpretative framework I propose, the paratexts, such as prefaces, dedications, postfaces, are viewed as dialogic supplements to the body text, creating a dialogic apparatus which constitutes its own totalizing reading experience. As Stuart Hall and Hans Robert Jauss have demonstrated, theorizing the various ways in which a reader may respond to the text in the present of its reading is crucial if one is to ascertain what possible meanings this textual assemblage may produce. This is all the more crucial since contemporary texts on trauma inscribe themselves within a variety of historical and
ideological discourses seeking to define the events in question. The extent to which this dialogue is itself embedded within the text and paratext is an important indication as to how the text positions itself within this web of discourses, and whether the work masks discursive violence present within the narrative.

In terms of its application to literature and how literary texts are constructed I offer several pertinent interpretations of the “dialogic.” For Jauss in his pioneering work *Towards an Aesthetics of Reception* there is a relation to his now well-known formulation the “horizon of expectations,” the particular blend of historical and generic information and pre-conceived notions which the reader brings to any individual text. These “announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions” (23) are meant to dialogue, whether explicitly or implicitly, with the reader’s preconceived ideas concerning literary texts. The text, as Jauss notes, is never received in a “vacuum.” According to Jauss this relation between disparate texts, as well as between reader and text, is fundamentally dialogical.

The historicity of literature as well as its communicative character presupposes a dialogical and at once process-like relationship between work, audience, and new work that can be conceived in the relations between message and receiver as well as between question and answer, problem and solution. (Jauss 19)

This dialogic process, which includes the moment of the reader’s encounter with the text in the present moment, can be equated with Stuart Hall’s “distinctive moment of consumption” that moment in which the reader “decodes” the packaged semantic content
As Hall points out the reader’s decoding may not always align with the particular message intended by the author or editor and in this sense the nature of dialogue produced can be highly subjective. Nevertheless it is possible to identify particular readings or interpretations that a packaged work, often in the space of the paratextual material wish to promote or foreclose, and to analyze what forms of dialogism they would be most likely to promote.

However, to suppose dialogic processes at work between reader and text does not imply a unified text with which the reader engages as a totalized and unified entity. For Bakhtin, in the case of the novel, it is precisely the co-existence of different discourses within the novelistic structure itself that produces meaning and gives the novel its distinctive character. As Michel Holquist writes in his introduction to Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination* “The novel by contrast seeks to shape its form to languages; it has a completely different relationship to languages from other genres since it constantly experiments with new shapes in order to display the variety and immediacy of speech diversity” (xxxix). The heteroglossic character of the novel thus allows it to juxtapose and recontextualize various speech and discursive practices, giving them new substance, and often working against hegemonic interpretations of discourse which seek to achieve full and totalizing meanings. In other words, specific discourse within the novel is always read relationally and certain rhetoric (say, redeployed political rhetoric) finds its meaning undermined and its truth claims called into question. Thus on some level the novel necessarily problematizes totalizing truth claims and languages’ referential function, as it shows the relational nature of language and meaning.

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91 Hall outlines this theory of reception in his seminal essay "The Television Discourse-Encoding and Decoding," *Education and culture* 25 (1974): 8-14. While he speaks specifically about television news broadcasts within the essay Hall’s theoretical apparatus is equally applicable to texts, especially those which purport to represent real world events.
It is instructive to consider written testimony and its paratexts in light of Bakhtin’s definition of the novel, precisely because conventional wisdom suggests that testimony as a document is a unified whole containing only a single voice. And yet the additional of paratextual material to a testimony necessarily creates a document that demonstrates the sort of heteroglossic juxtapositions to which Bakhtin refers.

Furthermore, literature of trauma, which tackles the paradoxical task of speaking the unspeakable of extreme violence, must also grapple with the failure of meaning and totalizing narrative. This function takes on an ethical imperative when one considers that it is so often hegemonic, totalizing discourses, such as racist government ideology, which are at the root of the state-sponsored violence that leads to trauma. However, in the case of eyewitness testimonial works, such as J’étais enfant soldat or SurVivantes the tools available to promote dialogism would seem limited. Indeed, if the witness is considered to be in sole possession of his or her testimony92 and if a goal of testimonial literature is precisely to allow the witness to speak uninterrupted and unimpeded, is it possible to introduce dialogic elements into a first-person testimonial account? We must further ask the question, what does it mean to have a first-person eyewitness account which does not situate the testimony within a dialogic context? Does such a stance reinforce the witness’ right to speak and be heard or does it misrepresent something fundamental about the necessarily dialogic process of giving testimony? Might it reproduce on some level the false notion of a discourse of absolute, mimetic truth which, sadly and paradoxically, is a similar dynamic to the power and violence of political speech which often brings about trauma?

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92 See Dori Laub’s contributions to Testimony.
The two texts I will analyze in this chapter indeed appear to take opposed approaches to the role of dialogism in testimony. Critics have pointed out that Survivantes advances a dialogic notion of testimony which situates the survivor Mujawayo’s discourse within the larger framework of its enunciation in the present to a group of interlocutors. In this instance the paratext serves a crucial function precisely because, even as the text wants to promote a dialogic vision of testimony, the necessity of giving Mujawayo the space and agency to tell her own story limits the amount of dialogic interventions present within the diegesis of her testimony which is almost exclusively in her own voice. The paratext thus has a crucial performative function which, I would argue, makes it inseparable from the text itself, acting in concert with it to suggest the necessity of dialogic testimony without disrupting the witness’ authority to tell her story. In contrast, Badjoko’s memoir does not promote such an approach, with the first-person witness’ voice seemingly the only substantial discourse within the work. However, it is precisely in reading J’étais enfant soldat against the grain, as a dialogic text despite its apparent monologism, that the full range of meaning that the text produces can be apprehended. In this case the paratextual material, in the form of the book’s cover and back matter and its avant-propos, can be placed in dialogue with the main text, producing meanings which work against the work’s packaging. In making these claims for a meaning produced by this interaction between text and paratext I am relying in part on Stuart Hall’s assertion that readers have a variety of ways of decoding semantic messages which go against their intended meaning, i.e., avoid the framing which Watts and Hargreaves discuss in their respective studies. My goal is to move beyond an analysis of what these liminal texts intend to do and to explore what meaning they are likely to produce given the variety of interpretive codes to which they may be subject. In this case

93 See Alexandre Dauge Roth Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda.
it is paratextual materials which interest me especially since the generic constraints of first-pers

This dialogic relationship takes on a specific meaning in the context of traumatic memoir in which the victims are telling their story despite the political and psychological barriers which may make it difficult to relate their experience. The presence of an attentive interlocutor to the testimony can be a sign of the victim’s ability to regain a measure of agency and to learn to live with the past of his or her trauma. As previously stated since the nature of testimony precludes certain kinds of dialogism, the paratextual material is a place where varying discourses can be juxtaposed with the witness’ narrative without compromising the witness’ authority.

Of course, the mere presence of paratext does not imply that a text will promote attentive listening and self-reflexivity on the part of the listener. Indeed, the paratext, as in the case of the child soldier’s memoir, may in fact try to foreclose certain kinds of more critical readings, a practice disconcertingly similar to colonial-era prefaces. Nevertheless, the mere physical juxtaposition of text and paratext inevitably creates a kind of dialogism which produces meaning that the paratext cannot frame or control, precisely because the meaning results not solely from the preface’s semantic content but from its “mise en relation” with the main text, a pairing which opens it up to a variety of subjective interpretations. It is

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94 In *Testimony after Catastrophe: Narrating the Traumas of Political Violence* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2006), Stevan Weine explores the relationship between dialogism and testimony which he sees as a way to avoid testimony’s instrumentalization.

precisely in this space of dialogue that we can discern the potential meanings produced in the present moment for the Western reader of an African eye-witness to trauma.

**Part II: Affirming the Survivor’s Right to be Heard: Esther Mujawayo’s *SurVivantes* as an Act of Agency**

The 2011 MétisPresses edition of Mujawayo’s book *SurVivantes* (co-authored with Algerian-born and European-based journalist Souâd Belhaddad) offers a fascinating example of the possibilities of the paratext to create a productive dialogism in concert with the testimony of a trauma survivor. The 2011 edition contains a large number of paratextual elements, including two interviews, an *avant-propos*, a dedication, two prologues, a preamble, and a postface. While this proliferation of material surrounding the text is explained in part by the necessity of justifying its republication and differentiating it from the 2004 first edition, these materials also have a performative function linked to the *SurVivantes*’ particular form of traumatic representation. They emphasize the dialogic nature of the text, and also represent the attentive community of témoignaires who have endorsed Mujawayo’s testimony. The prologue also performs the notion of repetition, as well as the hesitancy that a survivor may have in speaking out about the genocide. Whether consciously or not, even the alliteration of the various prefatory elements (the *avant-propos*, the two prefaces, the preamble, and the prologue) create an effect of repetition which foregrounds this device within the text itself, a motif which Belhaddad alludes to specifically within her own preface.

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Mujawayo’s text is a complex work, combining first person testimony, memoir and conventions of the interview. Resulting from a series of interviews between Mujawayo and Belhaddad, the text loosely retains the interview format. While Belhaddad’s questions are not reproduced, italicized parenthetical comments such as “(elle rit)” allow Belhaddad’s voice to intervene occasionally in the text. Mujawayo was thirty six when the 1994 genocide began. In her memoir, she chronicles not only her experience during that time, but also the discrimination she faced as a Tutsi growing up in Rwanda as well as the other massacres that had occurred in the decades before the genocide. Mujawayo and her three daughters survived the genocide which took place over three months from April until June. Her parents, sister, and husband, along with almost her entire extended family, were killed. Within the narrative, Mujawayo describes her efforts to find work following this devastation and her ultimate emigration to Germany where she has remarried and lives with her daughters. She currently works as a psychotherapist for survivors of trauma, including many Rwandans.

_SurVivantes_ was originally published in 2004 by Editions de L’Aube. This edition contained the two prologues and preamble as well as the “entretien croisé” between Mujawayo and Simone Veil. The edition I will be analyzing here is the 2011 MétisPresses edition which features a new _avant-propos_ from editor David Collin, an interview with the co-authors on the current situation in Rwanda, as well as a postface from Alexandre Dauge-Roth, an American-based scholar who has worked on Mujawayo’s texts. This “nouvelle edition, augmentée, revue et corrigée,” as mentioned previously, clearly obeys the general rule that new editions of works must justify their existence by offering something “new” to the reader. At the same time the addition of this material is necessitated by the overall logic which governs Mujawayo and Belhaddad’s approach to representing the genocide and its
aftermath, namely confirming the ability of the survivor to have agency and be active in the present moment. Though Belhaddad is listed as a co-author, I will refer to the text as Mujawayo’s since the body text is told almost exclusively in her voice.

_SurVivantes_ is one of several dozen memoirs of survivors to emerge from the aftermath of the 1994 Tutsi genocide, many of them written by women. It could be classified also with journalistic accounts such as Jean Hatzfeld’s series of collected testimonies of genocide survivors. However, what makes Mujawayo’s text especially unique is her decision to avoid, and indeed explicitly critique, the sort of harmonizing narratives of redemption, forgiveness and total recovery which characterize many Rwandan survivor narratives. Immaculée Ilibagiza, author of _Left to Tell_ (2006), one of several survivors who links her ability to survive and recover to her Christian faith, urges Rwandans to forgive each other, using her own story of transformative forgiveness as a model. In a troubling comparison, Ilibagiza suggests that survivors who harbor hate for those who murdered their families are as guilty as the killers themselves. Mujawayo explicitly rejects this imperative for total forgiveness acknowledging the hate she feels for the killers and her desire to see them suffer, even as she states unequivocally at the end of _SurVivantes_, “Et comme je n’espère pas à mon pire ennemi que ça lui arrive demain. A personne au monde, je ne souhaite ce tragique hasard” (257). It is the complexity with which she treats these questions of memory and forgiveness, as well as her avoidance of totalizing narratives of complete recovery from

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100 In addition to Ilibagiza’s memoirs, these include Alexis Bilindabagabo and Alan Nichols, _Rescued by Angels: The Story of Miracles during the Rwandan Genocide._ (East Brunswick, Australia: Acorn Press Limited, 2001); John-Yves Bizimana, _Escape from Rwanda: A True Story of Faith, Hope and Survival._ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2010); Frida Umahoza Gashumba and Sandy Waldron, _Frida: Chosen to Die, Destined to Live._ (Lancaster, UK: Sovereign World, 2007).
tragedy, that make *Survivantes* exemplary amongst testimonial literature about the Tutsi genocide.101

Mujawayo’s text distinguishes itself as well through its attention not simply to her own story but to that of other *rescapés* and the psychological and social conditions in which they live. The text is divided into three parts. A first section deals with the plight of survivors following the Tutsi genocide, a second with a history of the events that precipitated it and her personal experience as it occurred, and a third section with Rwanda ten years following the genocide (which would have been contemporaneous with the book’s original 2004 publication). Much of the memoir deals not with Mujawayo’s personal experience, but with the situation of other survivors including those she sees in her practice as a psychotherapist. The book contains numerous criticisms of Western governments not only because of their decision not to intervene during the 1994 Tutsi genocide but because of their failure to address the needs of survivors in its aftermath. She describes incompetent Western mental health professionals and evokes the devastating irony that genocide perpetrators awaiting trial receive HIV treatments that infected rape-victims in Rwanda cannot afford. In speaking of the difficulty that these survivors have in telling their stories she in effect becomes a spokeswoman for the disempowered and silenced survivors and the obstacles they face to reconstructing their shattered lives while living with the constant fear and pain caused by the genocide.

The Ambiguous Classifying of Francophone Limit-Event Testimony

Mujawayo’s text illustrates some of the key differences between autobiography, memoir, and testimony, showing how limit-event writing so often resists this kind of generic

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framing. While much of the *SurVivantes* deals with Mujawayo’s personal story, her continued focus on the experiences of other survivors and her reflections on present day Rwanda ensure that the focus remains not on the “self” of the first-person author but rather on the context of both the pre and post-genocide. However, to classify it as memoir, in other words the recounting of an individual’s relationship to certain historical events, would also be simplistic as Mujawayo’s interest is not only in recounting a history but in demonstrating the complex nature of the survivors’ position and the barriers to their speaking in the present.102 Tellingly the text does not appear to conform to the definition of testimony in the more colloquial sense as so much of the memoir recounts Mujawayo’s experience in the present (very little detail is given concerning her experience during the genocide itself). It is thus useful to think of Mujawayo’s text outside of these generic classifications of first-person writing and to instead situate it her work as a literary act, a gesture meant to inform the Western world as to her experience as well as to perform, through the very act of writing and publication, the possibility of agency which the genocide sought to deny. As Alexandre Dauge-Roth writes à propos of *SurVivantes,* “In their attempt to re-envision and re-assert themselves through testimony, survivors move from a position of being subjected to political violence to a position that entails the promise of agency and the possibility of crafting the meaning of who they are” (167-168).

Mujawayo’s text, and testimonial literature in general, also complicates some of the more recent notions concerning Francophone autobiography, throwing into question the ability of these frameworks to explain the functioning of this literary genre. In her work on

102Here I use the commonly accepted distinction that memoir deals more closely with the author’s relationship to particular historical events whereas autobiography generally pertains to the individual person’s subjective experience and development.
Tutsi author Scholastique Mukasonga\textsuperscript{103} Viviane Azarian notes how testimonial writing concerning the Tutsi genocide finds itself at a generic crossroads:

“La question serait alors de préciser comment ces différents écrits sur le génocide se nourrissent les uns les autres mais aussi comment le génocide se constitue en rapport intertextuel dans le champ large de la littérature africaine francophone et possiblement le renouvelle” (424).

Placing Mujawayo’s work in dialogue with Edgard Sankara’s recent attempt to theorize Francophone autobiographical writing further illustrates the way in which the testimony of the genocide complicates attempts to generalize about first-person African writing. In his 2011 study \textit{Postcolonial Francophone Autobiographies: From Africa to the Antilles} Edgard Sankara considers Francophone biographies through the lens of reception theory, discussing the complex relationship between the first-person writer and his or her indigenous community with which a Western reader would not be familiar. Stating the aims of his study, Sankara writes:

Using this transnational reception framework, I demonstrate that the manner in which the French public and its literary filter, the press, have received Francophone African and Caribbean autobiographies reveals not only a fracture between the autobiographers and their local community, but also the

\textsuperscript{103} Mukasonga, a Rwandan Tutsi who was not present during the genocide but lost much of her family, is the author of \textit{La femme aux pieds nus} (Paris: Gallimard, 2008) and \textit{Inyenzi ou les cafards} (Paris: Gallimard, 2014).
mixed reaction of a French audience in search of ethnographic information.

(5)

Focusing on community in Francophone biography has a tragically ironic resonance in the case of Mujawayo who bears witness to the obliteration of her entire social network and community to which she was apart. Sankara further focuses on this notion as a central problematic facing African writers. “Coming from a communal society, how does the autobiographer write about her/himself, and to whom does he/she write? The receiving end, be it indigenous to the autobiographer or French metropolitan, challenges the self-projection of the autobiographer” (19). Indeed, while in Sankara’s formulation it appears to be the act of writing itself that separates the African biographer from his or her community, Mujawayo’s text has quite the opposite effect. Her discursive attempt to have her own and other survivors’ voices and struggles be recognized is precisely the act which will help her reintegrate into a new form of community through recognition of what she and fellow survivors suffered and continued to suffer. After genocide, when the communal society to which Sankara refers is itself fractured, the act of writing becomes a way to restore community, rather than serving as evidence of its disintegration. As I will demonstrate later, this restoration of community as a goal of the literary act of writing is reflected in part in the book’s paratextual framing and its relation to the body of the text.

SurVivantes further distinguishes itself from the genre of Francophone African life-writing to which it ostensibly belongs through its unproblematized use of the French language as vehicle for telling the story of an African author. Even as they write, to borrow a phrase from Françoise Lionnet, “in the interval between different cultures and languages,” (1) Badjoko and Mujawayo do not problematize (or even mention) that French is not their
first language or seem to express any ambivalence about their chosen medium. For Mujawayo it is accepted as a given that French is the language of education and access to employment and power, and the tragedy is not that French was imposed in Rwanda thus interfering with traditional cultural practices, but rather that the Hutu government denied Tutsi students access to French education.104 Ironically, in *SurVivantes* Mujawayo’s command of French represents not a fact of imperial domination, but rather serves as a testament to her ability to defy the discrimination that sought to deny her access to education before the genocide. In terms of her writing, the larger question of how to translate individual traumatic experience appears to trump this concern about the meaning lost when an African reality is translated into a European language, a problematic which scholars such as Françoise Lionnet have identified as central to Francophone biography.105 Indeed, it would appear that the representation of traumatic events, since it calls into question the signifying function of language at any level, renders moot the particular question of polyphony present in much Francophone African literature. In addition, this failure to mention postcolonial language politics reinforces that the traumatic memoir is premised as much on epistemological as cultural difference. The particular linguistic medium used to express the trauma is not necessarily itself a question of concern. Slippage in meaning is as much a function of language’s difficulty signifying as it is a question of culture needing to be “translated” from a European to African language. Indeed, a mass-traumatic event such as genocide is precisely that which obliterates culture, as a community based on certain cultural practices is destroyed by the abhorrent, destructive act of violence. That at no point in the prefatory material to *SurVivantes* does the question of Mujawayo’s choice of French occur further suggests that

104 In one notable instance she describes with pride how, before the genocide, her brother Innocent’s perfect command of French won over a Hutu official who became appalled that Innocent had been denied access to education and subsequently found him a place at school.

this problematic, which Lionnet associates so strongly with African life-writing, is not a universal of this kind of first-person African writing especially in the context of the limit-event memoir.

The Narratology of Witness and the Co-Authored Enunciation of Trauma

In order to show the way in which SurVivantes’ paratext reflects, and indeed amplifies, the text’s dialogic qualities, it is necessary to demonstrate the way in which the work itself dialogizes Mujawayo’s testimony without contesting her authority. The interaction between text and paratext works to further give SurVivantes a dialogic quality without calling into question Mujawayo’s right to speak. Like most survivor testimony the portions of the work told by Mujawayo’s “je” retain an informal, oral quality with Mujawayo occasionally addressing a “tu” who would appear to be Belhaddad. The informal register manifests itself through repetitions of words and ellipses (“Protéger?!...Protéger?!...”) as well as verbal tics such as “ah” or at one moment the onomatopoeic “pfffff” that suggest the text is the transcription of an oral interview. While Mujawayo’s appears to address Belhaddad as “tu”, the body of the text does not contain the questions Belhaddad asked in order to elicit Mujawayo’s responses. Rather the co-author’s presence manifests itself through occasional parenthetical italicized expressions which describe what Mujawayo was doing at the moment she was speaking. A common occurrence is “(elle rit)” (referring to Mujawayo) often placed incongruously after Mujawayo has recounted a particularly alarming episode. Certain moments are more descriptive “(elle imite la scène)” referring to Mujawayo’s impression of a Rwandan friend who continuously opens and closes her surgically repaired jaw which had been injured during the genocide. Certain phrases implicate Belhaddad such as the
simple “(rires)” which implies that both women are laughing simultaneously and thus conjures up for the reader the shared space in which the interview is taking place.

The inclusion of these elements gives the *SurVivantes* a dialogic character, while at the same time allowing Esther’s voice, her “je”, to have absolute authority when she is recounting her story. The parenthetical remarks let Belhaddad convey the shared nature of Esther’s testimony without usurping her authority through the inclusion of another “je” within the space of the testimony which would contest Esther’s right to be heard without interruption. The overall effect is that while Esther speaks of past events of genocide, her recounting is always situated in the present moment of an exchange with an interlocutor. On a narratological level, *SurVivantes* thus reflects its larger project of focusing on the present agency of the survivors of genocide, who do not wish to be defined by their past. Phrases as seemingly innocuous as “Oh, pardon, je me fâche et je m’emballe” during a particular monologue are thus crucial to Mujawayo and Belhaddad’s narratological project. By focusing the reader’s attention on the space in which Mujawayo recounts her testimony the reader is continually reminded of the speaker as a living agent in the present, rather than as a passive agent controlled by the past events of genocide.

The absence of Belhaddad as the interviewing subject also allows the “tu” which Mujawayo uses for the majority of the text to take on an ambivalent meaning. While ostensibly directed at Belhaddad, the reader may also feel implicated by Mujawayo’s frequent use of this informal term. Simple yet chilling phrases such as “Tu sais, après le génocide, dans ma famille, presque tout le monde est massacré” (83) through their interpellation of both Belhaddad and the reader, implicate the latter, drawing him or her into the testimony as
To the shared space between Belhaddad and Mujawayo evoked by the parenthetical expressions one could also add this present space between reader and the *je parlant* which maintains the oral character of the testimony, while situating Mujawayo’s discussion as part of an interaction.

The importance of having attentive interlocutors when a survivor speaks of the genocide is addressed within the narrative when Mujawayo details the difficulties survivors encounter in finding sympathetic listeners for their stories. The process of talking about one’s experience during the genocide is complicated by both the psychological barriers which prevent people from giving testimony as well as the difficulty of finding sympathetic interlocutors. In a chapter entitled *La peur de pas être cru* Mujawayo says:

> Quand un rescapé raconte le génocide, il sent bien qu’on a du mal à le croire. C’est trop. Je l’ai déjà dit, pour celui qui écoute, c’est trop, c’est comme si on exagérait. Si le rescapé a régulièrement l’impression de ne pas être cru, c’est que les gens en face de lui ont souvent envie de se convaincre que ce n’était pas si horrible comme situation. (95)

Without addressing him or her directly, this statement implicates the reader who is asked to reflect on his or her own willingness or ability to engage with Mujawayo’s story. However, it is also the survivor’s ability to continue her own traumatic story which constitutes a barrier to these stories being heard. Mujawayo relates the story of Bibi, one of her patients who was frequently unable to finish recounting the story of her experience during the genocide. “Et lorsque Bibi racontait la façon dont on avait tué sa dernière fille Claire, elle bloquait toujours” (96). Mujawayo gives other examples of survivors who for various reasons have

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difficulty recounting their testimony. She returns to the story of Bibi to affirm not simply the power of expressing oneself but of being believed. “Mais, surtout, en plus d’avoir pu s’exprimer, le fait que sa parole ne soit plus mise en doute a été déterminant pour Bibi” (100). This question of memory and truth is also what has pushed Mujawayo to write *Survivantes*, as she herself struggles with this constant doubt related to her experiences in the 1994 genocide. *Survivantes* thus becomes a document not only for the Western world who ignored the genocide but for Mujawayo herself as she attempts to mitigate her own desire to forget the past:

> Alors, je me dis que c’est pour cela que je veux écrire, que c’est urgent, essential, qu’il me faut absolument le faire. Il me faut immortaliser ces moments que ma mémoire ne gommera jamais mais refoulera, peut-être, à force de vagues de doutes. Car je sens bien que l’histoire et la mémoire ne feront pas grande chose pour affaiblir ces doutes. (101)

Implicit in this statement is also the role of the interlocutor, the legatee of this traumatic past upon whom it is incumbent both to listen to and then believe the testimony he or she has heard. These meta-reflections on the nature of language and memory which appear throughout the narrative thus continually implicate the reader and ask him or her to perform similar acts of self-reflexivity. However it is in the interaction between the body text and the 2011 MétisPresse edition’s paratextual material that notions of dialogism and the shared nature of testimony are performed in an equally vivid way. Indeed, the paratextual material echoes the themes and problematics enumerated above in such a way as to allow the entire 2011 edition, both text and paratext, to function together, acknowledging explicitly the dialogic function of paratext, in a way that avoids the unintended meanings and
contradictions that mark the dialogic interaction between text and paratextual material in works such as Badjoko’s *J’étais enfant soldat*.

**Repetition, Response, and Community: The Multiple Functions of Paratexts in *SurVivantes***

Despite the differences discussed previously, in some significant ways Mujawayo’s memoir adheres to certain generic conventions of Francophone fiction. The author has moved from the African continent to Europe and it is this movement which brought her in contact with her co-author Belhaddad, thus allowing the text to come into being.

Both David Collin, in the *avant-propos* and Belhaddad, in the first prologue, occupy spatially within the text what would formally have been occupied by a European authority who, to quote Watts, “brings the outside in” for the Western reader while also attempting to frame the text and condition its reception. *SurVivantes* does not attempt to disrupt this dynamic through radical restructuring of the paratext’s placement or through experimental overtures. Instead it redeploy the convention of the allographic preface by a European (or in the case of Belhaddad, European-based) editor or writer in a way which is consistent with the memoirs overall promotion of a dialogic form of witnessing.

David Collin’s *avant-propos* to *SurVivantes*, which follows the title page, is instructive for several reasons, chief of which being its immediate decision to situate the work within a larger context of MétisPresses’ *Imprescriptible* editions, a collection of re-edited texts. After referencing the addition of certain paratextual elements, Collin states that “Ainsi, la réédition de *SurVivantes* s’augmente et s’actualise, et devient une nouvelle édition” (6). His suggestion

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107 Many Francophone novels of the 1950s and 60s, such as the previously cited *L’aventure ambiguë* (1961) or Aké Loba’s *Kacoumbo, l’étudiant noir* (1960) featured an African moving to Europe, usually to continue their studies.
of the book’s changing and growth in fact dovetails with the work’s overall project of suggesting the agency of the survivors. In suggesting the book’s ability to regenerate itself, Collin underscores the theme of regeneration and reclaiming life which Mujawayo attempts to establish through her work.

While I will not offer in-depth analyses of all the paratextual material, it is instructive to spend a moment on Belhaddad’s prologue which, like Collin’s *avant-propos*, occupies the space within the work that might previously have been reserved for the African writer’s colonial patron. However, gone are the days when the *préfacier* of an African author’s co-written work can remain silent as to the nature of the co-author’s collaboration, the canonical example of this former practice being Jean-Richard Blochs’s grandiloquent preface to Bakary Diallo’s *Force-Bonté*. 108 Without giving precise details concerning the book’s method of production (when and where she and Mujawayo met to conduct interviews, for how often etc.), Belhaddad explains the way in which their collaboration shaped the book as well as her role as editor. She explains how the book is based on interviews, certain of which she has edited but that “volontairement, j’ai laissé le ton de l’oral” (24). She explains the literary language, which she describes as occasionally chaotic and incorrect, as resulting from her desire to be faithful to Mujawayo’s manner of expressing herself. She also describes her journalistic impulse to correct the “brutal” prose which she retained so as not to obscure the horror of what she was relating. This self-reflexive framing avoids totalizing narratives of trauma which obscure the “openness” of these events, while her admission that certain sections were “retravaillé(s)” acknowledges that Mujawayo’s voice is in part a literary construction, not an “authentic” rendering of a survivor’s speech.

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108 Aside from an enigmatic reference to Lucie Cousturier (“C’est elle qui m’a envoyé ce manuscrit et fait connaître son auteur” (3)), Bloch provides no details as to Cousturier and Diallo’s collaboration would have functioned, nor does he attempt to dispel the impression that the text could have been ghost-written.
This introductory gloss thus makes explicit for the reader the goal of Belhaddad’s editorial choices, a principal one being to give the reader an approximation of the experience, not necessarily of the genocide itself, but of the language of its retelling in the present. “Tout cela est absolument vrai: la parole d’Esther a été brutale, insistante, lourde, voire redondante. Et, pour toutes raisons, extrêmement instructive et éloquente sur l’état d’un rescapé” (24). It is especially important to note the way in which Belhaddad explains the motivations behind her editorial choices, orienting the way the reader will read the text. This use of brutal language is spoken of in terms of “repetition” which Belhaddad speaks of as a way to translate “le chaos qu’a représenté le génocide” (24). Again the choice of words is significant, as it is not the genocide itself which is represented so much as what it symbolizes: a chaos or a psychological disordering which lives on in each survivor’s present.

The prologue thus works to dissuade the reader from viewing the text in terms of a totalizing depiction of the genocide, and rather as transmitting this “chaos” that the genocide has created and which has been “imprinted” within each genocide survivor.

This first prologue ends with an affirmation that, for the survivors, the genocide is not something that can be made to disappear, contained or exorcised within a totalizing narrative, but rather something that is eternally present. She ends with a quote from the daughter of an Auschwitz survivor who writes, “De toute façon, toute leur vie, ils seront toujours seuls avec ‘ça’” (25). That Belhaddad ends with a quote not from a survivor but from a survivor’s daughter suggests the conception of the book as a bridge between different generations, and the way in which shared trauma can create social bonds. Nevertheless, the bridging of these gaps and the creation of these bonds does not imply that the “ça” will be exorcised, nor that it can necessarily be transmitted as an experience. Bookending this prologue with a reference to the Holocaust suggests the universal character of genocide
which Belhaddad states early in the prologue. This linking to the Holocaust can also be understood as an attempt to show what new kinds of community are possible following the violent obliteration of social structures (in this case the community of genocide survivors from different historical and cultural contexts). However, the final line of the prologue (“De toute façon, toute leur vie, ils seront toujours seuls avec ‘ça’”) suggests the paradox of a community based on a shared solitude, and the impossibility of a full restitution of what has been lost.

The relationship between the paratextual material and the content of the main body of the text is also evident in the way that the introductory texts perform and reinforce a certain repetition related to the difficulty of speaking about one’s experience during genocide. Freud’s early studies of trauma and the repetition compulsion established repetition as a key component of traumatic discourse.109 The persistence of the traumatic event in reinserting itself in the present blurs the line between present and past, preventing the victim from being able to move past or at least, live with, the traumatic experience. It would be too facile to suggest that any evidence of repetition within limit-writing is meant to represent the trauma of the survivor. And yet when reading a traumatic testimony it is crucial to consider repetition as a rhetorical tool which allows the author to communicate the idea of a past event which continually makes itself manifest in the present moment. This is certainly a possible reading of the repetitive nature of the numerous introductory paratexts which delay the reader’s encounter with Mujawayo’s testimony. However, this repetition, I argue, has another function in Survivantes, namely that of demonstrating performatively the difficulty with which survivors speak of their experiences. In the memoir’s first chapter

109 For some discussion of traumatic memory and repetition see the collection of essays edited by Cathy Caruth, Trauma: Explorations in Memory. For Freud’s discussion of the repetition compulsion see Beyond the Pleasure Principle.
Mujawayo, who is a trained therapist, speaks about the impossibility for many survivors of telling their story, a therapeutic necessity in her opinion which allows them to regain some amount of agency in their present. Numerous obstacles present themselves including the fear of not being understood or heard by their interlocutors as well as their own fears of revisiting a traumatic past. Mujawayo gives the especially difficult example of Alice, a survivor who begins her story many times but for a long time is unable to finish. The decision to open the text with so many paratextual interventions can thus be seen as a textual performance and illustration of this hesitancy to speak about the genocide, as well as the measured and thoughtful deliberation necessary for such a story to be told.

Indeed, numerous repetitions which precede the main narrative strike the reader. There is first the alliteration of the *avant-propos*, two prologues, a preamble, and then finally the *première partie* (ironically named since it is the fifth distinct text to open the book). Whether intentional or not on the part of the editors, this alliteration, a sort of paratextual stutter, reinforces the notion of a testimony that is the product of reflection and which will be marked by certain hesitations and difficulties of self-expression. Mujawayo states these difficulties explicitly in the body text:

> Nos histoires de veuves étaient plus terribles les unes que les autres; pourtant, chacune d’entre nous voulait raconter, chacune voulait savoir. Voici pourquoi : une raison pour laquelle on parlait rarement du génocide avec d’autres, et pour laquelle on continue d’en parler rarement, c’est que nos histoires semblent toujours les mêmes à celui qui les écoute. Mais elles ne sont pas pour nous, qui les avons vécus. (89)
In delaying the reader’s encounter with the testimony itself, the various texts which introduce the *première partie* condition the reader to receive this testimony well before it is enunciated, alerting him or her to the stakes of its telling, and reinforcing themes related to the complex and paradoxical task of bearing witness to the unspeakable. These multiple beginnings are underscored by the contradictory “ça y est, je commence” (27) which opens Esther’s prologue, a statement which suggests the conflation of past and present, endings and beginnings. That the prologue is preceded by a preamble in which Esther introduces herself (despite having already spoken to the reader) further suggests a dialogue which is in a constant process of being initiated. The “vous” which opens the preamble (different from the “tu” associated with Belhaddad) appears directed at the reader, and establishes the dialogic tone of the text. Beyond their semantic content, these introductory texts ensure that an attentive reader has had time to reflect on what he or she is about to listen to and its potentially problematic nature. Conversely the difficulty that a survivor may have in articulating their pain and experience is mirrored by the drawn out paratextual framing which delays the readers encounter with Mujawayo’s narrative.

Another performative way in which *SurVivantes*’ paratext mirrors its thematic content is through its creation of a community of scholars, listeners and interlocutors who introduce and comment on the work. As previously mentioned the question of community in African writing oriented towards western readers is considered by Egard Sankara who suggests that the African writer has the complex goal of writing both on behalf of his or her community and for a Western audience. As a memoir, Mujawayo’s text does not precisely fit into this category of autobiography and yet to read her memoir in terms of its relationship to community brings up a tragic irony as it is precisely this complete obliteration of community to which she bears witness. Indeed, Mujawayo’s community, that of fellow survivors, is
different from the sort of communities based in shared values and cultural traditions with Sankara has in mind. Furthermore, Mujawayo’s writing towards a Western interlocutor is understandable in the context of the genocide since it is precisely the blindness of Western governments that allowed the genocide to begin in the first place. *Survivantes* is thus an attempt not to offer a mimetic reflection of a community in a documentary sense (the lens through which much African literature has been traditionally viewed) but rather to interrogate the possibility of new forms of social belonging predicated on a community of attentive listeners.

The paratextual framing reinforces this notion through the variety of interlocutors who are evoked, positioning themselves as listeners for Mujawayo and, in a sense creating for the reader the visual impression of a community of authors who have collaborated to produce and validate the text. These include Collin, Primo Levi (quoted in an epigraph) Belhaddad, Simone Veil, who is interviewed with Mujawayo in the latter half of the text, and Dauge-Roth who authors the post-face. Mujawayo’s voice, which already is read in the context of a conversation with Belhaddad, is further surrounded by other voices, many of them European, in effect positioning her within a community of responsive témoignaires while also placing her in dialogue with writers such as Levi. Since, as the text says explicitly, certain realities of the genocide (both living through it and negotiating its aftermath) resist semantic expression, the prefatory material becomes a key space which is strategically deployed so as to compensate for the possibilities that a traditional, linear, mono-vocal testimony might foreclose. In this way the paratext has a performative function in that it illustrates spatially the reconstructed community of témoignaires which allow Mujawayo, and by extension the survivors for whom she writes, to have a measure of social belonging and agency in the present moment.
The text also blurs the line between paratext and narrative especially in a final commemorative gesture in which, after the last chapter of Mujawayo’s testimony, there appears a list of the names of people in her family killed during the genocide. Here the reality and extent of Esther’s loss, the almost complete destruction of her familial and social network, is communicated outside of the narrative and the dialogic space of her conversations with Belhaddad. This extensive list functions both as a commemoration and memorial for those killed as well as a technique for inscribing the extent of her loss to the reader in a manner which acknowledges the inability of language to capture, in narrative form, the reality of this horrific event. That it should come at the end of the text inverses the normal paratextual function of the dedication, suggesting the permanence of this loss. And yet the paratextual elements which follow this list reorient the reader towards the future and possibilities for dialogue which might help mitigate and make bearable this pain. The obliterated social network is textually replaced by the network of writers and actors who join Belhaddad in surrounding her work with their own commentary. While I am in no way suggesting an equivalency between the collaboration that went into the text and the impossible restoration of lost family and community structures, the text nonetheless works to suggest the possibility of some kind of reconstructed community based on an acknowledgement of the survivor’s loss, and an attentive listening to their suffering.

*Survivantes* thus shows the way in which a work’s paratextual material can be used to introduce dialogism into the discursive practice of testimony in a manner which does not undermine the authority of the person bearing witness. Rather than reproduce neocolonial power dynamics, the text and paratext of this African eyewitness account perform a dialogic approach to testimony that reinforces the agency of the witness in the present moment and produces a reflection on the social function of the testimonial act. This practice suggests the
importance of the paratext in limit-event writing and the way in which allographic prefaces and introductions need not necessarily control, restrict or frame a text, but can instead work in concert with it in a performative fashion. The question then becomes what to make of limit-event texts which eschew this substantial paratextual apparatus in favor of a minimal, though heavily coded, framing. Analyzing the paratext of Lucien Badjoko’s *J’étais enfant soldat* reveals the way in which such minimal framing can be highly significant, working to foreclose certain readings while, perhaps inadvertently allowing the dissemination of ideological and violent discourse.

**Part III: Framing Discursive Violence: Paratext as an Amplifier for Political and Essentializing Rhetoric in Lucien Badjoko’s *J’étais enfant soldat***

At first glance it may appear strange to juxtapose *Survivantes* and Lucien Badjoko’s child soldier memoir *J’étais enfant soldat*, a little known text which does not attempt to offer the thoughtful, reflective representation of an individual’s traumatic experience. I do not wish to establish a false equivalency between a Tutsi genocide survivor and a child soldier who uneasily straddles the subject position between victim and perpetrator. While deeply disturbing, Badjoko’s experience fighting in the mid-90s in the Congo and his subsequent estrangement from his family are of a vastly different nature from Mujawayo’s victimization and catastrophic loss resulting from the 1994 Tutsi genocide. The similarity is not necessarily in each writer’s respective experiences but rather the often misleading similarities between each author’s subject positions as an African witnesses to trauma producing a co-written memoir with a European-based journalist implicitly written for a Western audience. It is precisely the way in which each text either engages with or subverts these recognizable, and in some ways pre-defined, subject positions, that I wish to engage with. Most importantly,
on a discursive level, both writers occupy a space of double-alterity, as African writer and witness to trauma, which influences their reception for a Western audience.

Published in 2005, former Congolese child-soldier Badjoko’s memoir *J’étais enfant soldat*, co-written with Belgian author Katia Clarens, belongs to the child soldier genre discussed at length in the previous chapter. Appearing after Emmanuel Dongala and Ahmadou Kourouma’s award-winning novels (*Johnny Chien Méchant* and *Allah n’est pas obligé*, respectively), as well as other high-profile child soldier memoirs, Badjoko’s memoir has attracted scant critical attention. With a cover featuring a machine-gun-toting child that is reminiscent of editions of both Kourouma and Dongala, it seems a safe assumption that the decision to publish Badjoko’s memoir was driven in part by the previous success of other child soldier works. It is precisely the way in which the memoir engages with these previous generic conventions which makes Badjoko’s memoir of special interest. What exactly does his text offer that previous child soldier narratives might not? Why do we not find the sophisticated paratextual and contextual apparatus present in *SurVivantes* even as both authors, despite their different experiences, are survivors of trauma? Indeed, it is the lack of framing of Badjoko’s work that I wish to explore in this section. Putting the scant paratextual material present in the text (principally the cover, back matter, and a brief *avant-propos*) in dialogue with the text itself reveals some telling contradictions between the way in which the text is presented and what the narrative actually accomplishes. Principally, in presenting Badjoko as an innocent child soldier with limited agency, the text paradoxically grants him increased agency by allowing a politically charged, self-aggrandizing memoir with

110. Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000) received the 2000 Prix Renaudot, Prix Goncourt des Lycéens and the Prix Amerigo Vespucci while Dongala’s *Johnny Chien Méchant* received the 2004 Cezam Prix Littéraire Inter CE. See the previous chapter for a list of child soldier memoirs and a discussion of this literary phenomenon.

essentializing racist discourse to be marketed to a Western public as “le récit poignant d’une enfance africaine.” Ironically, while *Force Bonté*, another co-written first person memoir of an African soldier (published in 1926), was instrumentalized by the French Left, here it is the European publisher who appears instrumentalized as a possibly unwitting arm of the Democratic Republic of Congo’s propaganda machine. The cold irony present in the reversal of these power dynamics suggests that continued attention to the way in which African narratives are marketed to European readers, and the various power structures at play, is of vital importance.

To understand the various ideological and essentializing positions which the paratext seems to unwittingly authorize, some historical context is necessary. The conflicts that Badjoko participated in and describes were a direct result of the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda and the subsequent massive influx of Hutu refugees, many of whom were genocide perpetrators, into Eastern Congo that same year. In 1996, citing a national security threat, the now Tutsi-led Rwandan government, controlled by the leaders of the rebel army who had put an end to the genocide, aided Congolese rebels in overthrowing the autocratic rule of Mobutu Sese Seko, who had shown little interest in dealing with the Hutu génocidaires camped Rwanda’s border. Badjoko, in a group led by rebel leader Laurent Kabila, originally fought alongside Tutsi soldiers in overthrowing the government. However, following Kabila’s victory, the Tutsi soldiers still present in the re-baptized Democratic Republic of Congo remained, eventually attempting to invade the Congolese capital of Kinshasa. While the Tutsi had been instrumental in overthrowing Mobutu, this and other anti-Kabila Tutsi-led military interventions following Mobutu’s overthrow lead to a strong anti-Tutsi sentiment among the

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112 This is the reading which Richard Watts offers in *Packaging Post/coloniality*.
113 A lesser known literary production related to this conflict is Belgian journalist Jean-Philippe Stassen’s comic strip “L’étoile d’Arnold,” *XXI Vingt-et-un* (Summer): 11.
general population which spilled over into massacres against civilians.¹¹⁴ “De nombreux Tutsi, rwandais ou congolais, furent ainsi massacrés dans les rues de Kinshasa. Plusieurs eurent à subir l’épouvantable supplice dit “du collier” c’est à dire qu’ils étaient brûlés vifs, un pneu enflammé autour du cou” (Cheuzeville, 178). This violence is absent from Badjoko’s memoir which instead focuses on the atrocities committed by Tutsis against Hutus to the exclusion of any mention of this anti-Tutsi sentiment. Indeed, the Tutsi genocide which precipitated these massacres is given scant mention within the memoir, which instead focuses primarily on Tutsi revenge killings of innocent Hutus under the pretext that they were genocide perpetrators. Such descriptions, whether or not by design, can be seen as contributing to negationist rhetoric regarding the 1994 Tutsi genocide which seeks to equate the revenge killings which occurred after the genocide with a second genocide.¹¹⁵ While such crimes need to be investigated and brought to light,¹¹⁶ Badjoko’s text creates a false equivalency between the genocide and these crimes, which, while deplorable, are not analogous with a state-sponsored genocide.¹¹⁷ Considering the French government’s fraught relationship with post-genocide Rwanda, the existence of prominent genocide deniers such as the American law professor Peter Erlinder, and the West’s unwillingness to acknowledge the Tutsi genocide which allowed it to take place, the propagation of essentializing anti-Tutsi discourse in a memoir published by a prominent French publishing house is a significant fact, all the more so when this discourse is not contextualized for the reader in any

¹¹⁷For an exhaustive documentation of the Tutsi genocide's planning and execution see Alison Liebhafsky Des Forges, "Leave None to Tell the Story": Genocide in Rwanda (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999).
substantive way in the book’s *avant-propos* or back-matter. In this case, whether Badjoko himself, in telling his story, is aware of the implications of the rhetoric he produces, is largely beside the point. What is relevant is the way in which his publisher Plon provides a platform for this rhetoric, ignoring the historical and cultural specificities of the narrative, which they instead package through a set of tropes related to the child soldier and childhood novels.

**Moving Beyond a Documentary Understanding of the Child Soldier Narrative**

Twelve-years-old when he enlisted, Badjoko begins his memoir with the story of a near death experience which caused him to definitively give up soldiering. He recounts how in 1996 he was initially captivated by the uniform of a passing soldier and subsequently enlisted without telling his family. After enduring a sadistic training regimen he goes to the front for Kabila’s forces where he gradually finds himself becoming inured to the violence. When the conflict initially ends he enrolls in school, only to occasionally return to the frontlines “pour rester en forme.” During this time he describes how the Tutsi, his former allies, have now become enemies and he details, in several graphic passages, their wanton cruelty, which he contrasts with the Congolese who “pardonnt vite.” Finally, he is officially demobilized at a ceremony where Joseph Kabila, the son of the assassinated rebel leader Laurent Kabila, gives a speech. Though upset at the now deceased father Laurent for failing to deliver on his promise to help the child soldiers find jobs and education, Badjoko forgives Joseph Kabila, who is also one of the memoir’s dedicatees, deciding that sons should not be held responsible for the sins of the father. The final scene of the memoir is a demobilized Badjoko listening to a friend describe the seemingly incredible site of some Tutsi sitting in broad daylight in the Congo, incredible since, according to the friend, they
should be wracked with remorse for their sadistic revenge killings against Hutu. The friend remarks:

Avec toutes les horreurs qu’on nous a montrées : les bébés pilés, toutes les femmes violées… Aujourd’hui, ils sont là et ils boivent tranquillement un verre dans un lieu public. Nous les Congolais, nous avons beaucoup de défauts mais nous avons une qualité : nous pardonnons vite ! (158)

That the book should end on such a politically charged image should leave little doubt of its political, if not polemical character, even if one hesitates as to how much of this results from pure calculation on the part of Badjoko.

It is worth noting as well that rather than depict himself as “cyniquement utilisé,” as the book’s back matter states, much of the memoir contains anecdotes in which Badjoko outwits people, sometimes civilians, using his military prowess as a means of asserting power. In one instance, while moonlighting as a soldier after he has resumed his studies, he terrorizes a classmate whom he pretends not to recognize. In another instance he savagely beats a man for pillaging, saying that the thief did not respect the glorious cause for which the soldiers were fighting. Such self-aggrandizing stories indicate that the author is capable of a certain degree of self-fashioning which belies claims in the paratextual material that he is lacking in agency.

Generically, Badjoko’s memoir can be considered part of a post-Mobutu “littérature de résistance” in which, according to Nuyanda na Rabango, “Tout ennemi, toute gueule non
sympathique est rwandaise, tutsie” (206). The memoir also contains patriotic rhetoric, as Badjoko justifies the fighting as part of the anti-Mobutu national liberation, which he professes to still believe even as he speaks candidly about the devastating effects of the war on himself and his fellow child soldiers. As Rabango notes Badjoko is from a relatively well-to-do background and appeared to enlist voluntarily. Even if it is evident in the text that Badjoko enlisted in part because of a naïve idealization of military life which he would soon outgrow, it is worth noting that he does not fit the clichéd profile of a child forced into war because of tragedy or lack of family structure. His decision suggests a certain agency, a point that Koffi Anyinefa emphasizes in his discussion of J’étais enfant soldat when he questions the extent to which the child soldier is often considered solely as a guileless victim. However, as crucial as it may be to ascertain the agency of Badjoko and other child-soldiers, Anyinefa and Rabango’s readings of Badjoko’s motivations are emblematic of discussions of child soldier texts that privilege their documentary value as an insight into the sociological phenomenon of the child soldier. While the historical value of these works is certainly significant, such readings, which fail to examine the way in which the narrative voice is constructed, do not consider the larger question of what meaning these accounts may create for their largely European readership. In the case of Badjoko’s memoir, a purely documentary reading that focuses exclusively on the cultural phenomenon of the child soldier fails to capture how the text serves a political function, thus implicating itself in the very conflict it claims to be in the past. One of the few critical studies of the work,

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119 In this way Badjoko occupies the uneasy subject position between victim and perpetrator. In the 2010 book L’empire du traumatisme: enquête sur la condition de victime (Paris: Flammarion, 2007) Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman explore the way in which the concept of trauma can potentially be used to transform perpetrators into victims by pathologizing the psychological effects of war.

Rubanga’s article *Mots et maux de guerre* treats *J’étais enfant soldat* as a testimonial document, omitting to mention that it is co-authored, and failing to note the political character of the work (although he does emphasize this in his discussion of similar works of Congolese literature). Indeed, even as Rubanga brings a more sophisticated understanding of the political factors that lead to the conflict, his treatment of Badjoko’s memoir reveals a continued resistance to investigating the propagandist discourse that the text disseminates while also allowing Badjoko to tell self-aggrandizing stories of his heroism and machismo. While being attentive to what Badjoko and his comrades may have suffered, a nuanced reading of the book reveals, in fact, that as an intervention into Western discourse concerning the events in Congo, *J’étais enfant soldat* is complex and troubling not simply for the violence it describes but for the discursive violence which it enacts in the present.

**The Voice of the Child: Constructing the Victim’s Voice in *J’étais enfant soldat***

Narratologically *J’étais enfant soldat* is similar to the majority of child soldier novels, characterized by a first-person, orally-inflected narration. Badjoko’s first person “je” speaks in an informal, at times aggressive, style suggestive of an oral interview. While she mentions some form of collaboration in her *avant-propos*, the co-author Clarens gives no details as to when and where the interviews were conducted but we are to assume that it was around 2003 when she met Badjoko who was then 18 or 19 years old. Her failure to specify how much of the work was written in his own voice (she in fact mentions that his first draft of 15 or so pages was “pas toujours compréhensible”) makes it difficult to tell to what extent the narrative itself is Clarens’ reconstruction or whether she was faithful to her original interviews. The text has numerous markers of orality that appear to suggest a transcription. (“Un matin de mars (oui je crois bien que c’était en mars), on nous a fait sortir.” (105).
Others suggest emotion (“Ouh! Comment pouvait-il se permettre, ce gros!”) These interventions are infrequent however suggesting that their principle purpose is to give the narrative an air of authenticity. These statements such as “oui je crois bien que c’était en mars” also work to create a certain intimacy between reader and speaker, since they situate the narrative’s retelling in the present moment, suggesting, rhetorically, that the reader is present for the text’s creation. There are occasional stylized literary gestures which indicate an a posteriori reworking of the text. The one paragraph sentence “un an” (to emphasize the Congolese government’s delay in compensating child soldiers) suggest an attention to style that would not necessarily be part of an oral transcription. While in the avant-propos Clarens claims that Badjoko’s French is “parfait” her reference to his “pas toujours compréhensible” writing suggests that she is in large part responsible for the polished, written version of the final text. However, rather than “dispossessing” Badjoko of his text, Claren’s implication that this self-aggrandizing, politicized narrative is written in the child’s authentic voice, in fact grants him increased agency. In a reversal of what might be considered a received notion about Western rewritings of African texts the prefatory presence of the European author amplifies, rather than diminishes, the voice of her collaborator.

The paratextual material of the 2005 Plon edition of Badjoko’s memoir is slight but it is precisely this sparse framing, what it authorizes and obscures, that I wish to explore. The book’s cover photograph in which a defiant child with an assault rifle perched on his shoulder stares directly at the camera, suggests the Editions du Seuil cover to the award winning book Allah n’est pas obligé which similarly featured a gun-toting child gazing impassively at the reader.\textsuperscript{121} Coming four years after the publication of Kourouma’s well-

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\textsuperscript{121} John Walsh gives an analysis of the cover to Kourouma’s novel in his article "Coming of Age with an AK-47: Ahmadou Kourouma’s Allah n’est pas obligé.”
known text both the cover and the book’s title suggest that a potential reader has a certain awareness of the child soldier figure, and that this book will offer further insight into this recognizable world. On the bottom of the cover written in white in a red rectangle is the phrase “le récit poignant d’une enfance africaine.” The term “poignant” acts as a promise of what the reader will find on the inside, although Badjoko’s text proves to be far more complex. The reference to an “enfance africaine” further associates Badjoko’s memoir with an even older genealogy of African literature, that of the childhood novel, the canonical example being Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir* (1953).\(^{122}\) In this way the past tense of the title (“j’étais”) can be seen as emblematic of the book’s framing on the cover, one which promises the reader a repetition of a previously known experience (a child-soldier and African childhood tale) as opposed to a new, disorienting experience for an uninitiated reader. The unintended effect of this framing is to obscure the book’s function in the present, as a political document which constitutes a discursive continuation of the conflict which the “j’étais” of the cover suggests to be in the past. The “j’étais” is especially ironic in this instance, and has two unintentional results. It could either blind the reader to the book’s political content, or, conversely make this content all the more apparent as Badjoko’s blind patriotism and essentializing, racist rhetoric appear especially jarring in the context of what was presented under the familiar guise of the “enfance africaine.” This unintended interaction, in which the text in fact undoes the paratext, is the sort of dialogic interaction between text and paratext which is revelatory of the limit-event memoir’s resistance to generic classification.

\(^{122}\) Ferdinand Oyono’s *Une Vie de Boy* is another well-known example.
The Perils of Joint Authorship and the Murky Status of Collaboration

The paratextual material complicates the question of agency through its implication that Badjoko is the principle author of *J’étais enfant soldat* a fact reinforced by the positioning of his name in larger type above that of Clarens on the cover and title page and the qualifying statement that the text was written “avec Katia Clarens.” The back cover further places Clarens in a subordinate position to Badjoko, where her very brief biography is listed below Badjoko’s and reads “Katia Clarens, qui a recueilli les souvenirs bouleversants de cet enfant soldat, est reporter.” The verb “recueillir” downplays any suggestion of manipulation on Clarens part as does the simple designation “reporter” with its connotations of the impartial medium who reports rather than invents. While *Survivantes*, and other more recent survivor narratives such as Elise Rida Musomandera’s *Le livre d’Élise* (2014) contain explicit information regarding the role which the co-authors played in shaping the prose of the final text, *J’étais enfant soldat* references this collaboration but gives no details as to Clarens’ role as editor and assembler of the main narrative. In the *avant-propos*, in which Clarens describes her first encounter with Badjoko at a demobilization center for child soldiers in Kinshasa in 2003, the details concerning the text’s production are obscured by a narrative of complete recovery and rehabilitation. Here Clarens describes their work together, a gesture towards transparency which in theory would put to rest questions of manipulation or editorial overreach by the co-author. However the goal is less to reflect on how their collaboration

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123In the introduction to *Le livre d’Élise* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014) the testimony of 30 year old Tutsi genocide survivor Élise Rida Musomandera, the European editors are scrupulous in detailing the exact nature of their collaboration with the non-native African French speaker. They write “Elise a intégralement écrit son récit. Anne Deylon l’a aidé à l’agencement du texte et au choix du mot le plus précis, en français, qui n’est pas la langue maternelle d’Elise, tout en restant au plus près de son écriture.” They continue with further details about people involved in the reading and editing process, thus acknowledging both the agency of the author and necessarily constructed, and mediated nature of her literary voice.
affected the final manuscript than to demonstrate Badjoko’s resilience despite being forced
to recall difficult periods of his life:

J’ai appelé les éditeurs. Eric Laurent, chez Plon, a tout de suite cru au projet.
Je suis donc retournée à Kinshasa et on a commencé à travailler. Il s’est prêté
au jeu au-delà de ce que j’avais espéré. Il a creusé, fouillé. Il a eu mal à la tête
et au ventre en répondant à mes questions. Mais il n’a jamais cessé de sourire.

(7)

This paragraph, while it appears to fulfill the requirement that the co-author speak about her
collaboration, in fact obscures the nature of their collaboration by instead turning it into a
reflection on Badjoko’s resilience. This narrative of Badjoko’s complete rehabilitation, a
narrative which squarely places the memoir’s events in the past, is reinforced elsewhere in
the paratext. The back cover says that “Lucien Badjoko a aujourd’hui dix-huit ans. Il fait des
études de droit à l’Université de Kinshasa.” This is repeated in the final lines of the avant-
propos. “Avec l’argent de ce livre, Lucien s’est inscrit à l’université. Il étudie le droit” (7).
Previously in the avant-propos Clarens also remarks that unlike the other children in the
rehabilitation center Lucien was not “paumé. Il était là, bien droit avec son sourire affirmé”
(7). All of this framing suggests a narrative of redemption and a certain amount of closure
concerning Badjoko’s traumatic past. The “avec l’argent de ce livre il étudie le droit”
further implicates the reader as having contributed to Badjoko’s recovery through the
purchase of the book. Even the seemingly innocuous choice to end the avant-propos with “il
étudie le droit” suggests Badjoko’s transformation from an agent of violence to one fighting
for justice. This narrative of recovery and redemption thus attempts to frame how the reader

124 This stance must be contrasted with Mujawayo who explicitly rejects a notion of recovery and of a trauma
that is completely past. It also aligns Badjoko with some of the memoirs of Rwandan genocide survivors whose
narratives of the genocide suggest a definitive and harmonizing end to their suffering post-genocide.
will receive the text, in some ways mitigating the horrible events which Badjoko will recount as being fully past. And yet when reading the text one is struck precisely by the way in which it does not conform to this packaging, as it continues in discursive fashion a certain form of violence through politically charged and racially essentializing statements, such as Badjoko’s descriptions of Tutsi massacring Hutu civilians hiding in a church:

Les cadres tutsis, eux, traquaient sans relâche les Hutus… [He describes the women and children hiding in the church] Un commandant tutsi nous a ordonné de les faire sortir. Exécution. Lorsque tous entassés sur la place, leur haine s’est déchaînée.

Partout les lames, au bout de fusil, se plantaient dans des corps. Les femmes n’étaient pas épargnées. Les enfants non plus d’ailleurs. (63)

While deeply disturbing and, if true, a deplorable war crime, this passage that focuses on a Tutsi-led atrocity (no other ethnic group is associated with such violence in the text) needs to be read, regardless of Badjoko’s intention, as a charged discursive intervention into the competing discourses which work to define the history of the Tutsi genocide and its aftermath.

A final example of how the paratextual framing downplays Badjoko’s agency occurs in the back matter’s final sentence which reads “Démobilisé cinq ans plus tard, il peut enfin 

125 In Writing History, Writing Trauma Dominick LaCapra cautions against the use of such totalizing narratives when describing trauma, which he argues can create a false sense of narrative closure which obscures the way in which traumatic memories linger with resonances in the present.

126 The description of a massacre in a church evokes numerous massacres during the Tutsi genocide which took place inside of churches. These include the church at Nyamata, now a memorial to the genocide, which appears in Boubacar Boris Diop, Koulsy Lamko and Véronique Tadjo’s books about the genocide. The decision to describe in detail a Tutsi massacre of Hutu in a church thus can be read discursively as a suggestion of an equivalency between the Tutsi revenge killings of Hutu, an egregious war crime for which there is ample evidence, and the Hutu-planned genocide of the Tutsi, a state-sponsored genocide of vast scale which has been falsely equated with the killing of Hutu civilians which followed it.

127 By contrast Hutus in Badjoko’s text are valorized as quick to forgive (like the Congolese), valiant, and exceptionally brave. He says “Je me souvenais soudain comme ils étaient braves, les combattants hutus : jamais un cri pendant les tortures, et jamais un mot non plus…eux ils ne dénonçaient jamais personne” (121).
raconter l’enfer qu’il a vécu et témoigner sur une tragédie ignorée qui a saccagé les vies de plus de trente mille enfants, cyniquement utilisés comme chair à canon.” The framing of the text as a testimony adds to its authenticity and yet as one reads the text, the idea of the children being “cyniquement utilisés” takes on other resonances in the context of the politically charged memoir. The reader may consider the other forms of exploitation to which this book in fact bears witness: French publishing agencies economically motivated packaging of a child soldier story is certainly present but there is also the way in which the credibility of a Western audience, who is meant to feel responsible for this ignored tragedy, is exploited in order to disseminate racist and ideological propaganda. Whether or not Badjoko himself is fully aware of the function of his rhetoric is largely beside the point. What is at issue is rather the way in which the book, with Badjoko as its mouthpiece, constitutes its own form of discursive violence, as the text reproduces the very mechanics of exploitation and violence that the past-tense of the “J’étais” in the title wants us to believe is over.

Ironically this framing can be viewed, cynically perhaps, as a way of legitimizing these critiques by presenting them through the voice of a child. Again whether Badjoko himself is aware of this is debatable and ultimately irrelevant. What is at issue is the way in which the memoir appears to reproduce the very kind of exploitation that it claims to decry.

While a variety of commercial or literary considerations can influence a publisher’s decision to use fewer paratexts, a comparison of Badjoko and Mujawayo’s memoirs shows the effects of a paucity of framing especially in the context of traumatic memoir. The fundamental question is perhaps whether the lack of framing in J’étais enfant soldat shows the perils of granting too much authority and legitimacy to the previously marginalized “other,” or whether the decision not to address the complex stakes of traumatic memoir was in fact designed so that the story could fit safely into the marketable commodity of the child soldier
narrative. In this way we see with Huggan the way in which the marginal figure of the child soldier is made knowable through its association with existing codes concerning children in African and violence, a process which makes marginality knowable for a reader thus foreclosing a more complex encounter with a truly unknown voice. At the same time, Badjoko’s memoir shows the way in which Huggan’s contention that postcolonial literature constitutes an aestheticizing and containment of the postcolonial “margin” can be called into question. In fact, the inconsistency between the marginal but already known figure that Badjoko is marketed as and the actual content of the book undermines this attempt at framing and reveals the difficulty of containing otherness in the charged case of literature of trauma. A careful analysis of J’étais enfant soldat reveals the necessity of reflecting not only on the way in which Francophone African trauma literature is packaged but also on the way in which such packaging can unravel itself, undermining its moves to contain the margins, whose unknowability ultimately resists attempts to contain it and make it fully known.

Conclusion

Both Badjoko and Mujawayo’s testimonial narratives, while in many ways vastly different, point to the complexities of packaging Francophone African life-writing to a Western reading public. The double alterity present within these texts, written in the voice of the cultural and epistemological other, is often addressed by the editor through paratextual materials which attempt to mediate this double-otherness for the Western reader. While the first paratexts to Francophone African writing, written by European editors and patrons, largely worked to instrumentalize these texts, works such as Mujawayo’s Survivantes reveal the possibility of productive collaboration between text and paratext. In addition, Survivantes shows the importance of considering European and African collaboration outside of a lens.
of neo-colonial power dynamics which the text would wish to remain hidden. Especially important when considering *Survivantes* is the way in which the paratextual material allows the monologic voice of testimony to be viewed dialogically. This strategic deployment of the paratextual space shows the ways in which limit-event writing can compensate for the failure of language to convey meaning, without necessarily resorting to formal experimentations which risk alienating certain readers or limiting the work’s distribution.\(^\text{128}\) The paratext’s ability to emphasize testimony as a present-act, rather than simply an *a posteriori* recounting of the past, gives it a crucial function within the genre.

Conversely, a lack of paratextual framing, as we find in Lucien Badjoko’s *J’étais enfant soldat*, could be seen as an attempt to avoid the implications of European instrumentalization that Richard Watts describes as characteristic of the colonial-era preface. Ironically, however, Plon’s failure to adequately contextualize Badjoko’s memoir, instead packaging it as the “poignant” story of an African child, simply reverses the instrumentalizing dynamics. It is now the European publisher which finds itself used as a platform for ideological and racist rhetoric, a rhetoric which it helps disseminate it through its disarming and misleading framing of the memoir as written by a guileless child with poor command of French. As previously stated, whether or not Badjoko himself conceived of his memoir in such a calculating fashion is unclear, but certain episodes in which he relates self-aggrandizing stories suggest that he is aware of the possibilities of rhetorical self-presentation. While the experiences and psychological torment which Badjoko describes and suffers are indeed devastating it is also necessary to reflect on his book as a literary act, one with resonances in the present moment. In this instance, *J’étais enfant soldat*, in large part through Plon’s framing,

\[\text{128}^{\text{This over-valorization of limit-event works written in obscure, formally experimental styles is of special concern to Stef Craps in the third chapter of the previously cited Postcolonial Witnessing.}}\]
becomes a discursive continuation of the violence which the rehabilitated Badjoko claims to be in his past. Seeing the way in which the European paratext is instrumentalized through the discourse of an African speaking subject suggests that the power dynamics conditioned by the paratextual material remain relevant in the postcolonial period, albeit in radically different forms.

Finally, at the risk of dwelling on clichés concerning the information overload of the internet age, I wish to reflect on the notion of epitext, those writings and representations of a text not present in the physical book itself. With the possibilities afforded by technology (e-books with embedded videos, author interviews, both print and video, readily available on-line) the notion of a book as a unified whole needs to be called into question. Can there be such a thing as a unified reading experience of a single work, given the variety of paratextual and epitextual material that exists? When one is more likely to encounter epitext, in the form of reviews and televised discussions with writers, then the text itself, to what extent should this extra-textual discourse be placed in dialogue with the text itself? Going forward it will be useful to (re)consider the notions of ownership and control associated with books, in both the African and broader context, in light of the ever shifting boundary between literary works and the vast array of discourses which seek to frame and illuminate them.
CHAPTER 3
Hierarchies of Witnessing: Pan-African Celebrity and the Marginalization of Survivor Testimony in “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire”

Introduction

When the Rwandan genocide began on April 7th, 1994 Vénuste Kayimahe, a Rwandan employee of the Centre d’échanges culturels franco-rwandais (CECFR) in the capital city of Kigali, was trapped at work. As a Tutsi, for Kayimahe to venture across town meant almost certain death but the protection of a white French companion or the French military could potentially ensure safe passage. His French coworkers, at home awaiting evacuation, and the French military in Kigali both refused to accompany him or lend him a vehicle. In addition, the French government, the principle funder of the CECFR, refused to evacuate Kayimahe, their employee of almost twenty years. This refusal would likely have amounted to a death sentence, had Kayimahe, his wife, and two of his seven children not been rescued by Belgian paratroopers and subsequently sent to Nairobi. He would learn months later that of the five children he had been forced to abandon in Rwanda, four had survived the genocide. His daughter Aimée had been shot and killed.

Eight years later, Kayimahe, published his first book, a memoir of his experiences during and after the genocide. Entitled *France-Rwanda: les coulisses du génocide*\(^\text{129}\) it combines Kayimahe’s expressions of guilt and grief with a vitriolic indictment of France’s role in the genocide, which included providing diplomatic and military support to the regime for decades. At the beginning and end of his text are two especially powerful recreated descriptions of his mother and daughter’s death that Kayimahe bases on eye-witness

accounts while also imagining their thoughts in their final moments. Though these passages blur the line between memoir and fiction, his book was nevertheless labelled and marketed exclusively as a témoignage, a generic distinction that, as I shall show, contributed to the text’s near invisibility in discussions surrounding writing on the Tutsi genocide.

Kayimahe’s memoir was published in 2002 as part of the “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire” collective writing project. He was the only Rwandan survivor and non-professional writer to participate. The brain child of Maimouna Coulibaly and Nocky Djedanoum, two African journalists living in Lille and the founders of the Francophone African cultural festival Fest’Africa, the project sent nine African authors of diverse origins to Rwanda as part of a two-month long residence with the mission to produce literary works about the 1994 genocide. Given that the project’s participants as well as its founders insist that there was no specific obligation for the authors to publish, the project’s success was astounding. In addition to the nine books, two documentary films, and the works of sculpture that resulted, the authors presented their works at a special “Salon du Livre” in Lille, during a multi-day conference in Kigali and Butare in Rwanda. Several of the writers

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130 Coulibaly and Djedanoum were born respectively in the Ivory Coast and Chad.
132 The lack of an obligation to publish was confirmed to me in a series of personal interviews with several people associated with the project: Catia Ricabonni, Responsable Fonds Individualisés et Programmes Culture for the Fondation de France (November 20th, 2014), “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire” co-founder Maimouna Coulibaly (November 10th, 2014) and the participating writers Boubacar Boris Diop (November 16th, 2014), Véronique Tadjo (February 25th, 2015), and Abdourahman Waberi (March 17th, 2015).
133 In addition to the nine texts, which will be discussed in depth later on, these include the documentary films Rwanda, pour mémoire (Les Fabriques de la Vanne, 2003) from the Senegalse filmmaker Samba Félix Ndiaye and Nous ne sommes plus morts (PBC Pictures, 2000) by the Cameroonian filmmaker François Wokouache. South-African born sculptor Bruce Clarke’s large-scale memorial project Le Jardin de la mémoire also emerged from the
reconvened in Kigali on April 6th 2014 for a “Café Littéraire” marking the 20th anniversary of the genocide, continuing their own public advocacy on behalf of Rwandan survivors and their role as intermediaries between the survivors and the Francophone world in Africa and metropolitan France. As Catherine Coquio writes in Rwanda: Le réel et les récits, “L’émergence de la mémoire du génocide dans la culture française date en partie de l’opération lancée par Fest’Africa…” (97) What Maimouna Coulibaly, one of the project organizers, initially dubbed “notre folie” is now one of the most significant forces of cultural production on the genocide.

In addition, the Rwanda project has been the subject of a dozens of scholarly books and articles over the past 15 years which have discussed it as a politically engaged “Pan-African” response to genocide while exploring question of non-Rwandans writing fiction about violent events they did not witness. The voluminous scholarly and critical output on the project attests to the crucial role “devoir de mémoire” has had and continues to play in bringing visibility to the plight of survivors as well as the mechanisms that brought about genocidal violence fifty years after the Holocaust. Noticeably absent, however, from most initiative. In addition the authors presented their works to the Rwandan public during a series of events in Kigali and at the University of Butare in May-June of 2000, and in France at a special “salon du livre” in Lille in November of 2000.

For books that treat the project in whole or in part see: Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, Contemporary Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment; Catherine Coquio, Rwanda: le réel et les récits (Paris: Belin, 2004); Alexandre Dauge-Roth, Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2010); Béatrice Gallimore Rangira and Chantal Kalisa, Dix ans après—Réflections sur le génocide rwandais (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2005); Nasrin Qader, Narratives of Catastrophe: Boris Diop, Ben Jelloun, Khatibi (New York: Fordham UP, 2009); Josias Semujanga, Le génocide, sujet de fiction? Analyse des récits du massacre des Tutsi dans la littérature africaine
scholarly discussions of the project and its works is the contribution of Kayimahe, the only Rwandan survivor to participate. His memoir is invariably mentioned in passing, if at all. While authors such as Boubacar Boris Diop and Tierno Monénembo are discussed with regularity, Kayimahe is often lumped together with “the other writers.” Rather than the lone testimony, the scholarly output on the project overwhelmingly privileges the works of fiction written by authors who, prior to the residence in 1998, had already achieved a certain level of recognition and celebrity in the Francophone world. In fact, in examining the scholarly reception of "devoir de mémoire" it emerges that the very narratives that have granted the project its visibility—namely, its connection to a longer tradition of Pan-African intellectual engagement, and the use of fiction to speak about genocide—effectively marginalized Kayimahe within discussions of the project. In other words, since Kayimahe did not have any status within the Francophone literary world and did not label his work as fiction, his book did not fit into the narratives used to legitimize scholarly discussions of “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire.”

I would suggest that the inability of the project’s one work of survivor testimony to integrate the broader narratives framing the project has a real world parallel: the prevailing sentiment, described in numerous survivor memoirs, that their stories are “dérangeantes,” or “de trop” and the subsequent unwillingness of even the most kindly disposed interlocutor to find a space within their daily routine for the survivor’s story of physical and emotional

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suffering. As the survivor Révérien Rurangwa states in his mémoire *Génocidé* (2006): “Je le sens autour de moi, je dérange le cocon douillet dans lequel les garçons de mon âge essaient d’installer leur existence” (134). In this chapter, I argue that Kayimahe’s limited place in these critical discussions mirrors this exclusion, as his work “disturbed” the most widely used narratives which scholars used to describe the project. In the first part of this chapter I will give an overview of “devoir de mémoire” and its scholarly reception, showing how its self-presentation, the celebrity status of its participants, along with scholar’s preference for certain literary historical master narratives, created the conditions for the exclusion of the project’s lone survivor memoir. In the second part, I will more closely discuss the reception of Kayimahe’s memoir and offer close readings of the fictionalized scenes of his mother and daughter’s death, showing how his text can be analyzed as a literary document which in turn shows the fluid nature of the fiction/non-fiction generic binary. Finally I will ask to what extent the distinction between fictional and testimonial literature should be rethought in light of the exclusion of survivors’ voices that it produced in the context of the “devoir de mémoire” project.

**Part I: A Reluctant Writer: Kayimahe’s Tragic Path to Authorship**

How was it that Vénuste Kayimahe, who had not previously had ambitions as a professional writer, came to be associated with “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire?” Born in 1950 in Runyinya, Rwanda, Kayimahe was a gifted student of French who had worked for nineteen years as a projectionist at the Centre d’échanges culturels franco-rwandais (CECFR) in Kigali. During the genocide, he first assumed the role of public witness, giving telephone interviews to French journalists while trapped at the CECFR.

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138 This sentiment appears notably in Révérien Rurangwa, *Génocidé* (Paris: Presse de la Renaissance, 2007); Esther Mujawayo, *Survivantes* co-authored with the Algerian journalist Souâd Belhaddad, and Elise Rida Musomandera’s *Le livre d’Elise*. 
Later, while a refugee in Nairobi, he published a *Lettre ouverte au Président de la République* in *Le monde* in May, 1994. It was this status as a public witness and critic of the French state, he claims, that caused French authorities in Nairobi to block his emigration to France, an injustice he discusses at length in his memoir. Following the genocide he returned briefly to work at the CECFR in Kigali only to be fired for taking too much leave, in part to care for his young son stricken with cancer.¹³⁹ Immigrating to Germany he completed *France-Rwanda*. Because of the polemical nature of the work, with its savage critiques of the French government for its support of the genocidal regime, Kayimahe had difficulty finding an editor until the left-wing publisher Dagorno, in collaboration with l’Esprit frappeur, expressed an interest. Dagorno had published Gérard Prunier’s *Rwanda: le génocide* (1998) and would publish Jean-Paul Gouteux’s *La nuit rwandaise* (Paris: L’Esprit Frappeur, 2002), both of which are highly critical of France’s role in the genocide. The association with Dagorno explains in part why the polemical and historical elements of Kayimahe’s text are often foregrounded, obscuring the elements of his memoir that deal with his personal history, textual strategies for writing about trauma, and the creative reconstruction of his daughter and mother’s death at the beginning and end of his memoir.

In 2002, Kayimahe collaborated with the French filmmaker Robert Genoud¹⁴⁰ to make *Rwanda-récit d’un survivant* which features Kayimahe speaking at length about his experience during the genocide. Following the publication of *France-Rwanda* Kayimahe tried unsuccessfully to raise funds for a *Maison de la mémoire*, an independent organism in Rwanda that would house archives of testimonies and other documents pertaining to the genocide. Kayimahe also would publically critique the transitional justice mechanisms, such as the local

¹⁴⁰Genoud’s other documentaries concerning the genocide include *Rwanda, l’histoire qui mène au génocide* (8 Mont Blanc Television, Les Films du Village, 1995) and *La France au Rwanda* (Zaraga Films, 1999).
court system known as *gacaca*, set up by the post-genocidal Rwandan state, and continued his vitriolic indictments of France for its alleged implication in the genocide.\textsuperscript{141} He has co-authored several articles with Jacques Morel, author of *La France au coeur du génocide des Tutsi*, and one of the most-outspoken critics of France’s role in Rwanda.\textsuperscript{142} This explains in part why Kayimahe’s memoir is so often branded as polemical and why, seen as a liability by both the French and Rwandan government, he has not achieved the public recognition of other survivor/authors such as Yolande Mukagasana and Esther Mujawayo, who are routinely asked to speak at commemorations of the genocide.

The decision to integrate Kayimahe into the “devoir de mémoire” project meant a departure from the original language used to justify the mission whose goal was to have African intellectuals break their own silence regarding the genocide both in Africa and in Europe. By allowing Kayimahe and the Rwandan exile Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa to participate, the project’s mission, implicitly though never explicitly, widened to include giving voice to certain Rwandans themselves, breaking another silence, that of the survivors of the genocide, very few of whom had been able to express themselves in writing. Indeed, if “devoir de mémoire” prominently featured non-Rwandan celebrity authors, it was in part a product of a cultural reality: at the time the project was conceived there were no prominent Rwandan writers, and Rwanda as a country had scant literary history.\textsuperscript{143} The attribution of


Morel also frequently cites Kayimahe within his own authors detailing France’s complicity in the genocide. See Jacques Morel and François Graner. "Le lieutenant-colonel de gendarmerie Michel Robardey." http://jacques.morel67.free.fr/Robardey.pdf

\textsuperscript{143} The novelist J. Saverio Naigiziki (1915-1984) who published the novels *Escapade ruandaise* (Brussels: G.A. Deny, 1949), and *L’optimiste* (Astrida, Rwanda: Groupe scolaire, Frères de la charité, 1954) is the most prominent of the few known Rwandan authors prior to the genocide. The Rwandan historian Alexis Kagame (1912-1981) also published translations and commentary on Rwandan poetry including *La Poésie dynastique au
the prestigious Renaudot prize to Scholastique Mukasonga in 2012 for her novel Notre-Dame du Nil, the first Rwandan author to receive the award, for the first time conferred the approbation of the French literary establishment on a Rwandan author. In 1998, however, there were no writers with Mukasonga’s status to be invited on the trip, hence the notion that professional writers from other African countries might serve as “ambassadors,” as Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa has termed it, for the Rwandan people who did not have the means to express themselves. While there has been a steady flow of Rwandan survivor memoirs published in French and in English over the past two decades, at the time of the project’s inception only Yolande Mukagasana, whose co-authored memoir La mort ne veut pas de moi (Paris: Fixot, 1997), had received any attention in the mainstream press.

Although Kayimahe had achieved a certain level of public visibility for his open letter in Le monde at the height of the genocide, he lacked the credentials of even the least prolific members of the Rwanda project. This might explain why Kayimahe was not originally invited to participate in “devoir de mémoire” which in turn explains why there is often confusion in descriptions of the project as to his real role. Yet there is little to suggest that, as of June 1998, Kayimahe was not a full-fledged member of the project, having initially served as a guide and advisor for the organizers. Abdourahman Waberi, one of the project’s

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*Rurangwa states this during an interview in Samba Félix Ndiaye’s film Rwanda, pour mémoire.

*Prominent examples include the previously cited memoirs Survivantes (2004) and Génocide (2006); Annick Kayitesi’s Nous existions encore (Paris: Michel Lafon, 2004); Pauline Kayitare’s Tu leur diras que tu es hutue (Brussels: André Versaille, 2011); in English, Immaculée Ilibagiza’s Left to Tell (Carlsbad, Calif.: Hay House, 2006).

writers, describes Kayimahe as travelling with the group to various memorial sites. Boubacar Boris Diop lists Kayimahe, along with the other nine authors, in his descriptions of the project. When asked directly about his role, Véronique Tadjo, another participant, leaves little doubt as his legitimacy as a member of the mission:

Vénuste Kayimahe et Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa ont véritablement participé au projet par la suite. Pendant les préparations, ils ont beaucoup aidé les organisateurs et ils ont apporté leur soutien pendant la résidence, allant partout avec les auteurs. Et puis Maïmouna et Nocky se sont dit que ce serait bien de les intégrer au projet de manière plus formelle.

Thus Kayimahe achieved a level of membership in the group of writers that is not generally reflected in discussions of the project. In addition, he had a privileged role of “local informant,” facilitating site visits and translating for the writers most of whom knew little about the genocide and had never visited Rwanda. In the 2001 documentary film about Kayimahe’s experience during and after the genocide, Rwanda, récit d’un survivant (2001) footage from a 2000 Salon du Livre in Lille, where the authors presented the published versions of their works, shows Kayimahe participating in a panel discussion flanked by Véronique Tadjo and the other writers. The film shows a table where all of the books including Kayimahe’s are on display. In his 2003 article in Lendemains “D’une justice à l’autre: réflexions sur la justice et le témoignage” Kayimahe describes his participation in the project and thanks Djedanoum and Coulibaly’s organization Fest’Africa effusively for their assistance in publishing his work. It is clear that if Kayimahe is marginalized in discussions of the project it has less to with his legitimacy as a participant than with other factors concerning

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149 Véronique Tadjo, Personal interview. 25 February 2015.
the packaging and reception of his memoir itself. It is thus all the more puzzling that so few critics saw fit to justify the little space devoted to his memoir given that, as the sole Rwandan survivor participant, his inclusion could potentially allow “devoir de mémoire” to come closer to being the truly Pan-African collective writing project it aspired to be.

Hierarchies of Celebrity and Visibility

If Kayimahe’s memoir has not figured in many conversations surrounding “devoir de mémoire,” it is in part because publishing survivor testimony was not an original goal of the project which was more focused on helping non-Rwandan African writers contribute to the collective memory of the genocide.\footnote{The co-founders Nocky Djédanoum and Maïmouna Coulibaly discuss the origins and goals of the project at length in an interview with Boniface Mongo-Mboussa in the journal Africultures (September, 2000).} Further setting apart “devoir de mémoire’s” writers from Kayimahe was that all enjoyed a certain degree of celebrity within the francophone literary world, something that did not apply to any Rwandan survivor in 1998. Winners of literary prizes, published in France, and regulars on the international literary festival circuit, these non-Rwandan African writers were almost all participants in an international system that works to legitimize “postcolonial” cultural production for a Western audience.\footnote{In addition to Huggan, see Sarah Brouilette, Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) for a discussion of the relationship of these writers to the publishing industry.}\footnote{For an in-depth study of the role of prizes in assigning value to literary works see: James English, The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2005).} As Graham Huggan demonstrates in his book The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margin, this system, in which the “marginal” identity of third world functions as a saleable commodity, is a powerful means of giving visibility to these cultures within Europe. It is thus not surprising that this system, with its network of authors and literary prizes,\footnote{For an in-depth study of the role of prizes in assigning value to literary works see: James English, The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2005).} should be used to bring visibility to the Tutsi genocide.\footnote{For an in-depth study of the role of prizes in assigning value to literary works see: James English, The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2005).} Scholars however have shied away from putting “devoir de mémoire” in the context of this global literary marketplace, undoubtedly to avoid the
distasteful connotation of commodifying the genocide or questioning the motives of the authors for being involved. And yet a thorough examination of the project, the celebrity status of its authors, and its own self-legitimizing logic is crucial if we are to understand why Kayimahe is on the periphery of so many discussions, and indeed, why survivor-authored testimonies still struggle to find an audience compared to the novels and films of non-Rwandans.

It was in part the “devoir de mémoire” project’s writers’ previous connection with Djedanoum and Coulibaly through their participation in the Fest’Africa events in Lille which allowed the majority to be selected, a fact which is not mentioned in discussions of the project, which often present the writers as a representative sample of “African writers.” Participating writer Abdourahman Waberi has in fact suggested that, given the unusual nature of the project, writers who did not know Djedanoum and Coulibaly might have balked at participating. The community of writers was thus to an extent limited to those with some visibility on the international festival and prize circuit which confers legitimacy on postcolonial writers who participate in the “global literary marketplace,” Sarah Brouillette term for the sphere in which these literary objects circulate. The goal of this section is to interrogate the celebrity and international status of the non-Rwandan authors who chose to participate and to argue that Kayimahe’s outlier status was implicitly inscribed within the language that framed the project.

The status of the eight writers originally slated to participate in the Rwanda project was variable: some writers were established and prolific, others less prolific but promising and successful, and some were, and still remain, relatively unknown. While the degree of


155 Abdourahman Waberi, Personal Interview. 17 March 2015.
causality is impossible to define, the careers of almost all the already established writers continued to flourish, if not improve, after their participation in the project, leading to increased recognition through literary prizes, visiting (and in the case of Waberi full-time) professorships at American universities, as well as invitations to speak publically about the project and on behalf of Rwandan survivors. The Guinean Tierno Monénembo and the Kenyan Meji Mwangi, had the most impressive careers in 1998, publishing their first novels in 1979 and 1974 respectively, followed by a steady output. It is interesting note that Mwangi, who was the only Anglophone writer to participate and in 1998 the most prolific of the nine authors, was the only invited writer not to publish a book on his experiences. After receiving the Prix Tropiques in 2000 for his Rwanda “devoir de mémoire” novel *L’ainé des orphelins*, Monénembo has received the coveted Prix Renaudot in 2008 for his novel *Le Roi de Kabel* and now enjoys the status as arguably Francophone Africa’s greatest living novelist.

In 1998, two of the authors, the Senegalese Boubacar Boris Diop, and the Djiboutian Abdourahman Waberi, fit the category of newly minted stars on the international Francophone scene. Author of three novels before the voyage to Rwanda, Diop had recently won the Prix Tropiques in 1997 for his novel *Le cavalier et son ombre* (Paris: Stock, 1997) as well as the Grand Prix Littéraire de l’Afrique Noire in 1998. His Rwandan novel *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (Abidjan: Stock, 2000) was named one of the 100 greatest African books

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156 Diop and Tadjo have both held visiting positions at Rutgers while Waberi now works full-time as Professor of French and Francophone Studies at George Washington University in Washington, DC.


159 Prior to the project Diop was also known for his novels *Les temps de tamango* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1981) and *Les tambours de la mémoire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1990).
of the 20th century, and he rapidly gained prominence as a public intellectual, publishing articles in French newspapers and appearing frequently at conferences to speak about the genocide. Waberi, at 33 the youngest author to participate, had been awarded the Grand Prix Littéraire de l’Afrique noire in 1996 and the Biannual Mandat pour la liberté prize from the PEN Club français in 1998, following the publication of several collections of short stories and a novel beginning in 1994. His is now Professor of French and Francophone Studies at George Washington University in Washington D.C., has published several acclaimed works of fiction, and was one of the co-signers of the much-discussed “Manifeste pour une littérature monde en français.”

Neither a literary celebrity, nor a novelist before the voyage, the Tchadian Koulsy Lamko is a somewhat liminal figure within the project. He had achieved some recognition as a playwright, poet and short-story writer, while doing community theater in Burkina Faso and appearing at the Festival International des Francophonies in Limoges, France. While he had not achieved the international recognition of the more established writers, his output of plays was prolific, and had been edited by numerous European publishers such as Editions Lansman and Actes Sud. His Rwandan book La Phalène des Collines (Paris: Serpent à plumes, 2000) is to date his only novel. He remained in Rwanda for several years following the residence to found the center for Arts and Theater at the National University in Butare.

160 These include the short-story collection Le pays sans ombre (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 1994) and the novel Balbala (Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes, 1997).

161 These include the aforementioned Balbala (1997) and Aux États-Unis d’Afrique (Paris: J.C. Lattès, 2006).

Thus while the residence clearly had a profound impact on the trajectory of his personal life, it marks almost the complete end of his published literary output.\footnote{His output following the project includes the unpublished play \textit{Corps et voix, paroles rizhomes} which is based on the works of ‘Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire’ and was performed in Kigali in 2000 and again at the Francophonies Festival in Limousin in 2001. He also published a collection of poetry: \textit{Aurore} (2001), and contributed to the collection of short stories: \textit{Dernières nouvelles du colonialisme} (La Roque d’Anthéron: Vents d’ailleurs, 2006) but this production pales in comparison to his bibliography that predates the 1998 residence.}

One of only two female participants, along with the Burkinabe Monique Ilboudo, Véronique Tadjo\footnote{Tadjo’s publications prior to “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire” included two collections of poetry: \textit{Latérite} (Paris: Hator, 1984) and \textit{A vol d’oiseau} (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1986), the novel \textit{Le royaume aveugle} (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1991) and children’s books including \textit{Le seigneur de la danse} (Abidjan: Nouvelles Éditions Ivoriennes, 1988); \textit{La chanson de la vie} (Paris: Hatier, 1990), and \textit{Le grain de maïs magique} (Abidjan: Nouvelles Éditions Ivoriennes, 1996).} was an accomplished novelist, poet, and children’s book author, winning the Agence de Cooperation Culturelle et Technique literary prize in 1983 and a 1993 UNICEF prize for her children’s book \textit{Mamy Wata et le monstre} (Abidjan: Nouvelles Éditions Ivoriennes, 1993).\footnote{Previous winners include Cheikh Hamidou Kane (1962) for \textit{L’aventure ambiguë} (Paris: Julliard, 1961), Bernard Dadié (1965) for \textit{Patron de New-York} (Condé-sur-Noireau: Présence Africaine, 1964); Ahmadou Kourouma (1969) for \textit{Les Soleils des Indépendances} (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1968); Henri Lopes (1972) for \textit{Tribaliques} (Yaoundé: Clé, 1971); Aminata Sow Fall (1980) for \textit{La grève des Bâttu} (Dakar: Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1979); Sony Lab’ou Tansi (1983) for \textit{Anti-peuple} (Paris: Seuil, 1983).} She was awarded the Grand Prix Littéraire de l’Afrique Noire in 2005 (the fourth of the Rwanda project authors to have done so), an award which has recognized almost every canonical Francophone Africa author of the last fifty years.\footnote{A less prolific writer than other participants in ‘Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire,’ Ilboudo holds a doctorate in private law from from Paris XII, and was a prominent newspaper columnist in Burkina Faso writing on issues pertaining to women’s rights and women’s health.} While not as well-known as most participants, Monique Ilboudo\footnote{A less prolific writer than other participants in ‘Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire,’ Ilboudo holds a doctorate in private law from from Paris XII, and was a prominent newspaper columnist in Burkina Faso writing on issues pertaining to women’s rights and women’s health.} had won the 1992 national book prize in Burkina Faso for \textit{Le mal de peau} (Ouagadougou: Imprimerie Nationale, 1992) and had gained further prominence as a journalist and women’s rights advocate in her home country. She is now a human rights advocate and ambassador for Burkina Faso, having published no works of fiction since her Rwandan novel \textit{Murakatate} (2000).

The only project participant at the time of the project’s conceptions with Rwandan roots, Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa had fled Rwanda for Burundi at the age of 2 in 1961.
following the anti-Tutsi violence that would set a precedent for the 1994 genocide. Living in Italy in 1998, Rurangwa had written several plays, but did not have the status of the more prominent members of “devoir de mémoir.” Following Le génocide des Tutsi expliqué à un étranger (2000), he has published a memoir, Un rwandais sur la route de l’exil (2005), and a novel, Au sortir de l’enfer (2007) about a Tutsi survivor though neither has met with great commercial success.

Vénuste Kayimahe did not have credentials as a writer or public figure aside from his open letter to François Mitterrand in Le monde. Kayimahe’s marginal status was thus inscribed in many ways from the outset of the project as his profile differed so radically from the rest of the participants. In 2014, he published his first novel, La chanson de l’aube, with Izuba, a small French-based publishing house specializing, in part, in Rwandan literature. The story of a Tutsi school teacher whose life is upended by the genocide, Kayimahe’s novel has had little circulation, its marginal status reinforcing Kayimahe’s difficulty in achieving the literary celebrity enjoyed by the Rwandan project’s more prominent participants.

Thus for the less prolific writers, such as Ilboudo, Rurangwa, Kayimahe and Djedanoum, the publication of their books did little to affect their literary careers or catapult them into the area of Francophone literary celebrity enjoyed by their more prominent colleagues. In contrast, the celebrity status of many of the authors underscores how, in many ways, the Rwanda project was not as risky a venture as Maïmouna Coulibaly has implied, given the established reputations and previous success of the majority of the writers.

While the two originators of the project where not themselves well-known writers, they enjoyed the status of small-time power brokers within the Francophone literary world through their organization of the Fest’Africa arts and culture festival in Lille. The Chadian
Nocky Djedanoum, co-creator of the project with his then-partner Maimouna Coulibaly, had no prior publications, but it is crucial to acknowledge their role in finding funding for the project and getting it off the ground. Djedanoum obtained funding from the private French charitable organization La Fondation de France and with Coulibaly set about contacting the writers many of whom had participated in Fest’Africa. It is necessary to recognize that the Rwanda project was at its origins an outgrowth of a particular culture of Francophone African literary production centered in Paris and often promoted through festivals and large scale gatherings. Interestingly, while the careers of many of the project have flourished, Djedanoum and Coulibaly have all but disappeared from the public eye. Coulibaly is working as a journalist in Lille. After a failed attempt to mobilize funding to send African writers and intellectuals to Sudan to write about Darfur, Djedanoum moved to his home country to work for the office of the Chadian first lady. References to his recent activity are almost impossible to find.

To what extent the elevated literary status of Diop, Tadjo, Monénembo, and Waberi is due to their participation in “devoir de mémoire” is of course impossible to prove definitively, but there is little doubt that their association with the project gave further legitimacy to their status as relevant, engaged, and significant authors within the global literary scene. Diop, Tadjo and Monénembo’s Rwanda project texts were the only three to be translated and their status and significance has continued relatively unabated. It is thus clear that the Rwanda project can be placed within a larger network of literary institutions that legitimize and grant recognition to a small group of cosmopolitan, internationally based writers who ascribe to a certain number of its codes, which often include a concern for political engagement as well as a claiming, to varying degrees, a Pan-African identity.

According to Abdourahman Waberi, the Rwandan poet and theater director Kalissa Tharcisse Rugano was invited to participate as well but did not produce a work as a result.
However, for those writers who were not already a part of this circle, particularly the Rwandans, the project failed to confer a new kind of literary status, showing the limits of this system in terms of the kinds of visibility it is able to confer. Overall the project seemed to reinforce the status of those authors who were already internationally recognized, while granting limited, but not substantial, visibility to the less well-known participants. This fact is troubling in that it leads to the implicit legitimizing of the exclusion of the lone-survivor Kayimahe in a project meant to bring visibility to the survivor experience. In addition, it exposed the constructed nature of the rhetoric of “African solidarity” that framed the project, revealing it in part as a rhetorical construction rather than a reflection of a specific cultural or historical reality.

A Cosmopolitan Response to Genocide: The Rwanda Project’s Pan-Africanism

The Pan-African rhetoric of intellectual engagement has been commented on frequently by scholars looking to discuss the relevance and historical implications of the project and its works. A link is often made with a longer tradition of postcolonial intellectual engagement, the legacy of Aimé Césaire, Franz Fanon, and Léopold Sédar Senghor that has linked African cultural production with activism and political ideology. As Nicki Hitchcott writes in her article “A Global Commemoration,” the Rwanda project authors appeared motivated in part by:

a desire to affirm a collective African identity and to claim their membership in the international community. In other words, this group of writers identified themselves...

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as global African citizens whose agenda was no longer dictated by the enduring neo-colonial presence of the Western media. (153)

While the idea of a Pan-African identity has often been problematized, including by the writers themselves, scholars of the project generally have not called this label into question, accepting “devoir de mémoire” as illustrating, rather than helping to produce, the existence of a common identity amongst African writers. Véronique Porra comes the closest to interrogating the term, asserting that, along with its funding within the French metropole, the concept of Pan-Africanism reveals the project’s dependence on a European conception of Africa: "l'aspiration panafricaniste (ou ‘néo-panafricaniste’) qui y préside peut être lue comme un résidu postcolonial qui invite à la construction d’une ‘communauté imaginaire’ africaine, qui se conçoit primairement ex negativo, par opposition à l’Europe" (147). I would take Porra’s assertion further, suggesting that the idea of Pan-Africanism also contains a de-facto exclusion of individuals or writers who do not belong to the intellectual elite invoked previously. In other words, the concept operates in large part as a legitimizing label within the elite Francophone literary discursive field rather than an accurate representation of a particular transcultural identity.

Both Diop, Coulibaly, and Waberi have cited the state-sponsored execution of the Nigerian writer and activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1995 as a catalyst for their interest in Rwanda and their renewed understanding of the importance of an intellectual and political engagement that had begun to seem passé. While in the years preceding “devoir de mémoire,” African writers had begun to question the need, or desirability for political engagement, in part because of the failure of post-independence socialism and its political patronage of the arts, the sudden resonance of the idea suggested that perhaps the pendulum

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170 See in particular Boubacar Boris Diop in L’Afrique au-delà du miroir.
171 Ibid
had swung too far in the other direction. The implication was that the absence or silence of current day Senghors or Fanons had in part allowed the genocide to occur. In many ways this sense of a collective mea culpa pervades the self-reflective writing of Diop, Tadjo and Waberi. Indeed, some have seen in “devoir de mémoire” the revival of a by-gone golden area of intellectual engagement. In terms that suggest a sincere nostalgia for a “pre-disillusionment” period Collette Braeckman, in an article for the Belgian newspaper Le Soir, describes the gathering of the writers in Kigali in 2000 as: “les bases d’une vraie renaissance africaine, fondée sur la culture et la solidarité…” which to her “rappelait les grands engagements des intellectuels et des artistes africains au moment des indépendances.”

Complicating this notion, however, was also what might be termed not only the Pan-African but the cosmopolitan, and specifically hexagonal aspects of the project. Funded entirely within the French métropole, and employing African writers living in France, the United Kingdom and Italy, the African “intellectual” that the Djedanoum and Coulibaly called upon belonged, as mentioned previously, to a sort of cosmopolitan elite, seemingly as at home in a Paris literary salon as in downtown Dakar. Thus full membership in this diasporic group of writers also required the legitimacy of the French publishing world and of the means and funds to participate in this international literary circuit. Since Djedanoum and Coulibaly, the project’s African founders, had been settled in France at the time, this further limited the number of people who could participate in the project primarily to those who been able to travel to France to participate in Fest’Africa. It is thus essential to note that the idea of Pan-Africanism does not necessarily reflect a particular reality so much as

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173 Taiye Selasi’s term “afropolitanism” is an attempt in part to codify this diasporic, transnational African identity which defines easy categorization as either European or Africa. See Selasi’s 2005 essay “Bye-Bye, Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)” in The LIP Magazine’s “Africa” issue (March, 2005).
174 Abdourahman Waberi, Personal interview. 17 March 2015.
operate as a concept with substantial cultural capital which in the case of “devoir de mémoire” was also essentially to its funding. As Catia Riccoboni of the Fondation de France, the French non-governmental charitable organization that funded the project, explains, it was precisely the belief in a common African identity that, in their eyes, legitimized the Rwanda project. Ricabonni claims that such an initiative might have seemed opportunistic or exploitative coming from European intellectuals interested in writing on the genocide.

“Nocky [Djedanoum] avait une certaine légitimité. Nous en tant que fondation, sur ce sujet-là, nous n’avons pas. Il faut donner les moyens pour le faire, mais on restait un peu en retrait.”175 Is it necessarily true that a Chadian or Senegalese writer would have more legitimacy to speak about a Rwandan tragedy than a Swede or a Brazilian? It is revelatory that for the Fondation de France, the presumed solidarity between African writers and the Rwandan people was enough to legitimize a project that they might have otherwise considered too risky to undertake from a public relations standpoint.

Another effect of this insistence on the project’s Pan-African character is a discursive shift in focus from the genocide itself to the silence of African intellectuals concerning it. While clearly it is implied that the “devoir de mémoire” writers’ goal is to bring visibility to the genocide, one detects a self-reflexive collective guilt concerning Africa’s non-engagement that shifts attention from the multiple silences particular to Rwanda (those of the victims, for instance) to that of the international, specifically African community. While acknowledging these silences is crucial, it also betrays a sort of nostalgia for an idealized, mythic notion of the African intellectual, with Rwanda then serving as a sort of springboard from which this reputation might be rehabilitated. Kayimahe, a non-professional writer with no prior publications, thus did not fit the profile of the “African writer” included in the Pan-African

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175 Catia Ricabonni, Personal Interview. 20 November 2014.
discussions that framed the project. Thus when critics speak of African writers in reference to the project, they are not referring to any writer of African origins, but rather to a particular type of cosmopolitan intellectual, a figure who shares many similarities with Kwame Anthony Appiah’s famous formulation of the comprador intelligentsia.\footnote{See Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?" \textit{Critical Inquiry} 17.2 (1991): 336-57.} Appiah defines the comprador intelligentsia as “a relatively small Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery.” (348) Linking the Rwanda project to this term is not to suggest a cynical commodifying of genocide but rather to show how Kayimahe, who was not a cultural power broker by any means, had difficulty effectively giving visibility to his work, being less familiar with negotiating the codes of visibility and publication within this particular cultural sphere.

Regardless of how one feels about the “comprador intelligensia” label and its pejorative connotations, its very existence is indicative of the significant global visibility that intellectuals such as Diop, Monénembo, Tadjo and Waberi enjoyed before the trip began, hence the relative ease with which they could be incorporated into pre-existing master narratives regarding intellectual production and the postcolonial world. Simply put, Kayimahe did not occupy a subject position with substantial cultural capital in the public discursive sphere. Thus while on paper he fit the description of the project’s aims quite well—he was a politically engaged African writer—the self-legitimizing logic of academic discursive production meant that he was relegated to the sideline despite being the participant who came the closest to firsthand knowledge of the genocide.
Paradoxical Truthfulness: Hierarchies of Fiction Over Testimony

While the focus on the Pan-African nature of the project is one way in which Kayimahe paradoxically found himself excluded, there is another focus in the scholarly reception of “devoir de mémoire” that also marginalizes his text: an implied hierarchical relationship between fictional and testimonial writing which is based on the assumption of an almost Manichean difference between fictional and testimonial written discourse.177 Along with the idea of the engaged African intellectual, “the inevitable questions raised by the fact of writing a novel about genocide” are consistently cited as reasons for why these texts are worthy of particular interest (Small, 200), and as the question which the literary critic will try and unpack. As such the established question of literary creation’s relationship to genocidal violence, a debate launched in part by Adorno’s oft mis-quoted dictum about writing poetry after Auschwitz, served as a second literary historical master narrative that legitimized scholarly discussions of the project. To compare the genocide to the Holocaust worked against negationist discourse while also showing the universal dynamics of essentializing rhetoric and state-sanctioned, politically motivated violence that the Holocaust and the Tutsi genocide have in common.178 Furthermore, the ethical implications of an outsider writing fiction about genocide is consistently privileged as one of the defining characteristics of the project.


Fiction, much of the criticism of the project implies, is best suited to grapple with particularly thorny questions of representation and the “unspeakable” since there are a wider variety of literary and rhetorical tools at the author’s disposal. If the traumatized victim simply pours out in unreflected fashion his traumatic memory, the outsider author has the necessary perspective to plumb certain depths of the unspeakable. As Noémie Bernard writes:

Le traitement de la fiction dans les romans de Tierno Monénembo et de Boubacar Boris Diop, de même que leur usage du témoignage, en font deux illustrations d’un choix littéraire singulier, qui montre que la fiction peut recouvrer des significations profondément différentes. (85)

Josias Semujanga suggests the singularity of fictional discourse to convey truths about the genocide when he writes, à propos of the project: “Par-delà la morale… la fiction appelle à la vigilance. Sa morale est le bien transcendant auquel l’horreur de l’univers évoqué convie le lecteur” (113). This distinction is further reinforced by the generic labels of “roman” and “témoignage,” which are often seen as dichotomous. In one notable instance the distinction between “témoignage de dedans” and “témoignage de dehors,” used by Romuald Fonkoua is repeated by numerous scholars in conjunction with the project, even as it effaces the fact that Kayimahe spent almost the entire genocide outside of Rwanda, and thus shares many similarities with the “témoin de dehors” who bore witness through fiction. Furthermore, the classification of Kayimahe’s memoir as an “document-témoignage” or “book length

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essay”\textsuperscript{181} further cuts off consideration of its literary qualities in a way that might bring his story visibility and valorize his work.

Implicit in this distinction is in fact a hierarchical conception of literary responses to catastrophe that presupposes that Rwandans are not capable of writing fiction, therefore outsiders must do it. It must be noted that Rwandans overwhelmingly approved of the project and its effects, including Rurangwa and Kayimahe.\textsuperscript{182} Stating the inability of the Rwandans to write fiction about their tragedy is usually mentioned in terms of a compassionate acknowledgement of the traumatic effects of genocide which render its victims capable at most of producing testimony. Diop articulates this idea most clearly when he explains that with time Rwandans will produce a great work of literature:

Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa and Vénuste Kayimahe, les deux auteurs rwandais de notre groupe, se sont contentés d’écrire des textes de réflexion plutôt que de la fiction. Ma conviction est pourtant que les grandes œuvres littéraires sur le génocide d’avril 1994 seront écrites plus tard et par les Rwandais eux-mêmes. Pour cela il faudra sans doute que le travail du deuil ait été fait, que la douleur ait traversé plusieurs générations et, qu’émémergeant d’une longue stupéfaction, les fils trouvent enfin les mots pour dire la folie de leurs pères. (L’afrique au-dela du miroir, 35)

The use of the verb “se contenter” is revelatory in that it implies a hierarchy between testimonial and fictional writing, a notion that is expressed in similarly implicit terms by


\textsuperscript{182} In Senegalese director Samba Ndiaye’s documentary film Rwanda, pour mémoire (2000) Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa praises the project in the following terms: “Le fait même qu’il y a beaucoup d’Africains dans ce projet est très importants pour nous, parce que ces africains vont être nos ambassadeurs. Ce sont eux qui vont raconter à nos compatriotes ce qui s’est passé. Parce qu’eux, ils sont venus, ils ont vu, ils ont parlé, ils ont écouté, donc les livres qu’ils ont écrits, ils vont aussi les exposer, les présenter dans leurs pays.”
scholars of the project. The implication is that since they are not fictional, the testimonies cannot necessarily be great. By this logic testimony, often treated as written transcription of an oral recounting, is not a creative endeavor and is therefore less complex, less strategic, and therefore less likely to reflect the full range of affective understanding combined with historical detail that the platonic ideal of Rwandan post-genocide fiction which Diop predicts, would supposedly entail. One cannot but detect a patronizing, eurocentric bias against Rwandan testimonial production as a less-rhetorically sophisticated, orally-inflected African form of pre-discourse which cannot match the novel as a form of discursive expression best-suited to plumb the depths of the unspeakable nature of genocide. With such assumptions in place, it is not surprising that Kayimahe’s work had difficulty being included in the literary historical master narratives which critics used to legitimize their discussions of the Rwanda project.

Implicit in this distinction between testimony and fictional texts is a long-standing assumption about traumatized speech which harkens back to Freud and assumes that the traumatized individual does not have the distance necessary to articulate completely what he has experienced. While this assumption certainly holds true for certain forms of oral discursive speech or testimony, the written “testimonies” from Rwandans are themselves constructed works with literary qualities and often say as much in their paratextual material. While one understands a certain reticence to discuss the “literary” qualities of a testimony, in part because to pass judgment on a testimony’s style could seem disrespectful to the author, it is also clear that this distinction can potentially reduce the visibility of the

183 Present in Freud’s early writing on trauma such as Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) this idea of trauma’s unknowability to its victims is taken up again in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s Testimony and in Cathy Caruth’s Unclaimed Experience.

184 In particular one thinks of Souâd Belhaddad and Esther Mujawayo’s Survivantes, Élise Rida Musomandera’s Le livre d’Élise, and Pauline Kayitare’s Tu leur diras que tu es butée.
testimony by excluding it from certain critical conversations regarding the process of producing writing about disaster. Indeed, a close analysis of Kayimahe’s text reveals a number of strategic choices which can be productively subjected to literary analysis. In the section that follows, I will show the literary qualities of Kayimahe’s testimony, exploring what aspects of his memoir were hidden by the twin focus on cosmopolitan Pan-Africanism and outsider fiction that characterized the vast majority of discussions of the “devoir de mémoire” project.

Part II: Fiction’s Place Within Memoir: Kayimahe’s Literary Strategies

Of the text’s in the Rwanda project that have generated the most critical interest—Diop’s *Murambi*, Monénembo’s *L’aïné des orphelins*, Tadjo’s *L’ombre d’Imana*, Waberi’s *Moisson de Crânes*, and Lamko’s *La Phalène des collines*—all combine fictional testimony and first person narration from Rwandans with the story of a non-Rwandan visiting the country post-genocide. Similarly, while Kayimahe’s book was labelled as a témoignage it opens and ends

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with fictional reconstructions of the death of his daughter and mother, events which occurred when Kayimahe was in Kenya. Thus while written by a Rwandan, Kayimahe’s rewritings raise similar questions related to that of “outsider” testimony, albeit with the added layer of complexity that the author is writing about his own family members. In the section that follows I will discuss the little that has been written about Kayimahe’s memoir before examining his use of literary devices, including fictionalized scenes and frame narratives, to communicate his understanding of the genocide to his readers. Finally, I will reflect on the broader implications of Kayimahe’s exclusions in terms of what they say about the limits of generic classification as a way of understanding written responses to genocide.

“Le Francophobe Paranoïaque”: Kayimahe’s Critical Reception

Attempts to integrate Kayimahe into discussions of the project often seem half-hearted or clumsy and at times simply bizarre. The previously cited article by Nicki Hitchcott (“A Global Commemoration”) offers the most comprehensive attempt to weave both Rurangwa and Kayimahe into the narrative of the project’s genesis and reception. It includes an epigraph from Rurangwa and frequent references to Kayimahe throughout. In terms of interrogating the fictional aspects of the text, Catherine Coquio comes the closest, suggesting that certain passages where Kayimahe imagines the death of his daughter bring him closer to fiction. However, in her article “L’écriture, la mémoire et le deuil” she seems to almost chastise him for not further developing this theme, suggesting that his work is too much of a pastiche and a polemic to have a real cultural impact. In speaking of the various Rwandan eyewitness writers, she states flatly that: “leurs récits ne relèvent pas de la littérature: ni ceux de Yolande Mukagasana, ni celui de Vénuste Kayimahe, ni celui, moins connu, de Marie-Aimable Umurerwa. Leur audience n’a d’ailleurs pas dépassé un cercle limité” (14). Such a definitive classification (between that which is literature and that which is not) forecloses the
possibility of certain kinds of critical discussions around Kayimahe’s text in a way which
denies the productive ways in which such supposedly “non-literary” texts can be read and
interpreted.

Few authors speak explicitly about why they have chosen to focus on the other texts
at the expense of Kayimahe’s. Audrey Small, at the end of her article “The duty of memory,”
provides a bizarrely self-accusatory mea-culpa for the exclusion of Kayimahe and the
Rwandan exile Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa:

Most disturbingly, perhaps, is that this discussion of the literary texts produced by
the devoir de mémoire project given here excludes the two extended essays, Jean-Marie
Vianney Rurangwa’s Le génocide des Tutsis expliqué à un étranger and Venuste Kayimahe’s
La France-Rwanda: les coulisses du genocide, which do seek to explain the genocide in
political and historical terms and therefore invoke facts and arguments, but perhaps
to a lesser degree the imagination. This then rather challenges the idea of a solidarity
or community among the devoir de mémoire texts which this article discusses, as it has
excluded the texts by the Rwandan authors involved in the project. (98)

Small’s statement is revelatory in that it makes explicit the hierarchy between works that
purportedly privilege the “imagination” over those that use “facts and arguments,” as well as
a certain discomfort with the exclusion of the Rwandan authors. However while
problematicizing the exclusion of Rurangwa and Kayimahe, Small stops short of fully
interrogating why this has taken place, nor did she see it fit to modify her own main
argument of the project as an act of solidarity.

The most thorough and stinging assessment of Kayimahe occurs in Francois
Lagarde’s summary of the text in his encyclopedic Mérialistes et témoins rwandais which
fixates on Kayimahe’s seeming paranoia concerning France’s attempts to keep him from immigrating, as well as the accusations levelled against his former employers at the French Cultural Center in Kigali. Lagarde writes that:

Son livre est à la fois instructif et douteux, selon qu’il porte sur lui-même ou sur son ennemi mortel, la France. La question que pose son récit est de savoir dans quelle mesure les passions que sont la douleur, la haine, la paranoïa ou l’orgueil informent le contenu du témoignage et nuisent à sa véracité. (297)

Lagarde’s discussions of Kayimahe is judgmental, displaying a lack of empathy that is surprising even when one considers the norms of objectivity in academic writing. In discussing Kayimahe’s decision not to return to Rwandan in search of children during the genocide he writes: “Le paranoïaque sacrificierait jusqu’à ses enfants restés au Rwanda sur l’autel de son ego blessé” (301). Missing from Lagarde’s own piece is any acknowledgement of the truth of what Kayimahe recounts (he is not alone in condemning France, for instance). The fixation on evaluating the testimony based exclusively on its ability to objectively reflect a certain reality, viewing Vénuste’s “distortions” as flaws in the narrative, is a reductive view of testimony and the different kinds of knowledge it may produce. His final paragraph offers a tepid recognition of Kayimahe’s suffering even as he calls him a “francophobe” and urges that his testimony be heard with “précaution.”

The evaluation of the testimony’s merit based solely on its lack of objectivity, presupposes a sort of platonic ideal of an objective testimony that is a simplistic and totalizing discursive concept. While not disputing the importance of fact-checking historical writing, to limit one’s evaluation of testimony to these criteria is to ignore the knowledge that such texts, in which the author himself is still grappling with his position towards the
genocide, can confer upon the reader. Small and Lagarde’s readings thus encapsulate the similarities between Kayimahe’s exclusion from these discussions and the difficulties survivors face being heard. For Small his text proved bothersome to the narrative she had woven about the project, hence its “disturbing” absence from her discussion. For Lagarde it was simply too extreme to be deemed credible and therefore was to be viewed with suspicion.

That the supposed exaggerations and historical distortions that Lagarde perceives in Kayimahe’s text should be its most noteworthy feature recalls Tutsi survivor Esther Mujawayo who speaks on behalf of many survivors when she explains their fear of not being believed:

Quand un rescapé raconte le génocide, il sent bien qu’on a du mal à le croire. C’est trop. Je l’ai déjà dit, pour celui qui écoute, c’est trop, c’est comme si on exagérait. Si le rescapé a régulièrement l’impression de ne pas être cru, c’est que les gens en face de lui ont souvent envie de se convaincre que ce n’était pas si horrible comme situation. (95)\(^{190}\)

While Lagarde is not the only one to question the truth of what Kayimahe says, focusing on questions of veracity almost exclusively when discussing survivor testimony is a limited interpretation of the range of knowledge such works can produce.

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\(^{190}\) In *L’ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998) Annette Wieviorka describes a similar sentiment on the part of Holocaust survivors, many of who subsequently stopped telling their stories after having been met repeatedly with incredulity on the part of non-survivors.
An Insider Makes Outsider Fiction: Kayimahe’s Creative Reconstructions

The fact that Kayimahe’s memoir was published by the left-wing press L’esprit frappeur, who specializes in politically oriented works, explains in large part why the historical elements of his memoir are foregrounded in the book’s paratext. His own expressed desire to bear witness to the history of the genocide no doubt contributed to the subtitle “témoignage d’un rescapé” featured prominently on the book’s cover. Indeed, much of the text is devoted to descriptions of France’s involvement in Rwanda before and during the genocide and Kayimahe’s own harrowing experience in the early days of the genocide and his subsequent struggles as a refugee in Nairobi. Framing the more literally testimonial aspects of the memoir however, are two fictionalized reconstructions which open and close the narrative, suggesting that the use of fiction was integral to how Kayimahe constructed his testimonial narrative.\textsuperscript{191} The first passage I will discuss is an account of the death of Kayimahe’s daughter. The second fictionalized passage, which comes at the end of the memoir, describes the life and death of his mother. France, despite being the object of so much vitriol within the body of the text, is hardly mentioned in the opening and closing pages of France-Rwanda: les coulisses du génocide. Instead, Kayimahe shares his grief and guilt concerning his survival and the death of his family members. In his forward, he writes:

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{191} Few critics have remarked on these moments in Kayimahe’s memoir. Catherine Coquio seems to almost gently reproach Kayimahe for not expanding the few fictional elements of his memoir since that might have assured him a larger audience. In describing a passage at the beginning of France/Rwanda where Kayimahe fictionalizes the death of his daughter, she writes: “Cette tension entre témoignage et littérature s’est rendue visible et conscience à son auteur à la publication, sans faire cette fois l’objet d’œuvre nouvelle qui en aurait relayé l’impact” (19). Zakaria Soumaré, along with Coquio one of the only scholars to mention the fictional aspects of Kayimahe’s text, mentions it only in passing : “Dès le début de ce texte où la part accordé à la fiction est très infime...” (126). Soumaré does not subject the « part infime » to literary analysis, which he does for the majority of the project’s novel’s, instead focusing mostly on its memorial function and its polemical nature.
\end{footnotesize}
Voici des années que, suite à mon injustifiable silence, mon esprit est sans cesse
 tourmenté par un remords profond et tenace: celui d'avoir le sentiment
d’abandonner à l’anonymat et à l’oubli mes frères et sœurs victimes de la haine de
leurs semblables et de m’y complaire; celui de me réfugier, au détriment du souvenir
et de la mémoire, dans l’irréel confort de la lâcheté et de l’amnésie volontaire. (7)

Even more remarkable his self-presentation of the work does not mention France at all and
suggests a much more personal motivation for his writing, not simply as a reflection of a
particular history, but as a productive, even inspirational task meant to prevent the
reoccurrence of future genocides.

Aujourd’hui, dans cet ouvrage, je parle surtout de moi, des miens qui m’étaient
proches, de mes amis, de mon milieu social et professionnel…Espérons aussi que
d’autres Rwandais, témoins de l’histoire de leurs pays, de leurs histoires, imiteront au
mieux, mon exemple…pour que le monde n’oublie pas le génocide des Tutsis et ses
horreurs, pour éviter que nul ne se mette à rêver de pouvoir recommencer…(9)

Far from strictly a polemic, there is a highly personal element to Kayimahe’s text which he
foregrounds in the fictionalized passages that open and close the mémoire. It is precisely
these moments in which Kayimahe's text reveals most clearly the limitations of the témoignage
label to capture the various literary processes at stake in his fictional reconstructions. In an
interview for the film Rwanda—récit d'un survivant Kayimahe describes his process of writing
his daughter’s death, for which he was not present. In a filmed interview, he emphasizes how
disconnected he initially felt from the event. “Je l’ai reconstruit en fonction des informations
que j’ai recueilli petit à petit auprès des gens, qui étaient avec elle, qui étaient présents au
centre Iwacu. C’est vrai qu’au départ je ne voulais pas y retourner, aller dans ce lieu, parce
que je pensais y mourir moi-aussi, mourir dans la tristesse.”
There is a self-flagellating quality to Kayimahe’s writing of the scene, which occurs in
the memoir’s first chapter. He imagines his daughter’s cries of abandonment and reproach,
directed at her father and other family members. In Kayimahe’s reconstruction as she lies
dying she exclaims:

Vous m’avez vraiment tous abandonnée ?... Aidez-moi, je vous en supplie ! Au
secours papa ! Papa où es-tu ? Et toi maman, où es-tu partie ? Où sont mes frères, où
est ma sœur ? Oncle, pourquoi n’es-tu pas avec moi ? S’il vous plaît, aidez-moi, je me
sens mal, je vais mourir. (18)

Her accusations of abandonment recall Christ’s words on the cross, “My God, my God, why
have you forsaken me,” an implication that gives her death meaning and a certain tragic
dignity by inscribing it within a narrative of martyrdom and sacrifice. This passage also
represents an attempt to bring back her memory, as Kayimahe grapples with how to respond
to this traumatic loss and his daughter’s now perpetual absence. It is also worth noting that
in the context of the Rwanda project, no non-Rwandan writer attempts such a third person,
realist reconstruction of the events of the genocide. This further highlights the productive
possibilities lost when his text is not included in discussions of the project’s fiction. In this
opening passage, he continues his reconstruction, going into increasingly graphic detail:

L’enfant continue à gémir, son sang coule toujours, à petits flots, sa bouche qui
remue de moins en moins fort ne cesse d’appeler au secours et de dire sa douleur.
Mais personne parmi les siens qu’elle appelle n’est là, personne ne viendra la prendre
dans ses bras, relever sa tête et retenir cette vie qui de plus en plus lui échappe. Elle
reste étendue, toute seule, sous le soleil qui la nargue en dardant ses rayons brûlants
sur son corps agité par les soubresauts de la mort. (19)
The reader may be torn between compassion for Aimée and discomfort with the alternatingly graphic and sentimental rendering of the scene. What is also evident here is the insight this passage gives into Kayimahe’s own grieving process and the personal importance of this testimony, showing his need to bring his daughter back to life through his text and give her death a Christ-like dignity while also expressing his extreme guilt through her accusations of abandonment and cries of pain. Far from being a pure polemic or self-righteous screed, the fictionalized passages foreground Kayimahe’s personal motivations for writing the memoir, and illustrate one way through which survivors may work to express, and thus share, their grief and pain. It is not just Aimée’s pain but Kayimahe’s that is translated through this fictional account in an especially powerful and poignant manner. Thus while not especially literary, in the sense that a purely textual analysis reveals tropes of melodrama, as a fictionalizing narrative it produces knowledge and insight about the genocide that a purely factual account could not, as well as demanding a certain level of sophistication on the part of the writer to fully grasp the knowledge that it produces.

This also raises the question of the intellectual and affective task of producing fiction about a genocide one did not experience in its entirety, but that had such a profound impact on one's family and social world. Why, indeed, should the intellectual and ethical complexity of the secondary witness trump the affective or emotional complexity of writing one’s own testimony? It is worth considering if it is possible for discussions of genocide and fiction to view fictional reconstructions in the context of testimony equally worthy of discussion and, in their way, equally problematic, even if that requires the tricky proposition of thinking critically about the way a survivor describes his or her own experience.
The literary aspects of Kayimahe’s text are also on display in the final chapter, “Une mère toutes les douleurs du monde,” which ends with a description of his mother’s funeral following a description of her life and death. The details of Kayimahe’s elderly mother’s suffering and death are graphic and heart wrenching, encapsulating the gratuitous, sadistic nature of the genocidal violence that so often provokes aversion and disbelief on the part of non-Rwandans. Rather than simply relate the horrific details as told to him by eyewitnesses, Kayimahe constructs a complex narrative intended to memorialize his mother and give meaning to her death, mixing Christian allegory, conventions of oral story-telling, and the visitation of a mysterious soothsayer or “devin.”

Kayimahe begins the chapter by acknowledging that what he is about to relate, like the death of his daughter, was told to him by others. Like the non-Rwandan writers of “devoir de mémoire” he is confronted with a similar problematic of reconstructing events for which he was not present. “Je connais tout le scénario de sa mise à mort. On m’a raconté dans les détails, son long et terrible chemin de croix” (330). While the comparison of his mother to Christ is here made explicit, Kayimahe also introduces a supernatural element, saying that his mother had been visited by a soothsayer or “devin” who told her that the president Habyarimana would be killed and that there would be much bloodshed. Over the course of several pages the mother describes the visit of the “devin” in a manner that recalls the conventions of oral story-telling traditions, specifically the arrival of the mysterious stranger, to whom must be shown a culturally mandated form of hospitality:

Voici, mon fils. C’était un soir, il y a plusieurs années, moins de dix ans après la prise du pouvoir par le président Habyarimana…Comme il est de tradition dans notre
famille—et ça, tu le sais depuis ton enfance—un voyageur qui demande un logis, surpris par la nuit ou frappé de fatigue, est toujours le bienvenu chez nous. (336)

The hospitality she shows will later underscore the brutality and the total dissolution of social norms that characterized the genocide, as Kayimahe’s mother, in a perverse inversion of cultural codes of hospitality, is forcibly removed from her home and beaten to death. Adding further complexity to her story, the stranger is referred to as a devin, a figure used by several of the non-Rwandan authors in their fictions. Kayimahe’s mother finds the mysterious guest, who she has agreed to host for the night, walking outside in a transe, reduced to an almost animal-like state. Within Kayimahe’s story-telling frame narrative, she relates:

La moitié des mots qu’il éructait était incompréhensible, mais ce que je perçus, c’est qu’il parlait de sang, de torrents de sang. Et lorsqu’il s’ébroua soudain, à la manière d’un animal, en lançant un rugissement de fauve blessé, je m’écriai, tout effrayée:

“Mana yanje ! Ntabara ndapfuye ! Dieu ! Venez à mon secours, je suis morte !” (336)

The devin’s uncannically accurate prediction will haunt Kayimahe for some time, and he claims to now be open to the possibility of supernatural forces at work in the world as a result of his mother’s divinely predicted death.

As he moves closer towards describing the death itself, the chapter becomes increasingly romanesque. Kayimahe articulates his mother’s thoughts in her final moments and recreates dialogues between her and the contemptuous Hutu that will grudgingly keep her safe until finally delivering her to the killers. In a conversation with her daughter, the mother evokes the story of the devin, giving even more details as to the extent of his horrific predictions. “Elle lui raconta alors l’histoire d’un ‘sorcier fou,’ et cette fois sans rien omettre.
Tout ce qu’elle m’avait caché…elle le lui révéla de sa voix fluette et moribonde” (342). The reoccurring mentions of the supernatural *devin* thus structure this chapter and show a deliberate, strategic choice on the part of Kayimahe to memorialize his mother through his own form of storytelling within his testimonial narrative. Thus when he describes the graphic events of her death itself, the reader is prepared to view them through the elegiac, fantastic, almost mythic narrative that the author has constructed. Her death, Kayimahe states, is not the result of random chance, but the final sufferings of a Christ-like martyr who is part of some unknown supernatural power’s bloody and mysterious master plan. In one of the book’s most disturbing scenes, Kayimahe describes how his mother was left for dead for three days in a latrine while passing shepherds ignored her cries for help:

Ses faibles appels à l’aide n’étaient perçus que par quelques jeunes bergers hutus des environs qui faisaient paître chèvres et vaches dans ses champs de sorghos, et qui se moquaient d’elle sans honte ni pitié: ‘Hé, vous qui passez, s’il vous plaît, je vous en supplie, sortez-moi de là’, disait-elle de sa voix affaiblie. Durant trois jours et trois nuits, elle répeta cette phrase, espérant le salut ou le coup de grâce. (347)

With his reference to “three days and three nights,” the length of time that Jesus was left in the tomb before his resurrection, Kayimahe continues the Christ-like comparisons he had initiated with the passage on his daughter. As with Aimée, the description confers upon his mother a certain Christ-like status and dignity while simultaneously underscoring the failure of Christian values to prevent the genocide in an overwhelmingly Catholic country. The appearance of a Good Samaritan figure, a woman who rescues his mother from the latrines, washes her and shelters her in the final days before her death, reinforces Kayimahe’s attempt to elevate the death to the level of biblical story. In addition, as he did with his daughter’s
death, Kayimahe imagines a potential worst-case scenario. One detects again his own feelings of guilt expressed through this recreating of a loved one’s suffering that he was unable to prevent. This biblical and supernatural allegory can thus also be seen in part as having a reparative function. It serves as an act of atonement for his feelings of guilt and abandonment, within this larger broader project of his mother and daughter’s textual memorialization.

In one of the final paragraphs, Kayimahe returns again to the figure of the devin who visited his mother wondering, “Mais existe-t-il réellement de nos jours de vrais prophètes de Malheur, comme ceux des temps bibliques? Peut-on prédire l’avenir de quelqu’un, le destin de toute une famille, le génocide de tout un peuple?” (351) This evocation helps frame the horrific event that had been predicted, which he describes in a few simple words. “…ma vieille maman fut massacrée à coups de gourdins sur la tête, ce 25 juin, 1994” (347). He then describes her funeral service, for which he was present, and the chapter ends with the words, “Repose en paix, Maman” (352) making explicit that the text is a kind of memorial.

The use of fiction and various forms of allegory shows how Kayimahe’s reconstruction of his mother’s death from eyewitness accounts is both a testimonial and a literary practice in which the author/witness confronts choices related to strategy, the use of symbolism, and the structuring and ordering of events similar to the non-Rwandan authors of the Rwanda project in their own fraught attempts to create fiction about the genocide. This in turn shows how classifications of Kayimahe as a “historical document” of “no literary value” vastly oversimplify what his writing works to accomplish.
Conclusion

Overall, one cannot help but see a parallel between the way in which survivors discuss their own attempts to be heard in real world settings and Kayimahe’s peripheral place in discussions of “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire.” His hybrid of personal memoir and polemical historical document did not fit the dominant narratives that critics have used to legitimize their discussions, either through invoking a history of pan-African intellectual engagement or over-privileging works labelled as fiction within the context of the project. While the visibility such criticism conferred on the project, and by extension the genocide, was significant, it should not be a given that it resulted in the exclusion of Kayimahe’s memoir.

The question then becomes whether or not literary criticism can find ways to be more receptive to testimony and to rethink the generic categories that consign testimony as historical document and thus not as worthy of serious consideration as both a testimonial and a literary act. As the response to “Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire” shows, such a step would require redrawing certain generic boundaries. It is, however, a move which would open up many productive possibilities of meaning and interpretation. As Michael Rothberg has eloquently shown in *Multi-Directional Memory*, the articulation of history, both public and private, need not be a zero sum game. In other words, the initial relegation of a particular event or story to the periphery can in time lead to new conversations and visibility in a way that compliments, rather than obscures, what had come before. The point is not to silence discussions of the Rwanda project’s novels in favor of first-person testimonial narratives, which are hardly free from their own ideological biases and exclusions, but rather to consider how the narratives we use to bring visibility to the stories of genocide and atrocities might be
expanded or modified so as not to occult the very stories of those who the tragedy has impacted most personally.

Furthermore, it is worth asking if discussions of outsider fiction about genocide, premised around the seductive, zen-like notion of fiction’s paradoxical truthfulness, do not serve in some ways as a reassuring intellectual refuge from the devastatingly simple and unanswerable questions at the heart of Tutsi survivors’ stories. How to start a career and raise a family without parents or a single living member of one’s extended family? How to form stable, loving social relationships after watching previously trusted neighbors murder your parents, mutilate you, and leave you for dead? How to live next door to the relatives of the man who publically raped you and whose children openly mock you and call you names? How to explain to your child why he or she has no grandparents, aunts, or uncles? If what Tutsi survivors such as Kayimahe, Révérien Rurangwa, and Esther Mujawayo seek is for non-Rwandans to be hospitable and listen attentively to their stories, so as to help them rebuild their lives, form new social bonds, and rediscover a sense of agency, perhaps a similar move could be asked of literary studies: to be attentive to the fluid nature of boundaries between fiction and testimony and to think of more inclusive narratives for discussing the multiplicity of literary creations, from both outside and within, that emerge from collective disasters.
CHAPTER 4
African Traumas On (and Off) Screen: Temporality and Violence in Francophone African Cinema

Introduction

In the opening scene of Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2014 film *Timbuktu*, a group of radical Islamists use Malian figurative sculptures for target practice. Later they pursue a gazelle in their jeep shooting sporadically and unsuccessfuIly. One militant exclaims “Tire it out, don’t kill it!” There is a sinister playfulness to these scenes. It is clear that the figurative statues’ wonton destruction and the gleeful pursuit of the terrified animal are proxies for a much deeper and more sinister form of violence.\(^{192}\) Based on the real life take-over of Timbuktu by the radical Islamist group Ansar Dine in April of 2012, Sissako’s film shows the day-to-day reality of life under occupation by a group using Islam and sharia law as a pretext to dominate the local population. They terrorize those who refuse to obey their seemingly arbitrary interdictions, forcing market fish-sellers to wear gloves, and arresting people for playing music. In a chilling scene of gratuitous cruelty, two alleged adulterers are stoned to death.

Based on the recent history of Mali, *Timbuktu* is a film of military occupation. It is concerned less with the violent take-over than with the seeming banality of life under military rule which is forever at risk of being punctuated by new acts of violence. A family sings quietly at home only to have their door broken down by machine-gun toting soldiers.

\(^{192}\) This practice of destroying cultural artefacts is today most closely associated with the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, most recently in their high-profile destruction of an ancient temple in Palmyra, Syria and the beheading of the city’s chief of antiquities, Kalid al-Asaad, in August, 2015.
who haul them off to be whipped for violating sharia law. Young boys in soccer jerseys, unable to use a ball, mime their game, complete with over-the-top goal celebrations, a moving act of resistance that can do little to shake the militants’ iron grip on power. While the militants’ culture of violence and destruction is foregrounded from the beginning, the depiction of what Žižek terms “subjective violence,” the graphic acts of physical violence themselves, are rarely shown. Instead, Sissako employs his trademark use of slow long shots, and striking visual set pieces (such as multi-colored fabric flapping on clothes lines, or an unidentified figure performing a haunting dance) that imbue the film with an almost sleepy, meditative air seemingly at odds with its violent subject matter.

Yet despite this languid pacing, *Timbuktu* is a film whose very structure and narrative drive are deeply informed by violence, both in the form of the unrepresented violent takeover of Timbuktu and the acts of cruelty and destruction that the militants threaten to unleash on a daily basis. Equally insidious is the atmosphere of fear and hopelessness which this threat creates. It poisons the lives of Timbuktu’s citizens even in moments of seeming calm and quiet fellowship. *Timbuktu* thus problematizes in a forceful way what it means to use the “leisurely pace” often associated with African film to show a culture built on violence and the potential for brutality to erupt at any moment. (Gugler, 9) Distinct from the use of suspense, the use of a slower pace to show violence paradoxically may bring the viewer closer to a more nuanced understanding of the real-world traumatic events which act as the fictional film’s referent.

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Perhaps in part because of a filmic approach that has eschewed the fast pacing and gratuitous violence of Western-produced genre cinema, the question of violence in Francophone African film has only recently been singled out by scholars as a distinguishing aspect of this filmic tradition.\(^{194}\) Indeed, the absence of violence as a focus of scholarship in Francophone African filmmaking needs to be interrogated in light of the violent past of colonialism that informs, implicitly or not, many Francophone African films, and the bloody conflicts that are the subject of ongoing media attention on the continent. Filmed, graphic, subjective violence in Africa has been seen as the purview of Hollywood movies, notable examples of which include Ridley Scott’s *Black Hawk Down* (2001), Terry George’s *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), and Edward Zwick’s *Blood Diamond* (2006).\(^{195}\) Major comprehensive studies of Francophone African film have not singled out violence as a specific unifying category, nor, until quite recently, spoken at length about the specificity of violence in these films.\(^{196}\) As the disciplines of trauma and memory studies have begun to nuance our understanding of what constitutes representations of trauma, I wish to couple a discussion of how non-mimetic ways of filming violence can be applied to the Francophone African cinematic tradition. This is not to suggest that African films are inherently violent, but rather to explore the productive possibilities of considering the absence of mimetic violence as, paradoxically, a form of representing violence and trauma.

\(^{194}\) Most notably in Lindewe Dovey’s *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009) which will be discussed in depth later in this chapter.

\(^{195}\) These are of course only the most recent Hollywood films to depict war and violence on the continent. To name just a few earlier examples from Western filmmakers: *King Solomon’s Mines* (1950) and its sequel *Watusi* (1959); *Untamed* (1955); *Zulu* (1964); *The Naked Prey* (1965); *The Passenger* (1975).

In my first section, I will first give a brief history of how Francophone African filmmakers have represented various forms of violence on the continent in ways that contrast sharply with Hollywood depictions. Specifically, I argue that African filmmakers have most recently privileged a “post-conflict” approach to violence, eschewing linear narratives for a focus on the aftermath of recent wars and intrastate violence in sub-Saharan Africa, often deploying an aesthetic of slower-paced filmmaking. Asking what it means to bear witness to violence through this “slow” aesthetic, I place these films in dialogue with recent theorizing in trauma studies that posits anticipatory dread as a legitimate category of traumatic experience. Using acts of “ultraviolence” as an off-screen referent, these films on war represent instead the anticipatory trauma that precedes real or anticipated violent acts, blurring the temporalities normally associated with representing gruesome acts of murder or dismemberment. I then frame this discussion within the larger critical debate surrounding both the nature of Francophone African filmmaking and its representation of violence, calling into question the possibly reductive vision of African cinema serving primarily as an alternative vision to Western film production. What does it mean, I ask, to consider African representations of violence outside of these long-standing critical frameworks, and instead regard them as universal meditations on transcultural and transhistorical power structures present both inside and outside of the continent?

My second section uses Abderrahmane Sissako’s 2014 film *Timbuktu*, arguably the most internationally successful Francophone African film of all time, as a case study in how an aesthetic rooted in the traditions of Francophone African cinema bears witness to a contemporary act of violence. Tracing a cinematic aesthetics that privileges contemplative long takes and stunning visual set pieces through Sissako’s earlier feature films, I show how
Timbuktu uses these techniques to represent not the physical act of violence itself, but the insidious psychological effects of its past occurrence and imminent possibility. Through close analyses of the rare scenes in which Sissako shows physical aggression, murder, and discussions of past trauma, I demonstrate the ways in which he gestures towards ultraviolent acts that occur off screen, privileging the anticipation of violence over gruesome or gratuitous representations. Finally, I examine the extent to which Sissako’s film, and by extension Francophone African responses to recent war and genocide, can be considered forms of mourning and if mourning can serve as a productive critical category, one which demonstrates the universal, rather than “alternative,” significance of this cinematic tradition.

Ambiguous Linguistic Boundaries: Defining Francophone African Film

While the majority of the films I reference are from the tradition of Francophone African cinema, I will also situate my discussion with more general discussions of African film given both the somewhat arbitrary nature of the “Francophone” label as well as the commonalities, especially in terms of distribution and production, faced by the continent’s filmmakers. The films I reference most closely in relation to Timbuktu will be from the Francophone African tradition, especially since Sissako situates himself as an heir to that particular legacy. His debt to Senegalese filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty is especially evident, with Timbuktu containing a number of clear visual references to Mambéty’s 1973 film Touki Bouki. However, with so many “Francophone” African films having little to no dialogue in French, Timbuktu included, I believe it crucial to be inclusive when speaking in general terms of cinematic production in Africa, especially when considering representations of violence which cut across linguistic and cultural boundaries. I thus wish to problematize
these labels even as I employ them in order to place my discussion with an ongoing critical debate concerning African film practice and production.

**Part I: Violence Off-Screen: War, Genocide, and Trauma in the Francophone African Film Tradition**

It is ironic that while colonial-era film production in Africa by Europeans sought to obscure the violence done in the name of colonialism, so little of that violence found its way into post-independence African films. With a neorealist aesthetic dominant in the 1960s and 70s, Francophone African filmmakers often focused on questions of post-independence governance, engaging in questions related to the role of the state and the newly emergent postcolonial power dynamics. Sembène Ousmane’s *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), which depicts the 1944 massacre of African *tirailleurs* by French troops, perhaps comes closest to showing the potential for brutality within colonial-era power structures. In the film’s climactic scene, French troops machine gun a group of repatriated Senegalese *tirailleurs* following a dispute about pay. If these representations of more graphic violence remain the exception rather than the norm in African filmmaking, institutionalized, structural violence has long been present in Francophone African film. This includes the marginalization of the poor and rural populations in Sembène Ousmane’s *Xala* (Senegal, 1975) and Djibril Diop Mambety’s *Hyènes* (Senegal, 1992), intergenerational struggles in Souleymane Cissé’s *Finté* (Mali, 1982) or more...
recently the brutal reality of migration in Sissako’s *En attendant le bonheur* (2002) and Moussa Touré’s *La pirogue* (Senegal, 2012).

However, the violence of post-independence intrastate conflicts and genocide which have gripped much of sub-Saharan Africa in the past decades have been largely absent from African films. Hollywood has produced what might be termed “ultraviolent” portrayals, including the previously referenced *Black Hawk Down* (2001) which takes place in Somalia, and *Blood Diamond* (2006), set predominantly in Sierra Leone. Using pounding extradiegetic music, and showing the indiscriminate slaughter of interchangeable black bodies, often by white soldiers, these two highly commercially successful films come the closest to mirroring an ultraviolent aesthetic with an a nominal attempt to bring some kind of awareness to ongoing conflict in Africa. Both films, which feature chronological narratives and the fast-pacing of genre cinema, can be considered the embodiment of the kind of Hollywood-style filmmaking to which, according to many critics, African filmmaking is the more thoughtful and meditative alternative.

A Manichean distinction between Hollywood and African cinema is complicated, however, by films which occupy a liminal space in terms of their production and subject matter. Films such as *Johnny Chien Méchant* (2008) by French director Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire

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200 A notable exception is *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Nigerian director Biyi Bandele’s 2013 film on Nigeria’s Biafran civil war, based on Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie’s bestelling 2006 novel of the same name. Several successful South African films, including Gavid Hood’s *Tsotsi* (2005) and Ralph Ziman’s *Gangster’s Paradise: Jerusalem* (2008), contain graphic depictions of violence, albeit not from the sort of intrastate civil conflicts that have ravaged the countries to its North.


and *Rebelle* (2012) from the Canadian director Kim Nguyen, feature African actors speaking in their native languages. Both films center on child soldiers, by now a recognizable mainstream icon of conflict in Africa, and differ from the American films mentioned above through a more concentrated effort to humanize the African populations depicted. Nevertheless, the films borrow heavily from the playbook of American action cinema with extended battle scenes and graphic depictions of death and dismemberment filmed in a realist mode. While choices such as a lack of extradiegetic music suggest an attempt to buck certain generic conventions, the films appear to invite a voyeuristic pleasure in showing the scenes of violence that the filmmaker in principle is trying to denounce.²⁰⁴

Beyond their use of images of graphic violence what *Blood Diamond, Black Hawk Down, Johnny Chien Méchant,* and *Rebelle* share in common is a linear narrative that shows little interest in the aftermath of violence. In contrast, the few African directors who have represented the bloody civil conflicts of the past decades have predominantly opted for what could be dubbed “reconciliation” or “post-conflict” films²⁰⁵ which show the aftermath of conflict, often depicting or representing the violence of war or genocide in flashbacks.²⁰⁶

Nigerian director Newton Aduaka’s 2007 film *Ezra* is one such example, telling the story of a child soldier who unwittingly kills his parents and must now admit his actions in front of a

²⁰⁴ A film such as Claire Denis’ *White Material* (2009), set in a fictional African country during a period of civil war, might also fall into this ambiguous category of films who defy easy categorization as either “European” or “African.”

²⁰⁵ Haitian director Raoul Peck’s *Sometimes in April* (2005) which explores the aftermath of the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, is an example of a post-conflict film that also defies easy classification owing to its funding from France and the United States and its mix of African and non-African actors.

²⁰⁶ Again, given the historical and cultural specificity of truth and reconciliation in the South African context, I make a distinction between South African films dealing with the post-apartheid era and the civil conflicts of sub-Saharan Africa. Notable South African films dealing with the post-apartheid era include Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman’s documentary *Long Night’s Journey into Day* (2000) and John Boorman’s *In My Country* (2004).
truth and reconciliation committee. While the flashbacks show scenes of graphic violence—Ezra machine gunning civilians, a child shot at point blank range—the focus of the film is primarily on Ezra’s unsteady road to recovery and social reintegration in the post-conflict period. Chadian director Mahamat Saleh Haroun’s film *Daratt: Saison Sèche* (2006), co-produced by Abderrahmane Sissako, features no flashbacks but contains the sort of slow, meditative pacing that informs Sissako’s and much of Francophone Africa’s filmmaking.

Set in Chad following the end of a long-running civil conflict, the protagonist Atim takes a handgun and travel from his small village to a city to murder the man who killed his father. Unable to pull the trigger, he accepts a job from his father’s murderer. He gradually grows closer to him and spares his life in the film’s climax. The atrocities of the Chadian civil war are never shown but the present-day weight of this past violence is felt throughout the film. There are multiple sequences in which Atim stares at the man he is meant to kill. The viewer contemplates the young man’s anguish at his inability to accomplish this task and his budding affection for the father’s murderer. In one especially powerful scene, Atim stares directly into the eyes of his intended victim. Both men circling each other like caged animals, a gulf of unsaid grievances and suspicion between them. In placing the film squarely in the *après* of war, the film suggests how violent histories continue to inscribe themselves in the present moment working against a totalizing representation of a conflict that would only represent the acts themselves.

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208 Haroun’s feature films include *Aboua* (2002), winner of Best Cinematography at FESPACO, and *Un homme qui crie* (2010), winner of the Jury Prize at Cannes. *Daratt* was part of a series of seven non-Western films commissioned by the New Crowned Hope festival as a commemoration for Mozart’s 250th birthday. It received the Special Grand Jury Prize at the 63rd Venice International Film Festival.
Burkina Bé director Regina Nacro’s *La nuit de la vérité* (2004), which takes place in a fictional post-independence sub-Saharan African country, also does not focus on the conflict itself but its unstable aftermath.\(^2\) As Judith Spleth maintains in her discussion of Nacro’s film, this type of filmmaking reflects the reality of a certain kind of modern warfare, whether in Yugoslavia or Rwanda which “have blurred the historical divisions between men’s and women’s spaces in times of conflict, allowing violence to penetrate those private refuges traditionally considered safe and secure” (218). As in *Daratt* the implication is that the violence of the past conflicts is unrepresentable, or, at the very least, its mimetic representation is largely irrelevant. While a few flashbacks show certain characters on the battlefield, the past fighting is mostly shown through series of grisly murals, drawn with child-like simplicity and depicting the murder of soldiers and civilians. When the film opens, the rebels and the government soldiers meet to celebrate a new cease-fire but tensions run high on both sides. Both groups fear an ambush and the atmosphere of mutual suspicion threatens to erupt into new conflict. While ultimately violence does break out during the ceremony, the film ends on a positive note, suggesting the reconciliation has been successful. In terms of temporality, Nacro’s film uses the past act of violence as a referent which informs the present of her film, in which characters confront the trauma of the civil conflict. Violence is screened not through actual shots of carnage but rather through the tense confrontations between its victims and perpetrators.

While Malian director Cheick Oumar Sissoko’s 1999 film *La genèse* shows violence within a more linear narrative, he nonetheless plays with conventions of temporality by

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\(^2\)Before making *La nuit de la vérité*, her first feature film, Nacro had a prolific output of short films including *Bintou* (2001) which won the 2001 FESPACO prize for Best Short.
dehistoricizing his representation of war and trauma in present day Africa. Dedicated to “all those in the world who are the victims of fratricidal conflict,” this film frames violence and genocide as transhistorical and transcultural universals, told through a reenactment of the biblical story of genesis set in Africa at an unspecified time. In an especially graphic scene, the sons of the biblical patriarch Jacob massacre the Canaanites including women and children, declaring that the infants could grow up to be dangerous. This genocidal violence, which in the African context evokes the 1994 Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, uses contemporary violence in Africa as an unscreened but nonetheless present referent, which informs the film’s symbolic critique. There emerges in La genèse, as in the “post-conflict” films African films discussed above, a categorical refusal to depict certain forms of violence in contemporary Africa through mimetic representation within a linear narrative. A key question here is whether elements of this dehistoricization are meant also to deterritorialize this violence as a universal, rather than an African phenomenon. Furthermore, how do we understand these depictions of violence in relationship to the real-world referent which structures the plot of much of these films?

An Aesthetics of Graphic Representation: “Ultraviolence” On and Off-Screen

In considering Francophone African filmmakers’ choices to dehistoricize violence or to leave it off-screen, it is instructive to consider the implications of the opposite approach. That is to say that stylized "ultraviolence" which, while almost completely absent from African film, has become a staple of Hollywood film production, including films set in

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20A prolific filmmaker throughout the 1980s and 90s, Sissoko earned international recognition for Guimba, un tyran (1995), winner of an Etalon de Yenenga prize at FESPACO and special jury prizes at the International Film Festival of Locarno. La genèse earned him a second Etalon de Yenenga. Other notable films of Sissoko’s include L'école malienne (1982), Finzan (1990), and Battù (2000) which received the RFI Prize at the 2001 edition of FESPACO.
Africa. While these films are consumed widely by Africans, they have had less impact on the world of African film production where Hollywood aesthetics and tropes, often for material reasons, are rarely reproduced. Laurent Bouzereau dates the advent of the “ultraviolent” film to the relaxation of the Hollywood Production Code in the late 1960s, when directors such as Sam Peckinpah began including graphic scenes of death and dismemberment in their films. The ultraviolence label could be applied to gory horror films, such as the iconic Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974), action movies (Terminator (1984), Die Hard (1988) etc.) as well as what could be considered highbrow treatments of violence, such as the stylized gore of Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction (1994) or Kill Bill (2003) series.\(^2\)

The category of ultraviolence raises thorny questions regarding what precisely is being represented when death and grievous bodily harmed are shown in often a flippant, light-hearted or, conversely, an overly sentimental way. Ironically, as Stephen Prince notes, to say that a film is violent is often to imply that it does not address the question of real-world violence and its representation in a meaningful way: “Viewers rarely experience screen violence…treated in a serious and provocative way that invites reflection and contemplation” (34). Given the proliferation of ultraviolence, he notes that “a critique of violence may be best pursued on screen in its absence, that is, by not showing—at least not in graphic detail—the very phenomenon the film would address” (32). Here Price highlights what is more than just a question of semantics. To say that a film “shows” violence is in fact to say that it does not really show it at all. In other words, it does not allow the viewer to interrogate the mechanisms and effects of real-world violence. For Price, to not show violence on screen is perhaps to more faithfully contribute to an understanding of the consequences of violence in

\(^2\) For a thorough history of the ultraviolent genre, which considers Sam Peckinpah and, more recently, Quentin Tarantino, as its avatars see Laurent Bouzereau, Ultraviolent Movies (Toronto: Citadel Press, 1996).
the real world, and thus, ironically to “show” violence closer to as it really is. In light of Price’s comments, the lack of screened violence in recent African film, particularly in the post-conflict films discussed above, suggests not a lack of engagement with violence but rather an attempt to represent it through other means. Indeed, one way in which filmmakers such as Sissoko, Haroun, and Nacro contribute to do this is precisely by shifting the temporality of what we normally consider violent. In concentrating not on the acts themselves but on their anticipation and persistent repercussions, the films show violence, not as an aestheticized series of arresting images, but as an omnipresent force that strains the fabric of individual and community relations. Of course such an approach to representing violence is not unique to Africa, but it is enlightening that it appears as a privileged means for Francophone African filmmakers to bear witness to the conflicts that have ravaged much of the continent in the past decades.

The Violence of Waiting: Rethinking the Temporality of Trauma

The question of temporality in representations of violence comes into play in regard to African cinema not simply through a displacement of linear chronology or dehistoricizing gestures, but through the slower pacing of African filmmaking in relation to more mainstream Western fare. Linked in part to the arthouse aesthetic that informs much Francophone African film production, Ousmane Sembène also explains the more leisurely pacing of his films to a connection with African oral tradition. It is important to

acknowledge some overlap with the aesthetics of “slow cinema,” a generic category applied to the Russian filmmakers Andrei Tarkovsky and Alexander Sokurov, as well as the Belgian director Chantal Ackermann, among others, whose use of long shots is often contrasted with the frenetic pace of Hollywood editing. Contemporary African cinema would seem to strike a middle ground between the aesthetics of the “slow” movement and an attention to linear narrative and storytelling, perhaps reflective of the link between a more meditative style and the oral storytelling tradition articulated by Sembène.

The relationship of an arrested temporality in African filmmaking to representations of violence has been underexamined, perhaps because it is tempting to conclude that such pacing suggests a lack of interest in screening a particular kind of violence. However, it is precisely through such an approach to temporality, I argue, that a certain mode of representing violence can occur. This is particularly evident in Abderrahmane Sissako’s films such as *En attendant le bonheur* (2002), *Bamako* (2006), and *Timbuktu* in which long shots of the desert or of families at rest belies the complex web of fears, desires, and past traumas that threaten to erupt into violence. While few images of graphic violence are shown, it is important to reflect on what such an aesthetic might add to our understanding of the real-world violence, be it literal or structural, that acts as a continual off screen referent. If, as Susan Sontag notes in her discussion of graphically explicit photographs of war, “reverential conditions” in which to regard images of atrocity can seem a scarce, it is worth asking if part of Sissako, and by extension other African directors’ filmmaking, create precisely such

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214 Sokurov is best known for *Russian Ark* (2002), a historical drama which consists of a single take. Tarkovsky’s films include *Solaris* (1972) and *The Sacrifice* (1986), while Ackermann is best known for *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) and *La captive* (2000).
spaces of contemplation not of the images themselves but of their glaring absence. Indeed, I would argue that particularly in the case of *Timbuktu*, with its meditative pace composed of long takes and slow pans, Sissako creates a space of spectatorship in which a certain kind of reflection concerning the jihadist occupation and its effects can occur in a manner that would be foreclosed by more graphic representations.

In the discussion above, filming violence within the slower paced aesthetic associated with African filmmaking is thus predicated on an act of past violence as an off-screen structuring referent. However, it is not simply past violence, but the threat of future violence that is inscribed within this particular style of filmmaking. The anticipation of this future trauma, and the debilitating effect of this fear on individuals, is precisely what films such as *Daratt, La nuit de la vérité*, and *Timbuktu* represent with such chilling clarity. In the case of *Timbuktu*, the town’s civilian residents are subject to the violent caprices and constant threats of the Islamic police. They live in the shadow of both past and future violence, which threatens to erupt at any moment. Yet despite this oppressive and damaging atmosphere of impending violence, traditional definitions of trauma did not include this sort of anticipatory dread.²¹⁵ As increasingly more scholars in trauma studies seek to expand the definition of what constitutes trauma, it is worth asking if this question of future violence is an equally relevant structural referent for these films, and another important way in which their aesthetic of violence differs greatly from Western and mainstream portrayals of violence in Africa.

²¹⁵ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Witnessing* and Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience*, the foundational texts of trauma studies, are anchored firmly in the Freudian notion of the traumatic event as residing in the past. Even as it manifests itself in the present through flashbacks, the experience of trauma, in their frameworks, always pertains to a past event.
Standard definitions of trauma, beginning with Freud, have implicitly followed a chronology which placed the traumatic stressor as a past event which inscribes itself continually in the victim’s present. However, in Tense Future (2014) Paul St. Amour posits that the anticipation of future violence, such as the dread felt by citizens who knew their city was a potential bombing target in World War II, manifests itself in ways that could be considered traumatic. This kind of anticipation, he argues, fragments conceptions of time and the self in a similar manner to past violent events. He asks what it would mean if we considered the traumatic effects of a state of total war, in which violence could erupt at any given moment and the populace is kept in a state of perpetual readiness for conflict. In doing so, St. Amour calls into question and radically upends the conventional narrative associated with trauma and a past event. In broadening the framework of trauma to consider this kind of anticipatory dread, he obliterates many of the temporalities normally associated with violence. I wish to extend this rethinking of trauma and temporality to the African context and the post-conflict films discussed previously, arguing that considering the traumatic nature of anticipation can shift our definition of what it means to “show” violence.

For if anticipatory dread constitutes its own form of trauma, then a film such as Daratt or Timbuktu is actively engaged in screening violence, rather than simply skirting around the edges of a destructive past or present outburst that may or may not occur. The meditative long takes, and moments of silence in both films show not only the products of a violent past but representations of a violent present informed by a legitimate fear of future violence.

216 Freud first lays out this definition of trauma in Beyond the Pleasure Principle (1920) in which he attempts to explain the behavior of soldiers from the First World War suffering from shell shock. 217 St. Amour further buttresses this claim in an article which appeared in the August 3rd, 2015 edition of the New York Times entitled “Waiting for the Bomb to Drop.” He cites a 2012 study from the Stanford Law School’s International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic showing that Pakistani civilians living in areas with a high proportion of American drone strikes may exhibit symptoms of PTSD even if they themselves have not directly experienced an attack.
Critics suggesting that trauma studies be “globalized” to become more relevant to the postcolonial context have called for a reevaluation of what constitutes trauma, suggesting that the Western definition, still deeply rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, is reductive.\textsuperscript{218} Michael Rothberg writes of “the need to supplement the event-based model of trauma that has become dominant over the past fifteen years with a model that can account for ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence as well” (226). In using the term “micro-aggression,” critics such as Rothberg and Stef Craps posit that the accumulation of smaller scale acts of racism and aggression can have impacts comparable to the violent, traumatic event (the bomb explosion, the train crash etc.) that Freud considered in his writing on trauma. Franz Fanon’s now iconic story from \textit{Peau noire, masque blanc} of the devastating psychological impact of seeing a French child exclaiming “Maman, regarde le nègre, j’ai peur!” upon seeing Fanon is an illustration of just such an experience.\textsuperscript{219} The micro-aggression is of course linked to anticipatory trauma as it suggests living in an atmosphere of continual threat (black South Africans living under apartheid or the lives of black communities terrorized by American law enforcement). What a film such as \textit{Timbuktu} makes evident is that the micro-aggression can be considered traumatic precisely because it suggests the “macro” threat of sudden, life-altering violence that could erupt at any moment. In the case of \textit{Timbuktu} this includes the dread of losing one’s life, seeing a loved one shot, or being violently whipped for singing a song in the seclusion of one’s own home. To represent people in the midst of living this dread is to show the micro-aggressions of harassment from

\textsuperscript{218}Stef Craps makes the case for incorporating the “micro-aggression” model of trauma in his 2012 book \textit{Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds}. The collection of articles in a 2008 special issue of \textit{Studies in the Novel} (40.1/2) whose professed aim is to “globalize” trauma studies also engages with this question of “micro-aggressions” and their relevance to a postcolonial context.

\textsuperscript{219}Frantz Fanon, \textit{Peau noire, masque blanc} (Paris: Seuil, 1952).
those in power (here the Islamic police) but whose traumatic nature comes in part from the anticipation of large scale traumatic event, the moment of life altering violence which Sissako categorically (with a very brief exception) refuses to show in any graphic detail.

Sissako’s *Timbuktu* is an especially fascinating case study for cinematic depictions of anticipatory trauma. The military occupation it depicts blurs questions of violence and temporality even further than St. Amour’s example of the civilians in World War II who were as of yet materially untouched by violence but living in constant anticipation of a devastating, life-alternating aerial bombardment. Caught between the initial violence of the jihadist take-over, the daily threat of injury and death, and the possible violent expulsion of the occupiers, the citizens in Timbuktu are figuratively hemmed in by violence. It is a place of limbo in which constructing a future is impossible and a certain past way of life has been obliterated. Sissako’s film thus offers an especially productive way to rethink how African filmmakers represent violence on screen and to nuance the very notion of what constitutes filmed violence in the African context.

**Narratives of African Cinema: Critical Responses to a Film Tradition**

Before addressing in more depth the specific ways in which Sissako represents violence through slow-paced filmmaking and a focus on the anticipation of trauma, it is necessary to situate this discussion within the dominant critical discourses that have framed, and continue to frame, Francophone African film production. The narratives used to describe sub-Saharan African filmic production imply their own forms of temporality which continue to shape our understanding and reception of these films. One of the oldest and most present of these frameworks could be dubbed the “shooting back” paradigm. This
posits a dialogic relationship between African cinema and its Western counterpart, for whom Africa was long a repository of essentializing clichés. African filmmaking, especially its early iterations, was thus conceived as a consciously alternative response to racist, Western-produced images. Nwachukwu Frank Ukadike sums up this attitude in his comprehensive study _Black African Cinema_ (1989): “From the beginning the major concern of African filmmakers has been to provide a more realistic image of Africa as opposed to the distorted artistic and ideological expressions of the dominant film medium” (3). This representative statement points in part to why violence as a lens for understanding African film may have had limited traction. For Western and African critics, African film was precisely the space where Africa as non-violent, i.e. non-savage, and barbarous, could be represented and inscribed in both the African and European imaginary. In addition, African filmmakers’ use of time, the more meditative, “slow-paced” aesthetic alluded to previously, could be read as a rebuke to a Western, capitalist imposition of time at odds with “African” notions of temporality which reflected a particular world-view and pace of life.

The idea of African film as engaged in a dialogue with Western filmmakers is reflected in the title of Melissa Thackaway’s _Africa Shoots Back: Alternative Perspectives in Francophone African Cinema_ (2004) in which she states that “Francophone African filmmakers…have seized the opportunity to provide alternative representations of their disfigured selves,” referring to centuries of otherizing discourse from the West. These “alternative” representations are often amalgamated under a sign of an undifferentiated...

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220 For more on this question see Kenneth M. Cameron, _Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White_ (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1994). Richard A. Maynard _Africa on Film: Myth and Reality_ (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden, 1974).

“Africaness” to which filmmakers bear witness. Elizabeth Lequeret suggests this when she writes that through film African directors show “leur capacité…à livrer et faire partager à l’Afrique, mais aussi aux autres continents, leur singulièrè façon d’être au cinéma et au monde” (65). This dialogic understanding of Francophone African cinema—which is described as responding to essentializing portraits with examples of a specifically African sensibility—naturally has its limits, particularly as it places the African director's work in the subordinate position of a response, forever responding to the first salvo in a debate whose terms he or she is not free to set. In addition, the singularity which Lequeret refers posits a unified African identity as a prerequisite for the African filmmaker’s visibility, a notion that harkens back to the négritude movement’s much critiqued notion of using an essentialized vision of African identity as a means of valorizing African culture. While certainly not the first African film to problematize questions of Pan-African solidarity or identity, Timbuktu highlights this notion quite vividly through the clashes of different ethnic groups and nationalities that vie for control within the city itself.

Along with the dialogic paradigm discussed above, the idea of African film and filmmakers as necessarily socially or politically engaged remains present even as critics hasten to point out that specific ideologies (particularly socialism) are no longer dominant. Born out of the socialist movements sweeping West Africa in particular, and reinforced through prescriptive declarations such as 1975 FESPACI charter alluded to earlier, it is remarkable the extent to which a “burden of commitment” continues to be placed not simply on

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223 See Note 7.
224 The persistence of commitment as a means of understanding Francophone African artistic production is explored in depth in Odile Cazenave and Patricia Célérier, Francophone African Writers and the Burden of Commitment.
filmmakers but on African artists as a whole, especially in relation to representations of violence. For instance, in a general discussion of African literature, music, and film, Lizelle Bisschoff and Stefanie Van de Peer write:

African artists are contributing to these processes of reinterpreting the violent past in order to establish a more peaceful, secure future... We believe that it is this hope and optimism for the future that is remarkable in African arts, and in the ways it deals with the atrocities of the past. (8)

It could be argued that the specific ideologies attributed to iconic filmmakers such as Ousmane Sembène have simply been replaced by more vague, humanist notions of fighting for a more stable future—a description which risks framing all violent representation within a certain teleological framework.

It is instructive to note how even as critics have sought to nuance discussions of how to categorize and discuss African cinema, both the “alternative” framework and the engagement paradigm continue to crop up. Oliver Barlet’s highly influential Cinéma d’Afrique noire: le regard en question (1996), initially seems to work against more homogenizing discussions, by shifting the focus from encounters between various national cinema traditions (North v. South, African v. European etc.) to the intersubjective encounter between viewer and film. African films, he argues, can help us better understand our relationship to the “other”, whether in Africa or in our own community, while at the same time respecting the specificity of the cultures in question. Nonetheless, in adapting this framework, Barlet reverts to utopic terms reminiscent of engagement discourse when he lauds the potential of African film to effect a certain kind of existential transformation in its
viewers. In addition, he generally imputes to African filmmakers a clearly defined image of a future for the continent which their film reflects:

La réflexion sur le cinéma et sur l’état des sociétés africaines progressant, une évolution s’affirme aujourd’hui: il s’agira moins de faire le miroir de son espace afin de permettre à son people de retrouver son identité que de proposer dans tous les domaines de la vie une perception personnelle d’un ordre existant et partant une volonté pour un ordre futur. (58)

While not implying any ideology behind this “future order,” he again inscribes the film and its filmmaker in a process of historical transformation that is not unlike the sort of teleological narratives of a political ideology. Such a position risks foreclosing the possibility of a film having multiple, or perhaps, no clear vision for what an “African” future might look like. Indeed, the ending to Sissako’s film, in which a child flees in panic in the desert towards an uncertain future, appears precisely to cast into doubt the knowledge of any future order even if the filmmaker offers a clear critique of ongoing political violence.

The persistence in critical discussions of African cinema of a discourse of engagement is not surprising considering that scholarly writing on African cinema has also, implicitly or explicitly, taken as its task the promotion and valorization of its object of study. In giving visibility to what it considers a neglected, under-funded art form, the critic of African cinema had sought to give visibility to what could be termed necessary alternative discourses about Africa which would conceivably contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the continent in the global imaginary. In this way one can say scholarship and the films have worked in tandem, promoting this notion of an alternative vision of this
“singular” continent and valorizing previously denigrated or ignored forms of cultural production. Without disputing the importance of allowing African directors to contribute to their continent’s construction in the global imaginary, one notes that this stance nonetheless risks leading to clichés about African richness and exemplarity which uncomfortably recalls discourses of the “noble savage” and which foreclose certain non-value laden conversations concerning a work’s aesthetics. When Van der Peer and Bisschoff generalize about African artists as inherently optimistic, this supposedly valorizing statement necessarily excludes any artists who do not follow its prescriptive call for a particular kind of hopeful stance. Sissako, for example, whose film *Timbuktu* bears witness to violence in a way that is deliberately ambiguous and challenging, is precisely the sort of artist whose film resists that manner of classification.

I would argue then that the lack of discussion of violence within these various discourses surrounding African film stems in part from the larger rehabilitative master narrative that has informed much of critical discourse about African cinema. To expand the definition of violence to include films that did not show graphic depictions of death or dismemberment could potentially be seen as suggesting an underlying violence present in Africa that would synch uncomfortably with racist Western discourse. What I propose is precisely the opposite. That to emphasize the way in which structural and symbolic violence is present in these films, in part through the anticipatory dread experienced by the civilians in *Timbuktu*, is to show certain practices of violence and exclusion as neither an African nor a Western phenomena, but as universal, cross-cultural experiences emerging from a specific cultural context.
“Alternative” and “Grounded” Filmmaking?: Critical Discussions of Violence in African Film

In response to the legacy of violent conflicts on the continent, and their growing reflection in fictional film, some recent scholarship on African cinema has begun to address violence directly. While shedding new light on the place of violent representations with this filmic tradition, these discussions have also tended reproduce, rather than challenge, the tropes of critical discourse related to cinema that have been described above. In *African Film and Literature: Adapting Violence to the Screen* (2009), the only book-length study to deal explicitly with violence in African film, Lindiwe Dovey inscribes representations of violence within this narrative of “alternative” filmmaking, stressing that:

“…by dealing with violence in certain ways, African filmmakers are participating in that larger project by African critics to try and understand and work against continuing violence, thus problematizing representations of Africa as inherently violent, and contributing to the ongoing construction of Africa itself” (xiv).

While it would be far-fetched to suggest that any of the filmmakers in her study would be endorsing violence through their films, Dovey’s definition nonetheless presupposes a degree of intentionality in terms of preventing violence as an explicit goal, rather than a possible effect of the film. Even as Dovey does not argue for engagement in the sense that the filmmakers are espousing a specific ideology, the implication is that the filmmakers are participating in a non-ideological attempt to bring about a respect for certain humanistic

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Dovey’s examples are mostly from the Anglophone context, focusing primarily on South African films, although she does devote a chapter to Cheick Oumar Sissoko’s *La genèse* and another chapter to a general discussion of Francophone film production. The marginalization of Francophone film within the only book-length study devoted explicitly to violence in African film further highlights the scant attention paid to violence within Francophone African cinema.
values. Joseph Gugler suggests this as well when arguing that in the context of African film “after the violence of slavery, of colonialism, and of post-colonial conflicts, gratuitous violence seems obscene” (10). Note that given the popularity of action and genre films on the continent itself, Gugler is referring less to what African moviegoers themselves prefer and instead evoking the legitimizing logic of the market for African films, in which an arthouse aesthetic shunning certain tropes of mainstream filmmaking remains dominant. Implicit in this discourse is also the question of a certain artistic and moral superiority for African filmmakers whose commitment to engagement and rejection of the gratuitous violence that Gugler mentions, are supposedly markers of a more serious and laudable approach.

One of the few critics, along with Dovey, to address violence specifically in African cinema, Nyasha Mboti argues for a broader definition of what constitutes filmed violence. He posits that a broader definition of violence is needed to understand its presence in the African film tradition and initially appears to depart from many previous critics, stating that while violence has always been present in African film, it has manifested itself in less explicit ways:

This article suggests that the screening of rape, war, murder and genocide is merely incidental and irrelevant to the “idea” of African film. It is a serious misreading to

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226 This idea of a gap between what African filmmakers produce and the desires of African viewing publics is spoofed in Cameroonian director Jean-Pierre Bakolo’s 1997 film Le complot d’Aristote in which a group of South African youths enamored of American action movies thwart the desires of a high-minded filmmaker who seeks to improve their taste in films.

227 Mboti cites Ousmane Sembène’s La Noire de (Senegal, 1966) and Xala (Senegal, 1975), Mweze Ngangura’s Pièces d’identité (Democratic Republic of Congo, 1998) and Sarah Maldoror’s Sambizanga (Angola, 1972) as examples of films in which systemic, rather than explicit violence, is the central theme.
view violence in postcolonial African films as approximating to portrayals of rape, war, murder and genocide. Rather, African filmmakers’ definition of violence is way more profound, grounded, lived and much more subtle than this. (42)

Mboti is in part suggesting the move which I wish to make in this chapter, namely a broader definition of what it means to show violence in the African film. It is telling however, that he asserts that this particular aesthetic of violent representation is both African in nature and superior to other forms of traumatic representation. Reproducing a discourse of African exceptionalism and exemplarity, Mboti frames a particularly African aesthetic of violent representation as tied to African superiority linked to their “profound” and “subtle” film practices. Violence in African film is thus the superior alternative to an implicitly heavy-handed, less grounded Western alternative. While endorsing Mboti’s view that what it means to screen traumatic events in African film can be expanded, I wish to decouple it from any discourse of African exemplarity in regards to cinematic production. Such a position, I would argue, risks foreclosing certain discussions of the meaning produced by representations of traumatic events.

The exceptionalism to which both Mboti and Dovey refer, tied to a belief in specifically “African” film practices, is related to the burden of ‘representivity’ that critics so often place on African films.228 Indeed, what to make of an African director whose violent aesthetic doesn’t match Mboti’s definition? Is the film somehow less African? As David Murphy and Patrick Williams observe in Postcolonial African Cinema (2007), “African films are regularly praised or condemned for failing to meet certain representational demands; for

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being too Western, too African, too political, too apolitical” (26). Both Mboti and Dovey’s generalizations about violence in African film, either as an “alternative” to Western cinema or as “more profound,” both inscribe any filmed violence within a ‘representative’ narrative that, I argue, ignores some of the more universal resonances of an African film such as *Timbuktu*. In other words, such a stance risks minimizing the African film’s ability to portray truths regarding power structures and individual responses to violence that are applicable to many cultural contexts. In the section that follows, I will argue that Sissako’s *Timbuktu* categorically subverts this demand for representivity thus calling into question the notion of a specifically African mode of representing violence. While I agree with Mboti that the idea of what it means to show violence on screen should consider less graphic representations, I do not wish to couple this aesthetic choice with any notions of African filmmaking’s alternative or exemplary aesthetics. Indeed, part of the strength of *Timbuktu* is precisely the way in which it calls into question received notions of African identity through showing the multiplicity of languages, worldviews, and cultural practices that are in constant, and often devastating, friction within occupied Timbuktu.

Whether it is “shooting back” (since it is apparently not allowed to “shoot first”), laying out ideological or humanistic visions for an unrealized future, or lagging behind the West in terms of funding, African film has been framed by master narratives that explain this body of cinematic production in terms of its belatedness and incompletion. This is especially evident in the emphasis placed on the lack of funding and resources and the dependence on foreign investment that is a common critical trope. While based in objective fact, framing African cinematic production in these terms implicitly creates the narrative that African cinema is in some ways incomplete, that this lack is not a material reality but a lamentable
imposition with grave consequences. This notion of incompleteness, while based, I believe, on a sincere desire to give visibility and agency to African artists, is nonetheless a discourse that needs to be critically examined. If, as Graham Huggan and others have shown, postcolonial artistic productions’ marginality has become a key condition of its visibility, it is worth asking the extent to which the underfunded discourse also serves to confer cultural capital on much of African cinema.229

Violence on African Time: Rethinking Trauma, Temporality, and the African War Film

One key aspect of this chapter is to problematize the temporalities which have surrounded African film criticism as well as discourses on violence. To construct a discourse to explain Africa’s film production is to map it onto a specific temporality and chronology, one that, as I have shown, remains predicated on discourses of engagement, exemplarity and incompleteness. How then to speak in general terms about this cinema without replacing one reductive view of Africa and African cultural production with another? The goal of this chapter is not to create a new and totalizing meta-discourse of Francophone African film history, but rather to think about how notions of time and history linked to the African context have colored African film criticism and to suggest alternative interpretative frameworks that allow these films to be seen in a new and productive light. It is especially difficult to speak about the slower-paced, meditative filmmaking seen as inherent to much of African cinema without evoking the tropes of belatedness discussed earlier, just as discussions of violence might be linked to the questions of social or political engagement. In

situating my discussion of African film and violence in relationship to non-linear
temporalities both of trauma and cinematic production, I hope to also show the transcultural
and transhistoric resonances of violence in African film, which represent conflict outside of
a particular linear chronology.

Discourses about time in Africa of course carry their own peculiar philosophical and
cultural baggage. Gugler advances the idea of a temporality specific to African film, a sort of
slower paced approach to filmmaking which maps onto a specifically African conception of
time.\textsuperscript{230} The idea of a specifically “African” notion of temporality is reflected in the phrase
“African time” used by Westerners, and some Africans, to explain an apparent indifference
to Western norms of punctuality supposedly common to the majority of Africans. Add to
this Hegel’s famous pronouncement of Africa as residing outside of history,\textsuperscript{231} and it is clear
that discourses of time in relation to Africa have served to reinforce its fundamental
difference with Western culture, as well as its third world status. Outside of history, culturally
ill-suited to follow the rigid schedules necessary to participate in the global economy, Africa’s
failure to subscribe to Western conceptions of time have been used to explain the
continent’s marginal status and its failure to be a player in global capitalism.

The goal here is thus not to construct a particularly African notion of temporality,
but rather to reflect on how discourses related to time, especially in the context of
filmmaking, may have colored Francophone African films’ critical receptions. Who is to say,
in fact, that it is Western genre film that has an accelerated notion of on-screen time, and

\textsuperscript{230} He develops this idea in the introduction to \textit{African Film: Re-Imagining a Continent} (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003).
that it is in fact African filmmakers whose pace better approximates the time it takes for a viewer to process all of the complex interactions and nuances of a particular story? A slower pace can also be linked to lower budget filmmaking as well as to a particular independent or French new wave sensibility that contains to inflect these films. It is crucial, however, to consider how the pace of films such as *Timbuktu* or *Daratt* can act in large part to give the viewer space to grasp the violence and trauma that occurs on a daily level under the state of occupation.

In the following section, I will argue that the slower pace of Sissako’s *Timbuktu* can be seen not as a deliberate choice to avoid screening violence, but rather as a way to foreground more powerfully its traumatic effects and the insidious ways in which military occupation makes violence and its anticipation a fact of daily life. It can be argued that the violence of genre films serves precisely to distract the viewer from the effects of real-world violence, to aestheticize it in such a way that it bears little to no resemblance to the experience and effects of real-world traumatic events. It is violence outside of time, visited upon disposable characters with no interiority, dispatched in an instant. I thus wish to question the implicit link between the slow pace of filmmaking and a more meditative peaceful approach to representing contemporary violence. Precisely what Sissako’s earlier films such as *En attendant le bonheur* and *Bamako* suggest is the powerful, often violent, longings and emotions that play out during moments of seeming in-action. This dissonance between a film’s more leisurely pacing and its violent subject matter is dramatically foregrounded in *Timbuktu* which depicts a state of military occupation and the arbitrary but brutally enforced laws of the Islamic Police. In a series of close scene analyses from *Timbuktu*, I will show precisely how Sissako elaborates on an aesthetic of filmmaking
developed in his previous films to show violence by representing its absence and its future possibility, screening the anticipatory dread that St. Amour argues likens to more tangible forms of real-world violence. In conclusion, I will suggest that considering his film as a form of mourning is a way of understanding Timbuktu, and Francophone African cinematic responses to violence more broadly, outside of a narrative of rehabilitation or social engagement.

Part II: A Case Study in Slow-Paced, Off-Screen Violence: Abderrahmane Sissako’s Timbuktu

Born to a Mauritanian mother and Malian father in 1961, Abderrahmane Sissako was raised in Mali, studied cinema in the Soviet Union from 1981 to 1992 before settling in France. He began earning mainstream acclaim with his film Octobre (1993) winner of the Un Certain Regard award at Cannes and received recognition in European and African festivals for his subsequent films, including La Vie sur Terre (1998), En attendant le bonheur (2002) (originally titled Heremakono), and Bamako (2006) which earned a César nomination for meilleur espoir féminin (Aïssa Maïga). Sissako is frequently discussed as an heir to the cinematic legacy of Sembène, who also studied in the USSR, and Souleymane Cissé, also from Mali. While films such as Bamako are highly political, Sissako has expressed weariness at the pressure to be spokesman for the continent stating as far back as 2006 that: “On ne

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233 Sissako’s filmography also includes the short film Le jeu (1989), Le chameau et les bâtons flottants (1995), the documentary Rostov-Luanda (1997), in which he searches for a friend from Moscow who had gone to fight in Angola, and the short film Le rêve de Tiya, (2008) one of eight films commissioned to illustrate the UN’s Millennium Development Goals.
peut pas être toujours un porte-parole.” Thus while Timbuktu’s content is certainly political, it is also necessary to interrogate the extent to which Sissako sees himself speaking in the name of the town and the history it represents. Released in 2014, Timbuktu is by far Sissako’s most visible success, winning the 2015 Césaire for best film. Timbuktu also became only the second film from sub-Saharan Francophone Africa to earn a nomination for best foreign film at the Academy Awards, giving his film a degree of international recognition afforded to few other directors. Timbuktu grossed over one million dollars in the United States, a remarkable achievement for an African film. While relatively little has yet been written about Timbuktu in scholarly publications, Phyllis Toua’s recent article being a notable exception, it has been discussed extensively in newspapers and on the internet. Perhaps most notably, the professor and writer Nicholas Beau accused Sissako in an article for MondeAfrique as being in the pocket of the Mauritanian president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz for whom Sissako has worked as a “cultural adviser.” The polemic was picked up by major newspapers such as the Figaro, but failed to gain substantial traction. Significant internet chatter has been devoted as well to Sissako’s allegedly overly-sympathetic depiction of the

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235 Submitted on behalf of the Ivory Coast, French director Jean-Jacques Annaud’s La Victoire en Chantant (1976) is the only African film to win the academy award for Best Foreign Language film, although its attribution to the Ivory Coast is somewhat mitigated by the film’s French director and largely French cast. While films from Algerian and South African directors have been nominated, Timbuktu was the first film from a Francophone sub-Saharan African director ever to be nominated for Best Foreign Language Film since the category’s creation in 1965, a fact which testifies to African films’ severely limited presence in the United States and other major foreign markets.


Tuaregs, who have been accused of keeping slaves, in favor of an exclusive focus on the Arab and black African militants. Phyllis Toua’s article on the film’s reception—in addition to addressing issues surrounding the polemic mentioned above—discusses how *Timbuktu* was initially banned from the 2015 FESPACO festival because of security concerns, underscoring the volatile political climate in which *Timbuktu* was released. Critical reception of the film has been, however, largely positive, with critics praising Sissako for his nuanced approach to representing the jihadists and the suffering but resilient citizens of Timbuktu. A February 22nd review from *Le monde*, commenting on Sissako’s brief but impressive filmography states that *Timbuktu* “ajoute à une exceptionnelle qualité artistique les résonances funestes de l’actualité” while A.O. Scott in the New York Times raved that it was “timely and permanent, immediate and essential.”

Despite this commercial and critical success, with its depiction of a radical Islamist group that evokes the heavily mediatized actions of the self-proclaimed Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, *Timbuktu*’s success raises legitimate questions about the politics and conditions of visibility for African films in a global marketplace. While *Timbuktu* is slow-paced and meditative, a hallmark of Sissako’s previous films and of much of Francophone African cinema more generally, his depiction of immediately recognizable, iconic tropes of radical Islam inscribes his film within a range of filmic, media and political discourses regarding the

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239 This practice is discussed in Florence Boyer, *L’esclavage chez les Touaregs de Bankilalé au miroir des migrations circulaires*. Vol. 179. No. 3. Éditions de l’EHESS, 2005. A particularly virulent example of the critiques on the internet surrounding Sissako’s failure to address Tuareg slave-holding can be found in this blog post by an anonymous resident of Timbuktu. [http://faty.mondoblog.org/2014/05/16/le-timbuktu-de-sissako-nest-pas-le-tombouctou-ou-je-vis/](http://faty.mondoblog.org/2014/05/16/le-timbuktu-de-sissako-nest-pas-le-tombouctou-ou-je-vis/)

emergence and threat of Islamic terrorism. *Timbuktu* thus offers a fascinating case studies in the way in which Francophone African films bear witness to conflicts that are at once local and global, using a variety of techniques of slow-paced filmmaking to inscribe violence in the collective imaginary.

**A Contemplative Aesthetics Rooted in Francophone African Film History: Sissako’s Influences and Filmography**

Sissako’s filmmaking owes much to the non-chronological, at times absurdist style of directors such as Djibril Diop Mambété. Visual echos of Mambété’s 1973 film *Touki Bouki* occur throughout *Timbuktu* linking the film to a broader Francophone African cinematic tradition through this association with an iconic director. Like Sissako’s *En attendant le bonheur*, *Touki Bouki* (Wolof for “The Journey of the Hyena”) centers on two Senegalese teenagers in the early 1970s who dream of a departure for France that never materializes. With languid shots of the ocean and desert surrounding Dakar juxtaposed with car chases and a vivid scene of cows being slaughtered, Mambété mixes scenes of life in 1970s Dakar with a more universal reflection on longing for adventure combined with youthful idealism and naiveté. Mambété’s fascination with the natural beauty of Senegal’s coasts translates to magnificent shots of the ocean, the hum of the surf blending in with the sobs of the female protagonist whose young lover has been killed before he can realize his dream of emigrating to the métropole. While containing critiques of neocolonialism, such as a group of racist

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241 In addition to *Touki Bouki*, Diop’s small but influential filmography also includes two early short films, *Contras’ City* (1968) and *Badou Boy* (1970), the documentary *Parlons Grand-mère* (1989), the feature film *Hyènes* (1992), now widely considered a classic of African film, and the short films *Le Franc* (1994) and *La petite vendeuse du Soleil* (1999). Diop’s most critically acclaimed film, *Touki Bouki* was the winner of the International Critics’ Prize at Cannes and a Special Jury Prize at the Moscow Film Festival.

French school teachers complaining about their Senegalese hired help, *Touki Bouki* aspires to be a more universal meditation on hope and loss, centering on a particular generation of Senegalese youth barely old enough to remember the transition to independence. While *Timbuktu* dispenses with some of the more surrealist elements of *Touki Bouki* (one cannot help but hear a certain aural resonance in the titles), the fascination with a languid pace of life and a stunning visual landscape as a backdrop for violent and unexpressed desire is a clear parallel between the two films. If both filmmakers are preoccupied with the potential for violence that lies dormant in seeming moments of tranquility, *Timbuktu* concretizes this violence from a vague set of longings to the omnipresent jihadists and their volatile and unpredictable punishments.

In understanding the aesthetic of off-screen violence that Sissako deploys in *Timbuktu*, it is helpful to put the film in the context of the languid pacing and preoccupation with waiting that feature prominently in his previous feature-length films, notably *En attendant le Bonheur*243 and *Bamako*. Winner of the top prize (the Étalon de Yenega) at the 18th FESPACO film festival in 2003, *En attendant le bonheur* treats themes of exile and existential malaise, following several characters in a seemingly sleepy Mauritanian fishing village, some waiting to immigrate to Europe, others struggling to find a place for themselves within their home town. With shots of the wind-swept desert often framed through windows or screened by colorful fabric blowing in the breeze, the film suggests the myriad frames and filters which influence our perceptions of reality. The nod to Beckett’s *En attendant Godot* in

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the title plays out in the film’s languid quality and the seeming sense of immobility, which belies the rich interior life and aspirations of the various characters, who are often shown sprawled indoors taking tea or dozing in the shade. While many in the town dream of escape, it is possible, Sissako suggests, to construct a meaningful life for oneself if one is lucky enough to have a mentor. A young girl learns to sing by imitating her patient teacher and an adolescent boy dreams of becoming an electrician under the tutelage of a stern but loving older man. Attentive to the risks of creating an exoticized portrait of this town, Sissako never lets the sublime shots of the Mauritanian desert or the splendid colors of the townspeople’s robes and veils overwhelm the film, instead returning the viewer’s attention to the individuals whose lives unfold against this vivid backdrop.

A noteworthy, recurring visual theme in Sissako’s film is brightly colored fabric. It often hangs on laundry lines, flapping slowly in the breeze, and serving as a poignant expression of an aesthetically seductive exterior that belies the messy complexity of the characters’ interiority and their myriad of unexpressed or inexpressible longings, that may result in violence or death. In one of *En attendant le bonheur*'s climactic scenes the body of a West African migrant washes up on a beach. In a long take that lasts several minutes, Sissako focuses on the dead body which occupies only a small part of the frame. As he will in *Bamako* and *Timbuktu*, Sissako links the representation of dead bodies to contemplation and a sense of suspended time.

If the death in *En attendant le bonheur* is linked to poverty and the precarious situation of migrants, Sissako places death and violence in a broader geopolitical framework within
Bamako, the 2006 feature length film which preceded Timbuktu. The film stages an allegorical trial between the World Bank and African society, complete with black-robed judges, a prosecutor, lawyers, and witnesses representing various archetypical figures from modern Africa (the returned migrant, the intellectual, the village elder etc.) Within this framework, Sissako explores the complex interplay between government and violence which he represents without using clichéd or graphic images of violence. As Joseph Mboti writes:

in Bamako (2006), violence is often invisible to the naked eye and is easily missed if one is looking for stereotypes of violence such as rape, killings and beatings. Rather, violence is endemic to our socio-economic order and overt instances of violence may be regarded as mere symptoms and flare-ups of a more sinister, quiet violence that goes by other names. (38)

Sissako’s most striking representation of the “quiet violence” that Mboti refers to owes something to Diop Mambéty absurdist style, as Sissako spoofs a 1960s-era spaghetti Western in a manner both comical and chilling. Near the beginning of Bamako, a Malian family sitting in the courtyard of their home begins watching a film called Death in Timbuktu in an eerie presage of the 2012 real-world takeover and Sissako’s subsequent film. With familiar strains of harmonica music, the camera panning across a barren desert, and opening credits in large yellow font, the viewer immediately recognizes the tropes of the spaghetti Western. Although the cowboys speak English, the film takes place anachronistically in present-day Timbuktu. The cowboys, one of whom is black, begins terrorizing the civilians of Timbuktu.


They first shoot at a school teacher because the town “has too many [teachers]” and kill at random a woman fleeing with her child. The child cries and moans, pawing at his mother’s lifeless body. What saves this film from becoming heavy handed allegory are the knowingly poor production values which are over the top even by the standards of the genre being parodied. Victims are shot multiple times but there is no blood. The dialogue between the cowboys is mumbled and almost incomprehensible. Sissako translates the symbolic violence of global capitalism into concrete visual symbols of death and mourning. And yet in abandoning a realist representation of these deaths, he also rejects a sensationalist or aestheticized violence to symbolize what is happening. The use of Timbuktu as a setting for this parody also gestures towards the town’s symbolic potency as a once great center of African wealth and learning that has been a perpetual object of Europe’s, and now radical Islam’s, destructive desire. *Timbuktu* the film thus continues exploring, albeit in a much more explicit form, the town’s resonances as a symbolic locus of violence and desire in the contemporary world.

In addition to showing Sissako’s interest in the symbolic resonance of Timbuktu, an aesthetics of violence and death specific to Sissako is evident in *Bamako* through his representation of the death of a migrant attempting to cross the desert. A group of a dozen West African migrants abandon a woman disguised as a man who had joined them in their march through the desert to reach the coast and immigrate to Europe. Close to death, she lies almost motionless, twitching occasionally as her companions move on. Traditional Malian music using the stringed kora (quite similar to the music employed in *Timbuktu*) plays in the background, a surreal and unsettling juxtaposition given the slow, agonizing death that
is unfolding before the viewer’s eyes. In considering the use of seemingly incongruous music it is important to make a distinction between the stylized/aestheticized violence of a genre film, and Sissako’s own juxtapositions. The intention is not to create a comic dissonance between the action on screen and the flippant dialogue or lighter music. Rather, such a move grants a certain degree of dignity to the dying, rather than co-opting the death to emotionally manipulate the viewer towards a certain end. Amidst the destruction wrought by economic uncertainty and immigration, life goes on, moving towards uncertain, possibly destructive ends. This particular aesthetic becomes more pronounced in *Timbuktu* where, as I will argue later, multiple deaths are filmed in such a manner as to suggest representations whose purpose is to enact a kind of cinematic mourning.

*Timbuktu: Waiting for Violence Under Occupation*

Combining the languid pace of *En attendant le bonheur* with the more explicit investigation of corrupt governance and state violence of *Bamako*, *Timbuktu* displays an aesthetics of representing not the “quiet,” structural violence of *Bamako*, but the ever present threat of harm endemic to military occupation and authoritarian law. Set in Timbuktu under the rule of violent Islamic militants who hail from around African and the globe, Sissako’s film eschews the initial violent confrontation that brought about the takeover. He instead focuses on the day to reality of arbitrarily enforced sharia law. A man is asked to roll up his

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246 Albeit in a radically different context, this use of incongruously upbeat music paired with scenes of horror appears in Rwandan director and Tutsi genocide survivor Dady de Maximo Mwicira Mitali’s 2009 documentary *Par le raccourci*. Despite these divergent histories, the comparison is instructive as it points to the ways in which using non-sentimental music can work to frame images and stories of African suffering in a way that avoids pathos-laden or miserabilist engagement with histories of violence.

247 *Timbuktu* could also be situated with films on Islamic fundamentalism from Africa, principally from North Africa, which, Jospeh Gugler claims, often pander to Western audiences’ fears of Islam. He identifies three notable exceptions: Youssef Chahine’s *Destiny* (Egypt, 1997), Atef Hetata’s *Closed Doors* (Egypt, 1999), and
pants past his ankles and in frustration takes them off. A women selling fish becomes so exasperated with the demand to wear gloves that she prefers to be punished by the militants rather than comply with their nonsensical interdictions. The plot centers on one of the only remaining Tuareg families in the town. Living under a tent away from the town center, the Tuareg cattle-herder Kadine, his wife Satima, and 12-year-old daughter Toya are shown early in the film relaxing and laughing, imagining what will happen when their prize cow, the whimsically named GPS, will have a calf. As in *En attendant le bonheur*, Sissako has a keen eye for how bonds of love and affection form between friends and family during these seemingly static moments. It is precisely the values of joy and compassion that the jihadists’ presence risks upending. However, Kadine’s ultimate downfall does not directly result from the jihadists. It begins when he shoots the fisherman Amadou who had killed Kadine’s prized cow GPS for wandering into his fishing nets. As Kadine takes a pistol and leaves to confront Amadou, he makes a general reference to a humiliation that “must end,” suggesting that his violent response results in part from sublimated frustration and rage at his powerlessness in the face of the jihadists and their reign of terror. He confronts Amadou and they began to wrestle. Kadine’s gun discharges on its own, killing Amadou. Kadine is subsequently arrested and sentenced to death. As he kneels to pray before his public execution his wife arrives on the back of a motorcycle. She leaps off, brandishing a pistol and is shot along with her husband as she runs towards him. The camera lingers on their lifeless bodies, their arms intertwined. Meanwhile, the daughter Toya, and her adapted brother Issan, who are left behind at the tent, sense that something is amiss. They run across the desert in panic as a group of militants pursue the motorcycle driver. The camera lingers on Toya’s panicked face.

as she runs through the desert towards an uncertain fate before a fade to black and the closing credits.

While the story of Kadine and Satima’s ultimate death is the film’s central plot, the narrative retains a fragmented, non-linear feel. Much of the film is comprised of various stand-alone scenes that depict the daily reality of life under the Ansar Dine militants. A man with a megaphone makes laconic announcements in French, Bambara and other local languages regarding what seemingly innocuous practices, such as music and soccer, are forbidden. In a haunting, balletic sequence, a group of defiant teenagers mime playing soccer, improvising an entire game without a ball, delighting in their cheeky affront to one of the militants’ draconian restrictions. In one of the film’s several moments of humor, when two militants arrive on a motorcycle, the soccer players stop their pantomime and begin performing calisthenics, exchanging smug glances as the jihadists’ drive by.

The depiction of the fighters themselves is nuanced, a fact that lead the mayor of the French town Villiers-sur-Marne to cancel several screenings of *Timbuktu*, accusing Sissako of offering an apology for terrorism.248 The jihadists are shown in moments of vulnerability and seemingly innocent companionship. As Alexis Okeowo remarks they are “painfully human.”249 One militant, Abdelkerim, struggles to learn how to drive as his patient chauffeur, a fellow jihadist, gently teases him. A young black militant, who appears to be

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from metropolitan France, tries and fails to speak his lines with conviction in a propaganda video denouncing rap as sinful. An older jihadist attempts to encourage and inspire him, in a strangely affecting moment of mentorship that is at odds with the video’s deplorable subject matter. Even as they actively impose a ban on playing soccer, three of the jihadists, a mix of French-born immigrants and Africans, have a heated conversation in French about France’s World Cup victory in 1998. To the playful derision of his companions, one of them claims that France had bribed Brazil with “a few sacks of rice” in order to win. Their banter is meant to evoke the sort of barroom arguments that might occur anywhere in the world. The viewer can’t help but feel slightly disarmed and unsettled, by the implication that the actors within this murderous system are so recognizably human.

In another tragicomic scene, haunting strains of music are audible in the town at night. As the militants fan out to find its source with all the intensity of a special-ops team conducting a manhunt for a dangerous criminal, the full absurdity of their law-enforcement priorities is forcefully illustrated. The film cuts to the inside of a small room, where a woman reclines comfortably, singing with a relaxed smile, accompanied by a man on a guitar and two men quietly tapping drums. The calm is shattered by the militants kicking down the door, a stark reminder of how the particularly insidious and invasive nature of a ban on music, an interdiction which disrupts the moments of collective joy and relaxed communion that can make the occupation bearable.

Through such scenes, Sissako reminds us that beneath the veneer of normalcy lurk fear and the capacity for life-altering violence, although not always directly from the jihadists themselves. It is notable that the death which is most central to the plot, Kadine’s murder of
the fisherman Amadou, was not directly caused by the jihadists. It is thus not the initial act of the violent takeover that is the most salient feature of the jihadists’ presence. Rather it is the way in which their application of sharia law creates a pervasive climate of fear that gradually poisons existing cultural traditions and relationships.

**Caught Between Past and Future Violence: Screening the Trauma of Anticipation**

Whatever violence may have occurred before the jihadists occupied Timbuktu is figured by a series of absences. As Kadine and Satima chat quietly under their tent, the lone dwelling on an otherwise empty stretch of desert, it becomes apparent that they were once part of a thriving community. “There is no one left, we’re the only ones,” Satima says wistfully. It is unclear if their friends have been killed or simply fled. While their previous moments together were marked with domestic tranquility, both Kadine and Satima now admit their fear and how much they miss their friends. Rather than reinforce their sense of loss and dread, Sissako’s languid pace of filmmaking—shots of the desert at sunset, scenes of Kadine and Satima playing with their daughter Toya—obscure rather than reinforce this fear. What precisely are the traumas that may lurk under the surface? Feeling responsible for the death of GPS, who the fisherman Amadou had killed for wandering into his net, the young boy Issan reveal to the viewer (through a conversation with Toya) that he is an orphan. His father was killed resisting the invasion of the town. Toya remarks that her father is a musician, not a fighter, and so will be spared the fate of Issan’s parent. In this passing reference to Issan’s dead father—we are given no other details as to his death—Sissako’s implies the suffering and traumatization of Issan while giving the bare minimum of details as
to its cause. The viewer is made to focus instead on the child’s plight in the present moment, while his traumatic past remains unrepresented, manifest only in the boy’s tears and grief.

Both the conversation between Satima and Kadine and that between Toya and Issan make oblique references to past acts of violence which are never shown or referenced in more depth. It is the impact of the violence on the present moment, not the violence itself, that is Sissako’s primary concern. These vague references to past events thus inflect our understanding of the characters and their seeming acts of tranquil domestic bliss. Sissako both shows the persistence of certain forms of living—song, domestic tranquility—that the militants’ violent rule cannot obliterate, along with the legacy of past traumas and the fear of future ones which infuse these present moments with an atmosphere of perpetual menace. Never is this more evident than in the haunted eyes of Satima, shown frequently in close-up. They come to symbolize the weight and pain of the past and future suffering with which the residents of Timbuktu must contend on a daily basis.

**Showing Violence Through Its Absence: Sissako’s Aesthetics of Death and Suffering**

Even as he evokes past acts of violence and the present fear of the inhabitants, Sissako shows few scenes of physical violence perpetrated against the inhabitants of Timbuktu. In a striking opening scene, however, he suggests the militants’ capacity for sudden, life-altering destruction. Before the film’s premise has become entirely clear, a group of turbaned soldiers use wooden statues of human figures for target practice. Simple figures, often with their arms outstretched as if in supplication, they stand in a row, reminiscent of victims before a firing squad. Under the hail of the jihadists’ bullets, their limbs are blown to pieces and their faces splinter. As mournful music plays, the camera pans over the
dismembered statues. A sculpture of a squat figure belches smoke from a gaping mouth, resembling a silent scream of anguish. The sculptures cannot help but evoke the iconic images of blood and destruction both from films about Africa and Western media images. If one considers them as stand-ins for the humans who have been and will be targeted by the militants, the scene becomes especially sinister. While certainly not an example of graphic violence, the destruction of these objects is both a figurative representation of the sort of past and future destruction that now hangs over the town. It is an indication that the jihadists’ iconoclasm is a proxy for a much more sinister form of violence. In his slow pan of the mutilated statues, Sissako refuses an aesthetic of gore while at the same time suggesting that just such a scene, the wooden figures swapped out for flesh and blood people, may have occurred or may occur in the future. The broken sculptures thus symbolically show a vision of ultraviolence but in a manner which removes it from any kind of temporality, gesturing both towards its existence in the past and the possibility that it may erupt in the future.

Sissako continues this depiction of graphic violence perpetrated against material objects later in the film through the death of a cow, the most prolonged and graphic representation of the violence in the film. The scene, which recalls the graphic slaughterhouse footage which opens Djibril Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Boiki*, is a precursor to a second death, that of the fisherman Amadou, which is the key moment in the film’s plot. As Issan, the adopted son of Kadine, leads the herd to drink, the prize steer GPS begins running frantically towards Amadou’s net. Unlike Sissako’s previous films which made sparse use of extradiegetic music, GPS’s run is accompanied with ominous orchestral music reminiscent of the conventions of more mainstream, Western films. The music announcing the cow’s death underscores the significance of this moment for the plot (it sets off a chain
of events leading to Kadine’s death). However, in avoiding suspenseful extradiegetic music when showing human death, Sissako hints at the distancing effect such cinematic conventions have on filmed representations of death and suffering.

Having already warned the young boy Issan to keep the animals away from his nets, Amadou does not hesitate in throwing a sharpened stake at GPS, lodging it in the animal’s throat. There are six deaths shown in *Timbuktu*. That of GPS is by far the most prolonged and graphic. The camera focuses on GPS, the stake lodged in his neck. During a longshot of several seconds, she moans and falls to her knees. Shots of Amadou’s inscrutable face alternate with close-ups of the dying animal’s body: First GPS’ head, then her knees move feebly in the water. Finally, the animal’s nose fills almost the entire frame and a single rivulet of blood flows from her nostril into the water. In contrast to the dead human bodies in *Timbuktu*, which are shown briefly in jump cuts or with their features obscured by distance and shadow, the camera lingers on the slow, agonizing process of GPS’ death. The focus on the animal’s suffering and the physical manifestations of her wound indicates a desire to show violence, particularly its graphic consequences, in a way that avoids the tropes of the genre film with its fetishizing of images of human suffering. The discomfort at watching the animal’s death throes underscores the visceral nature of physical violence. Yet this representation keeps the actual representations of human violence at a certain remove.

GPS’s graphically represented suffering is both intimate and distant, suggesting a world of similar violence perpetrated against humans, even as Sissako rarely represents this suffering cinematically.
Sissako’s depiction of the death of GPS can be contrasted with that of Amadou the fisherman, who dies in almost the exact same spot as the cow whom he speared. Upon learning that Amadou has killed GPS, the young female who was to assure the future of his herd, Kadine tells his wife that “the humiliation must end” before taking his pistol to confront Amadou. Seeing the previously peaceful musician react with such smoldering fury, the pent-up resentment resulting from the trauma of occupation is clear. There is no indication of a previous grievance between Kadine and Amadou. The former’s reaction appears as much a sublimation of his anger and powerlessness related to the jihadist presence as it is about the loss of his cow. In a white, shroud-like robe, Kadine walks laboriously through the knee-high river to confront Amadou. Without letting the fisherman explain his side of the story, as his wife had urged, Kadine begins insulting him. The confrontation is filmed in a long take showing Sissako’s affinity for the aesthetics of “slow cinema”. It is dusk and the two men are framed by the water and the golden light of the evening sky. There are no close-ups of their faces. It is not even clear who has the upper hand in the struggle as they wrestle clumsily in the water. There is a gunshot and they both fall. It is unclear where the shot came from and if either man is dead. Unseen blood bubbles and gurgles in the water and the tangle of limbs and sodden clothing makes it impossible to tell the two men apart. Suddenly Kadine leaps to his feet. He frantically pats his body to see if he has been hit. Panicked, he runs sluggishly through the water to the other side of the shore. From the original long take of the struggle and the gunshot, the film cuts to a panoramic vision of the river and surrounding desert at dusk. In this panoramic long take, Kadine’s barely visible figure moves left across the screen, exits the river, and runs out of frame.
If the cow GPS was shown in great detail—her agonizing eye, the blood dripping from a nostril that filled up almost the entire screen—the long takes that show Amadou’s death keep his murder at a distance, avoiding any graphic images of blood or violence. His face is never shown, nor the location of his wound. We only learn that he is dead when several jihadists find his body a few hours later at dusk. A dark silhouette in the water, which is streaked red from a reflected sunset, the body resembles less a human figure than the abstract statues shown in the film’s opening credits. The seemingly obvious symbolism of the blood-red light reflected in the water serves not only to amplify the impact of the violence that just occurred, but also to suggest both the impossibility of representing violence and the manner in which death has permeated the social fabric of the entire town.250

In addition, in avoiding graphic scenes of carnage, Sissako creates a degree of dignity for his fictional dead, one which underscores that the film is meant to bear witness the real-world atrocities that occurred in Timbuktu itself.

The closest the film comes to showing graphic violence against human beings is a scene in which two adulterers are buried to their necks in sand and stoned to death. Sissako credits his shock and sadness at learning of the real-life stoning of two unwed lovers in Timbuktu on July 29th, 2012 by the Ansar Dine militants as what prompted him to make the film.251 It is thus important to view this scene not purely as a fictional filmic representation of violence, but one rooted in the deaths of two real-world individuals which profoundly

250 A similar metaphorical representation of blood occurs in Bamako when women are shown dipping clothes in buckets of dark red dye. A close-up on the rich, red liquid washing down a drain becomes a metaphor for the untold and unrepresentable suffering wrought by European neocolonialism and corrupt post-independence governance.

impacted the filmmaker. The stoning sequence begins with militants piling the last of the sand around a man and a woman who have been buried up to their necks. The camera pulls back for an overhead shot of the militants walking way, a group of what appear to be civilians at the ready with stones. Sissako uses a jump cut to show the lifeless heads and the ground littered with rocks as a final stone flies into frame and strikes the man’s bowed, motionless head. Almost none of the actual stoning itself is pictured, a palpable blank within the film as Sissako avoids the potentially voyeuristic sight of the sustained violence of their execution. Although both are bleeding from their heads, the faces are peaceful and their downturned gazes evoke the numerous iconic images of Christ on the cross.

Images of the lifeless heads protruding from the sand then alternate with a haunting sequence where a jihadist soldier, watched only by the local mad woman, performs an elaborate dance. As another young soldier watches in secret, the man pirouettes and flaps his arms like wings. His elegant and refined movements suggest a previous vocation or pastime which he can now only practice in secret. As balletic orchestral music plays, the films cuts between the murderous soldier’s graceful movements and the lifeless heads of the two alleged adulterers. This alternation between the lifeless heads and the elegant militant’s movements grants a certain dignity to the dead adulterers paradoxically conferred by its juxtaposition with the dance of the militant who is complicit in their death. The focus is not on the stoning itself but on its aftermath. Through this juxtaposition, Sissako creates a space in which the dead body can be contemplated outside of a voyeuristic framework. The fact that the bodies, save the heads, have been buried further accentuates the idea that bearing witness to this violence paradoxically entails showing a minimum of corporeal details. In addition, the juxtaposition with the graceful movements of the jihadist further suggests that
commemoration, linked to a certain kind of cinematic mourning, forms a part of Sissako’s aesthetic and directorial project. In gesturing towards the violence that remains off-screen, Sissako draws attention to it insidious and destructive impact while suggesting that cinema can confer a measure of dignity, albeit at a distance, to victims of real-world suffering.

Running to Nowhere: *Timbuktu*’s Climactic Scene

The climax of the film is the execution of Kadine, sentenced to death for murdering Amadou. Surrounded by militants and townsfolk, he prays in preparation to die. A motorcycle appears and Satima jumps off the back, running towards her husband brandishing a gun. Kadine runs towards her and they are both shot. With their bodies intertwined on the ground there is another visual echo of Diop Mambéty’s *Touki Bouki* where the two lovers lie together on a cliff overlooking the water, only there it is unclear who is dead and who is alive. Simultaneously, their daughter Toya and adopted son Issan begin to run in panic, though it is unclear if they are running towards their parents, or away from the violence. Meanwhile the militants pursue the motorcyclist, all pretense of their already shambolic system of justice dropped as they fire at him indiscriminately. Toya’s dash across the desert can be seen as a visual manifestation of the constant state of fear which grips the town. Filmed initially at a distance, she runs panicked in an uncertain direction towards an uncertain future repeating a phrase in Tamasheq that is not translated in the

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252 The motorcycle is a central symbol in *Touki Bouki*, ridden by the protagonist Mory around Dakar. In *Timbuktu*, the motorcyclist is an anonymous figure who delivers water, appearing regularly on screen although not featuring prominently in the action until the film’s end. Similar to the motorcycle in *Touki Bouki*, which has cattle horns mounted on its handlebars, Sissako’s motorcyclist has two long-handled mirrors protruding off the front of his vehicle in manner that closely resembles Mory’s modified motorcycle. The similarities underscore Sissako’s indebtedness to Mambéty’s filmmaking style and the prominent presence of the motorcyclist in both films emphasizes the sense of displacement and rootlessness that defines the interiority of the various characters.
subtitles. Much is ambiguous in this scene. It is unclear if Toya actually witnessed the murder of her mother and father and knows precisely what danger awaits her. The film’s final, devastating shot is a close-up of Toya’s face as she continues to run, breathing heavily and mumbling the same, untranslated phrase. The film then fades to black for a few seconds before the closing credits begin to role.

The conflation between Toya and the pursued gazelle from the opening shot (which flashes briefly on screen as Toya runs) further underscores the way in which Sissako uses animals to suggest the plight of his human characters. Besides the obvious implication of Toya, and by extension the townspeople’s, dehumanization, the images of running and pursuit which bookend the film are related, I would argue, to Paul St. Amour’s notion of anticipatory trauma. Indeed, the goal of the militant’s occupation is precisely control through inducing a state of perpetual fear resulting in a feeling of perpetual pursuit. This fear is based on violence but also constitutes its own form of violence, an especially insidious kind that poisons all aspects of the townspeople's experience under occupation.

Even more fascinating is the way in which Sissako intersperses what might be called moments of grace and resistance with suggestions of perpetual trauma. That is to say that even as townspeople mime playing soccer and sing as they are being whipped, these acts of resistance co-exist with the very real and permanent effects of the Islamic occupation. Timbuktu had been liberated after Sissako made his film and yet it is not the liberation that is the focus of his attention. Thus Toya, for all the resilience that she shows elsewhere in the film, may very well be quite traumatized by what has occurred, a psychological wound that will continue long after the occupation has ended. Indeed, it is precisely the use of this trope
of the action film—the chase scene—as an ending to the film that highlights Sissako’s own awareness of the limits of a slower style of filmmaking. Far from an exciting, pulse-pounding sequence, Toya’s labored running through the desert sand suggests as much inertia as it does flight. In bookending his films with these chase sequences, Sissako visually represents the inner turmoil felt by the town’s inhabitants under military rule. The languid pace of the filmmaking that dominates much of the film is nonetheless framed and defined by this fear and threat of violence. Just as the peaceful domestic tranquility of a group of young people playing music is interrupted by the militants, so are all aspects of daily life informed by this fear.

**A Film of Mourning? *Timbuktu* and an Aesthetics of Grief**

The question then becomes to what extent we can consider *Timbuktu* a film of mourning and by extension how this definition might be applied further to films from the Francophone African context. If, to paraphrase Dominick LaCapra’s nuancing of Freud’s definition, mourning consists of a period of transition allowing a sort of “working through” of a traumatic loss which then permits the individual to reconstruct new social bonds to replace the lost object, then *Timbuktu* could be seen as enacting mourning on several levels. First there is the actual way in which Sissako films death, giving space for a process of reflection about the death shown on-screen, which avoids a voyeuristic or fetishistic focus on a dead body, instead introducing an aesthetics of contemplation that confers dignity on them. However, in a larger sense, one could consider *Timbuktu*, viewed as a globally-circulating cultural product, as constituting a means of grieving, for a larger viewing

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community, the trauma visited on the citizens of Timbuktu itself. What interests me about mourning as a framework is precisely the way in which it intersects with temporality. That is to say that way in which a film could enable grieving, on an individual and collective level, what is irrevocably lost when a town and its individuals are traumatized and live under the violent militancy of Timbuktu, a loss that remains even after the town itself is liberated. To mourn is to accept to a degree of uncertainty about the future but at the same time not to resign oneself to an inevitable perpetuation of violence and death. For, indeed, in his references to *Touki Bouki* and a longer tradition of Francophone African filmmaking, Sissako joins a body of filmmakers whose post-conflict films could be considered to enact a form of mourning related to universal, transcultural phenomena such as the shattered illusions of youth and the violent realization of the precariousness of one’s family and social networks. Though there are specific cultural ideals and practices that the film mourns, in foregrounding this universal human practice, *Timbuktu* also gestures towards the universality of many of its themes, a key point if one wishes to consider this film outside of the “shooting back” framework, which so often subordinates African films as responses to a hegemonically dominant Western film corpus. I propose mourning thus not as the only framework possible for these post-conflict films but one that it is important to consider precisely because it allows for a representation of death and violence in the African context that avoids the potentially patronizing implications of the “alternative” framework for understanding violence in African film.
Conclusion

As discussed previously, the lack of graphic representations of violence from Africa’s colonial and postcolonial past has led to little scholarship on the role of violence in Francophone African cinema. The “leisurely pace” of African cinema has contributed to the impression in part that a cinema of violence in Africa has been largely confined to genre films and Hollywood depictions. Nonetheless, careful analysis of African cinema reveals a preoccupation with the effects of structural and subjective violence that is discernable even when such graphic depictions are absent. This slow aesthetics of violence, evident in Sissako’s *Timbuktu*, could conceivably be applied to both contemporary and canonical Francophone African films, shedding new light on the way in which filmmakers approached issues of corrupt postcolonial governance, social exclusion, and recent intrastate conflicts.

In privileging “slowness” as a critical perspective for understanding these films it is important, however, to acknowledge the potentially problematic connotations of this term, especially as it evokes a variety of assumptions related to Africa’s place in history, both intellectual and cinematic. The idea of slowness, with its accompanying implication of belatedness, uncomfortably recalls discourses of African backwardness and lack of progress that have been used as pretexts for both colonial and neocolonial acts of domination and exclusion. Furthermore, this aesthetic of filmmaking has frequently been linked to the lack of funding for African filmmakers, a material reality which gives rise to a critical trope which I believe needs to be examined. While acknowledging the importance of African cinematic production as a means of inscribing alternative visions of the continent in the global imaginary, the underlying premise of this grand narrative is that African filmmakers, if they
were given access to more funds, would produce films that had increased social utility. Given that the proliferation of money in Hollywood does not necessarily lead to more thoughtful and nuanced films, and given that Western genre movies are avidly consumed in Africa, it is important, I believe, to maintain some critical distance from the underfunded narrative, and the utopic vision of flourishing transcultural film production for which it advocates.

It is helpful to think of this discourse in light of what Graham Huggan and others have described as the appropriation of marginal status as a legitimizing identity, where an artist decries the very status that is responsible for his or her visibility, lamenting the conditions that, ironically, are responsible for their professional success. Without being cynical of such a posture, it is worth noting what is lost when criticism itself engages in such a move. In other words, when decrying the marginality of African cinema and suggesting possible remedies, rather than taking it for a perhaps lamentable but entrenched reality, is a standard trope of film criticism. As mentioned previously, such a stance risks forever painting African films as being somehow “less than”, of imputing to them an incompleteness that could only be remedied by an infusion of Hollywood-level cash and production values. It is worth asking what it would mean to reframe the debate from the opposite perspective, starting from the assumption that the economic and historic forces that would need to shift to make such a reality possible go far beyond further opening up the spigots of government or international aid to African filmmakers.

In the specific case of the critical narratives used to discuss Francophone African films on violence, it is crucial, I believe, to consider these films not simply as alternatives to

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254 See also Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace*. 224
Western essentializing or “afro-pessimist” portrayals, a discourse which reproduce a narrative of African authenticity tied to a more sophisticated portrayal of violence. As David Murphy and Patrick Williams have pointed out, in the past decade has come recognition that African film criticism has “long been subject to a form of exceptionalism, which has seen it occupy a space in-between other, more established fields” (2). To apply this exceptionalism in terms of Francophone African cinematic representations of violence, which Mboti claims are “more grounded” (52) is to risk too narrow a definition of what is considered an “African” way of showing a traumatic event, while also skirting dangerously close to the essentializing trope of African authenticity which has its own dark history of misappropriation by colonial and postcolonial Western governments and business interests. Rather, as I have attempted to show in my close analysis of Sissako’s *Timbuktu*, such films can also use the particular cultural context of sub-Saharan African to represent transcultural and transhistorical mechanisms and processes of exclusion, fear, and control through violence. Rather than offering an “alternative” to Western visions of the continent, a move which subordinates rather than validates this cultural production, these films can exist as fully-realized cinematic representations in their own right, revealing how a particular continent and its cinematic tradition, engages with histories of violence and trauma whose resonance is both local and universal.
CONCLUSION

Since its inception, Francophone African literature has been labeled as a literature of witnessing, that is to say a discourse whose principal purpose is to reflect a certain, objectively verifiable reality present in the outside world. While acknowledging the importance of this function (shedding light on the abuses of colonialism and the corruption of post-independence dictatorships), it is also crucial to give these works a degree of artistic autonomy, by considering their formal qualities in a way that is not overly determined by historical factors. Certain critics have already begun to question whether Francophone authors still feel this “burden of commitment,” which marked much early writing, and these critics have started to turn their attention to the aesthetic content of these texts. However, when dealing with literary representations of real world atrocities, considering these texts in purely aesthetic terms is neither desirable nor wholly productive. It is therefore imperative that we acknowledge these texts as literature of witness while also shifting our definition of witnessing to include more nuanced explanations of literary form and representational strategies. Witnessing as defined by trauma theory offers a useful critical lens, but one that also has limits in terms of how it approaches the individual bearing witness. As previously noted, the notion of the witness as a medium who gives access to a universal truth can create a troubling erasure of the subjectivity of the witness speaking. Conceiving of witnessing in dialogic terms as an encounter between literary testimony and reader allows us to examine these texts’ ability to bear witness to present violence while acknowledging their autonomy as works of art to which each reader constructs a unique relationship.

The central concern of my dissertation is thus the push and pull between the individual bearing witness and the collective memory in which this testimony is so often inscribed. In engaging with the literature and film emerging from the recent violence in Francophone Africa it became clear that the practice of bearing witness also involves the construction of an individual voice, a voice which demands recognition for its suffering and which often contests the notion that it be used as an avatar for a uniquely “Rwandan,” “Congolese,” or “African” experience. Trauma studies, with its focus on the process of bearing witness for an individual, and narratology, with its focus on the “voice” that speaks to us from any text, provide a critical framework that could unpack the precise ways in which the voice of the witness within these child soldier narratives, survivor testimonies, and films might be understood outside of nationalist or Pan-African labels.

In addition to literature and film, newer media for transmitting testimony deserve greater consideration. Scholars have written extensively about video recordings of Holocaust testimony, emphasizing the political and ethical implications of listening to the traumatic memories of victims of the Shoah. However, comparable efforts by the Rwandan state or non-profits, such as “Voices of Rwanda,” to archive survivor testimony online remain understudied. Further work can and should be done to examine the archival practices of Holocaust and Rwandan genocide testimonies, reflecting on the political, ideological, and cultural stakes of the recorded testimony as a means of accessing history.

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Furthermore, as new generations come of age who did not directly witness this violence, a preoccupation with the “post-conflict” generations has already emerged. The French journalist Jean Hatzfeld has recently published a book interviewing the children of genocide survivors and perpetrators, investigating how this traumatic past is shared and transmitted to those who did not live it.²⁵⁷ Across the ocean in Haiti a parallel process is unfolding as young artists and playwrights respond to the brutal dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier which many of them did not experience directly. In addition to the types of fictional and nonfictional witness described in my study, the consideration of how postmemory, that is the intergenerational transmission of a traumatic past, functions in the francophone world will, I believe, become an increasingly urgent object of study.²⁵⁸ Moving forward, as scholars continue to rethink the categories and temporalities associated with trauma, it will be necessary to include these postmemory generations, whose understanding of past histories of violence they did not experience will shape the legacy of genocide and war for future generations.


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