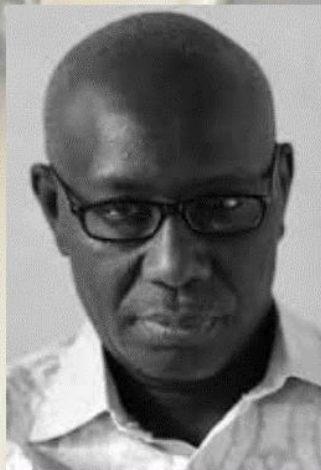




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Boubacar Boris Diop

Une écriture déroutante



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SOMMAIRE

(Im)pouvoir de la littérature.....	i
Préface de Kalidou SY	
Les je(ux) de Boubacar (Boris) DIOP.....	1
Boubacar CAMARA	
Haunting of the Return in Boubacar Boris Diop's <i>Thiaroye: terre rouge</i> and <i>Murambi: le livre des ossements</i>	27
Bojana COULIBALY	
Murambi : un tombeau à ciel ouvert.....	47
Pierre GOMEZ	
La question du choix linguistique dans la création littéraire chez Boubacar Boris Diop : l'exemple de <i>Doomi golo</i>	65
Ibrahima SARR	
Écriture, mémoire et subversion : les (en)jeux de la création esthétique dans <i>Les tambours de la mémoire</i>	93
Alioune-B. DIANÉ	
Boubacar Boris Diop ou les lacets de la mémoire.	111
Mamoussé DIAGNE	
Société et esthétique de l'inachevé chez Boubacar Boris Diop.....	121
Jonathan Russel NSANGOU	
Lecture intertextuelle et intermédiatique du <i>Temps de Tamango</i> et du <i>Cavalier et son ombre</i> de Boubacar Boris Diop.....	141
Babou DIENE	

Langues et littératures

Hors série n°1, avril 2014

« La solitude du clown ». N'Dongo, Diery Faye, Aly Kaboye, les mendiants-
conteurs..... 159

Liana NISSIM

Boubacar Boris Diop, entre fiction et réalité : les affleurements autobiographiques
dans *Les Petits de la guenon*..... 179

Apo Philomène SEKA

Boubacar Boris Diop: The Achievement of the Craft of I-Narration187

Ousmane NGOM

Prise de parole, prise de conscience (*Diallo, l'homme sans nom* de Boubacar Boris
Diop)..... 219

Francesca PARABOSCHI

Les espaces de non-dit chez Boubacar Boris Diop..... 249

Pierre VAUCHER

A Narrative of Catastrophe: *Le Cavalier et son ombre*..... 271

Nasrin QADER

Écriture, mémoire et oralité dans *Le Cavalier et son ombre* de Boubacar Boris Diop 291

Fodé SARR

Boubacar Boris Diop : l'écrivain et ses ombres 315

Boubacar CAMARA et Ousmane NGOM

Revisiter Territoire, mythe, représentation dans la littérature gambienne : une
méthode géocritique de Pierre Gomez 349

Sylvie COLY

Haunting of the Return in Boubacar Boris Diop's *Thiaroye: terre rouge* and *Murambi: le livre des ossements*

Bojana COULIBALY*

Résumé :

*Le retour spatio-temporel vers le moment tragique du massacre, aussi bien celui de Thiaroye (décembre 1944) que celui de Murambi (avril 1994), permet chez Boubacar Boris Diop d'éveiller les consciences, de forcer la mémoire douloureuse à se révéler et à se purger, le lecteur à apprendre et comprendre ce qui a pu nous mener à de telles tragédies humaines. Boubacar Boris Diop a en effet bien saisi l'importance de ce qui nous hante. La « hantise du retour » (**haunting of the return**), expression exhalée par Ngugi wa Thiong'o, se compose d'une part de cette émotion qui mêle nostalgie de notre culture, de la convivialité de la vie traditionnelle, de la mélodie de notre langue maternelle, d'autre part, de l'exil de notre patrie tant chérie, ainsi que de la hantise de la souffrance vécue durant la colonisation. **Thiaroye: terre rouge** (1981) et **Murambi : le livre des ossements** (2000) sont aussi bien pour l'écrivain, le lecteur, que les protagonistes, un retour mental, spirituel, physique nécessaire de l'exil. Cette étude s'intéresse aux modes de retour physique et mental effectué par les protagonistes vers une patrie morcelée et marquée par le souvenir de l'horreur.*

Keywords: *haunting of the return, horror, trauma, narrative, collective memory*

The haunting of the return is the urgency to denounce the unspeakable¹ which haunts us inevitably. It is the impossibility to forget the unforgettable tragedy of our common history and a struggle against revisionism. Since “trauma survivors struggle with transforming their experiences into narrative” (van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007: 26), the writer gives voice to the victims and helps them find a language capable of revealing the horror. As Boubacar Boris Diop has himself declared when referring to the Rwandan tragedy, it is our responsibility as writers,

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¹ Chris N van der Merwe & Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela in *Narrating our Healing: Perspectives on Working through Trauma* explain why is trauma unspeakable: “Extreme trauma is ‘unspeakable’ precisely because of the inadequacy of language to fully convey victims’ experiences” (25-6)

readers, artists, individuals, “to call the monster by its name”.² Diop’s return to the tragic events is significant because it allows us to understand not only that the victims were victims but also, as he declares in his afterword to the 2011 edition of *Murambi*, the circumstances of the tragedy and the motivations of the perpetrators.³ Again, as Diop says : “chaque cri doit faire l'objet d'une étude particulière pour qu'il ne se réitère pas.”⁴ Hence, the importance of representing the tragic event in a narrative form is undoubtedly for the writer attempting to prevent its recurrence or as Jacques Derrida states in his *Donner la mort* when referring to the function of narrative: “Cette narration est généalogique mais elle ne veut pas seulement acte de mémoire. Elle *témoigne*, comme le ferait un acte éthico-politique : pour aujourd’hui et pour demain.”⁵ “Haunting of the return”, a phrase borrowed from Ngugi wa’Thiong’o, is the mixed feeling of nostalgia and fear of past suffering experienced through the need to return to the homeland. We aim at unfolding in this study the different forms of return that the represented individuals experience and which further reflect Boris Diop’s own return into two traumatic historical events, namely the 1944 Thiaroye massacre of a part of the Senegalese infantry and the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda? We might further ask ourselves if there is a form of achievable healing of the trauma faced, if there is indeed a prospect of regeneration, in other words, if life is possible again, and through which terms life is achieved.

The return of the writer

On the occasion of Great Britain’s recognition in June 2013 of the crimes committed against the Mau-Mau in Kenya and offer of financial compensation, Diop reminds us of the Thiaroye tragedy, which has up to this day been only partially and very

² Diop, Boubacar Boris. Interview by Boniface Mongo-Mboussa, *Africultures*. Rwanda 2000 : mémoires d’avenir. Issue 30 (September 2000) : pp. 15-17, Print. Diop states : « cette tragédie m’a appris à appeler les monstres par leur nom. » (p. 16)

³ Diop, Boris. “Postface” *Murambi*. Paris: Zulma, 2011, p. 243

⁴ Diop, Boris. Interview by Marie Bénard, March 2001, Web, June 15, 2013, aircigeweb.free.fr/resources/rwanda/RwandaDiop1.html

⁵ Derrida, Jacques. *Donner la mort*. Paris: Galilée, 1999, p. 56

Bojana COULIBALY

recently recognized by France, and as Diop observes, France has been minimizing its casualties.⁶ The recognition of the responsibility of some European countries in tragedies faced by Africans such as the Thiaroye massacre, the Mau-Mau war, or the Rwandan genocide indicates the significance of African writers' capacity to initiate social and political progress and to spread awareness.⁷

Diop affirms in his afterword to *Murambi, le livre des ossements* that the need to return to the location of the tragic event and to further narrate the event – after having investigated the circumstances of the tragedy – additionally comes from elements of afro-pessimism discernible in his previous novel *le Cavalier et son ombre* (1997) and which to him is a problem faced by African writers in general.⁸ It is indeed after coming to recognize the significance of the fight against afro-pessimism that Diop accepted to participate in the 1998 Fest' Africa project, namely *Rwanda, écrire par devoir de mémoire*. Understanding the circumstances of the Rwandan conflict is also to Diop revealing the involvement of the international community and more

⁶ Diop, B. Boris. Interview by Mehdi Ba in *Jeune Afrique*, June 2013, Web, July 2, 2013, www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2736p029-032.xml2/

⁷ The British offer of compensation for the crimes committed against the Mau-Mau under the British rule comes after Ngugi's publishing of his latest memoir *In the House of the Interpreter* (2012) in which he narrates, among other experiences, the abuses and suffering faced by Kenyans and the Mau-Mau revolutionaries under the British rule in the 1950's. The families of the Thiaroye massacre victims are yet to be financially compensated and the role of the French in the Rwandan genocide yet to be recognized.

⁸ DIOP, *op. cit.*, "Postface", p. 244-45. He writes: "Je me suis senti d'autant plus mal à l'aise durant les premiers jours à Kigali que j'y avais débarqué dans cet état d'esprit plus ou moins afro-pessimiste. Dans mon précédent roman, *le Cavalier et son ombre*, j'avais glissé quelques paragraphes sur ce que je n'osais même pas appeler un génocide, sans avoir jamais mis les pieds au Rwanda et sans avoir la moindre idée de ce qui s'y était passé entre avril et juillet 1994 (...) chacune de ces tragédies, loin d'exister par elle-même, avec de complexes ressorts politiques, économiques et culturels, est simplement perçue comme une des nombreuses répliques du même tremblement de terre qui n'en finirait pas de secouer le continent depuis la nuit des temps. A ce compte, Khadidja, l'héroïne de *Cavalier et son ombre*, aurait pu remplacer dans tout le roman le mot "Rwanda" par "Somalie", "Érythrée", "Liberia" ou "Congo Brazzaville" sans jamais avoir l'impression de s'exposer à un contresens ou de brouiller les repères historiques. C'est au prix d'amalgames aussi superficielles et insensés que l'on paye, pour ainsi dire, son écot d'écrivain africain "engagé". "

specifically the one of Belgium and later France. In his afterword, like in *Murambi*, he insists indeed on the responsibility of France in the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Diop's novel similarly stresses the lack of action from the international community and shows that, although very influential countries including France and the United States were aware that genocide was taking place, their decision-makers did not act to stop it. Returning to the tragic events of Thiaroye and Rwanda serves to Diop, acting both as a novelist, a playwright and a journalist, to reveal a truth about colonization and Rwanda, which remains too often undisclosed by the mainstream media.

Return, as we read in the 1983 shorter edition of *The Oxford Dictionary*, as a substantive, is: 1. "The act of coming back to or from a place, person or condition"; 2. "The fact of recurring or coming round again"; 3. "The recurrence or renewal of some condition"; and as a verb: 1. "to come or go back to a place or person"; 2. "To go back in discourse, to revert *to* or resume a topic or subject"; 3. "To revert, go back again, *to* (or *into*) a previous condition or state; to come back *to* oneself". Other relevant definitions of *return* include: "to take or lead back upon a former direction", "to restore to a normal state", "to repay or pay back in some way". We may add that there are two types of return, namely physical and/or mental. When we look into the past, we return. When we write or read a history book, we return. When we narrate our personal story, we return. When we narrate someone else's story, we return. The notion of return persistently resonates in Diop's fiction and is particularly omnipresent in *Thiaroye: terre rouge* and *Murambi*. His own return into the past is both physical and mental, as it is a return in time and a return in location. Diop's characters in these two works of fiction similarly return to their violated homeland.

The Oxford Dictionary quoted above indicates that the term *haunting* is closely related to the notion of *habit* and *frequency*. Diop explains that the afterword of his new edition of *Murambi* serves the purpose of responding to some of the questions that he has been asked since the first edition has been published and it allows him to further reconnect with the reader on the issues of Rwanda and the genocide.⁹ We

⁹ Diop, B. Boris. Interview by Bios Diallo in *Jeune Afrique*, June 2011, Web, June 10, 2013, <http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/ARTJAJA2630p108-110.xml0/onu-algerie-france->

Bojana COULIBALY

therefore note that Diop continuously revisits historical events in order to keep them alive in our memory. He teaches us that silence perpetuates horror, that it prevents trauma from healing and that it prevents us from restoring our human dignity. Through Diop's creative writings, we are urged to become accustomed to denouncing, disclosing, remembering the tragic, and through our return to the traumatic events, we learn lessons, we spread knowledge, we send warnings, we restore, we connect and we struggle, so that it happens – never again. The reconnection with the tragic event is thus accomplished through its recollection, as Diop declares: "C'est pour le rappeler que j'ai tenu à ajouter une postface à cette nouvelle édition de *Murambi, le livre des ossements*."¹⁰

Different strategies of return could be noted in *Thiaroye, terre rouge* and *Murambi*. Diop first carries the reader into the past presenting us with facts related to colonization in Senegal, which is depicted as a background to the 1944 Thiaroye Camp tragedy and with the circumstances surrounding the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Diop's two works of fiction analyzed in this paper hence allow the reader to recognize the actual occurrence of the portrayed tragic events and confirm that the depicted Senegal and Rwanda are not represented in a merely fictional setting. In *Thiaroye, terre rouge* the writer chooses to return to a village called Sanankoro which is depicted in 1940 as devoid of any means of subsistence due to the war effort and food rationing which France imposed on its African colonies at the outset of World War II.

The annihilation of Sanankoro is representative of the Africans' sacrifice of their own survival as well as of the French severe repression of resistance against colonization and the war effort, as Naman, one of the only survivors of Sanankoro sent to war in France in 1940, declares: "Je vois les morts de Sanankoro et à travers eux ceux de tous les pays. Je sens encore les chaînes qui m'ont surpris en plein sommeil. J'entends les cris des innocents de mon village, ceux qui ne voulaient pas aller à Strasbourg (...)" (*Thiaroye* 162).

senegalboubacar-boris-diop-la-france-se-comporte-dans-ses-anciennes-colonies-comme-nulle-part-ailleurs.html

¹⁰ DIOP, *op. cit.*, "Postface", p. 268

In *Murambi* some of the characters represented are individuals that either have existed or still exist today. Jessica and Simeon are inspired from a young woman and an elder that Diop had met during his 1998 stay in Rwanda. Several known individuals are referred to including Grégoire Kayibanda, Juvénal Habyarimana, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, which brings the reader closer to the political context at the time of the tragedy. The Arusha peace negotiations which preceded the genocide are pointed to by Diop through Jessica's point of view as a reminder of the general context surrounding the tragedy. Moreover, in order to trigger the reader's interest in the event as a historical occurrence as well as to push the reader to look for complementary information, Diop uses hints to some of the most tragic killings including the torture and killing of Theresa Mukandori, which is extensively depicted in the novel, and which gives the reader a somewhat complete picture of her ordeals. The description of her death nonetheless triggers our interest in researching more on the circumstances of her murder and potentially in looking for pictures of her brutalized body, which had been exposed until 2005 as a duty to remember the horror of the genocide. On the other hand, Agathe Uwilingiyimana's brutal assassination is simply hinted by the writer through Jessica's recollection of some of the events: "Raconter ce qu'ils ont fait à Agathe Uwilingiyimana est au-dessus de mes forces" (*Murambi* 42). The reader is hence invited to research on the circumstances of the Prime Minister's assassination which took place on April 7th 1994. We learn that her fate has been similarly shocking. By looking at her assassination, questions are necessarily raised and lead us to further investigate the political context at the time.

Naman and Cornelius: the painful return

Naman Kouyaté is introduced in *Thiaroye, terre rouge* as an inhabitant from Sanankoro whose young son died of hunger. The death of his son is described through painful recollections of the agony that hunger led to inevitably. This tragic moment in Naman's life which he sums up with these words: "un enfant ne doit pas mourir de faim", leads him to begin to resist, for as he declares to his fellow villagers: "Écoutez mes frères, cela a assez duré, tant que nous ne nous dresserons contre l'envahisseur, il continuera à se gaver de notre chair et de la chair de nos enfants"

Bojana COULIBALY

(*Thiaroye* 150). After all the inhabitants of Sanankoro namely elders, women and children have been massacred because of the resistance of its inhabitants against the French intruders, Naman is sent to war in France right at the beginning of World War II. Surviving the war, he returns in 1944 to be stationed at the Thiaroye camp, where he calls for a rebellion and is among the soldiers shot on December 1st, 1944. Cornelius Uvimana's return is central in *Murambi*. A fictional character, he is a history professor exiled to Djibouti, the son of one of the major plotters of the Murambi massacre, returning to Rwanda in 1998, that is, four years after the genocide. At his return, he discovers, at the same time as the reader, the circumstances that led to the genocide.

In the context of Thiaroye, we note that the site of return becomes a site of beginning from which the French West African infantry departs to France and to which it returns to ultimately remain. The soldiers involved depart from void and return to void, as the returning soldier Seydina implies: "Depuis 1940 je n'ai plus aucune nouvelle de ma famille. Je les crois morts, eux aussi me croient mort" (*Thiaroye* 162). Following the first return into the moment immediately preceding the departure to war, the second return portrayed in *Thiaroye, terre rouge* is represented by the 1944 arrival of the French West African troops to the Thiaroye camp. Naman arrives to the camp which he describes as a "concentration camp" (*Thiaroye* 162). He claims that he departed from a concentration camp and ended in another: "J'ai passé trois ans à Dachau et à Buchenwald. Aujourd'hui c'est Thiaroye. Un autre camp de concentration" (*Thiaroye* 162). The cycle of pain and suffering is hence omnipresent. Although these soldiers have dreamed to return for four years and have hoped to experience freedom and joy, they come to face a new form of suffering. They are deprived of their right to financial compensation for having fought the war, and moral compensation for having faced bad treatment and segregation during the war.

Diop's characters thus experience a double-displacement. The first one being the one of expatriation, the second one occurs after the return when facing the transformations, the decisive and definitive changes that led to the impossibility of living our life the way we used to live it before. Cornelius' emotional state at the time of his return to Rwanda precisely reflects ways in which such a return could haunt us. His stream of consciousness indicates indeed that he has been haunted by

his return: “il avait souvent vécu son retour en pensée” (*Murambi* 1975). Interestingly, a parallel could be drawn with Diop’s own journey to Rwanda in 1998 who sought to discover the tragedy and its circumstances. Although Cornelius returns to his homeland, his alienation and estrangement have been complete. Both Diop’s and Cornelius’ journeys to Rwanda become an experience of rebirth. When returning to his birthplace Murambi, Cornelius concedes that a return from exile is a form of return into childhood (*Murambi* 177).¹¹ In Diop’s view, as we have suggested, the journey allows him to adjust the general misinterpretation by the media of tragic events faced by Africans, which in turn initiates the widely-spread afro-pessimism that Diop equally attempts to alter. Diop himself affirms that Cornelius’ return is similar to that of the writers who “discover Rwanda after merely having imagined it”.¹²

Cornelius faces different types of emotions including fear of past trauma and of the repressed memories, fear of the unknown, as well as nostalgia of childhood. At first, as he explains, fear is the main emotion that he experiences during his recollections of Rwanda: “tout tenait en quelques mots: depuis son enfance le Rwanda lui faisait peur” (*Murambi* 61). His situation is described as complex at the time of the civil war as he is indeed Tutsi from his mother and Hutu from his father. After years of exile in Djibouti, his identity is fragmented and he is in a state of alienation. He notices indeed how different he is from his fellow Rwandans: “‘Est-ce que je ne ressemble plus à un Rwandais?’ pensa Cornelius, amusé” (*Murambi* 54). As he concedes, his return becomes a necessary rebirth: “Revenir dans son pays – y être heureux ou y souffrir – était une renaissance” (*Murambi* 62). It is only his understanding of the past, as he declares, which could allow him to reclaim his lost identity and to be born again: “il ne voulait pas devenir un être sans passé” (*Murambi* 62). We similarly notice an earlier awareness of the importance of his past in the formation of his identity: “Il était évident que tout ce qu’il avait vécu hors du Rwanda ne trouverait son véritable sens que dans ce qui était arrivé quatre ans plus tôt” (*Murambi* 52).

¹¹ Diop writes: “peut-être ne sort-on pas de l’exil sans redevenir un enfant.”

¹² DIOP., *op. cit.*, *Africultures*. Diop originally stated : “[Cornelius] est, d’une certaine façon, chacun des auteurs qui découvraient le Rwanda après l’avoir seulement imaginé. ”, p. 17.

Bojana COULIBALY

Cornelius' return journey consists in attempting to unfold the circumstances of the death of some of the members of his family. His uncle Simeon Habineza remains the single possible link with the past as he is on the one hand, the only family member who Cornelius believes survived the atrocities, and on the other hand, Cornelius' reconnection with the past is accomplished through his earlier memories of Simeon. These memories reveal his constant struggle between anxiety and nostalgia as we could read:

Certes, il y avait connu des matins de pur éblouissement, comme ce jour où Siméon lui avait parlé, sur les rives du lac Mohanzi, de la naissance du Rwanda. Il repensait souvent à l'enfant à la flûte qui était passé tout près d'eux à ce moment-là. Mais il ne pouvait oublier les jours de terreur, dans ses jeunes années, quand des tueurs rôdaient en permanence autour de lui. (*Murambi* 61)

Further on in the novel and during his encounter with Simeon, Cornelius concedes that he has not indeed forgotten the little boy with the flute: “– Je me souviens de cet enfant qui jouait de la flûte. Je ne l'ai jamais oublié” (*Murambi* 179). He then goes on extensively depicting the picturesque environment which has permanently been engraved in his memory:

Cornelius revoyait tout. Sous leurs pieds, le sol boueux et gorgé par endroits d'une eau lourde et noirâtre. Le berger en guenilles conduisant deux ou trois bêtes à l'abreuvoir. Le taureau aux cornes longues et pointues qui formaient un cercle au-dessus de la tête (...) Et, surtout l'enfant à la flûte. A l'instant où Cornelius écrasait entre ses doigts une feuille de goyavier pour en humer le parfum, le son clair et pur d'une flûte s'était élevé vers le ciel. Un enfant d'une dizaine d'années, sans doute le fils du berger, était passé devant eux sans paraître les voir. La scène, demeurée vivace dans son esprit, avait nourri ses années d'exil. Selon les jours, elle lui revenait par fragments – un détail pouvait alors le plonger dans une longue rêverie – ou comme un tableau d'une harmonie quasi parfaite. (*Murambi* 180)

The moments of harmony that haunt Cornelius help him reconnect with his life before his exile. Petar Ramadanovic informs us that “a discourse about the past is

overdetermined by certain present conditions.”¹³ Although Simeon urges Cornelius to remember the positive memories and forget the negative ones, Cornelius’ further perception of the past is linked to the conditions faced by his fellow Rwandans during the civil war and the genocide. Returning to Rwanda in 1998 he remembers a day in February 1973. He describes it as a campaign of terror directed toward the Tutsi population: “ils disaient que tous les Tutsi devaient quitter le pays” (*Murambi* 57). On that day, his uncle Simeon guided Cornelius and his Tutsi friends Jessica and Stanley into a banana plantation to hide them from the atrocities that were being committed. From their hiding spot, they witnessed what Cornelius remembers as: “des flammes et des cris de terreur” (*Murambi* 57). Simeon then led them to Burundi where they heard about the massacres of thousands of Tutsi. Cornelius remembers that day as what he calls “une tache sombre dans sa memoire” (*Murambi* 61). The traumatic dimension of that moment remains vivid in his memory and haunts him persistently. Cornelius seems to expect a possible relief on his return to the location of the more recent tragedy during which his family perished.

His return is also accompanied by sub-narratives that are embedded in his main narrative. The story within the story pattern is indeed omnipresent and suggests a constant return to the 1994 events as they are revealed to Cornelius and to the reader. The stories are either told by Cornelius who discloses other people’s accounts of the events or by other characters whose narratives are directly reported to Cornelius and to the reader. Among these sub-narratives we note for instance the remarkable account of a survivor of the Ntarama church massacre: “– Les miliciens Interahamwe sont arrivés vers onze heures du matin, un jour d’avril. Les Tutsi étaient venus se réfugier dans leur paroisse (...) Moi, je me suis caché dans les marécages (...)” (*Murambi* 98). We notice that the trauma that this man experienced is suggested by his omission of the precise date of the massacre. The mental return to the event haunts him and he repeatedly, through his narrative, reenacts the horror. Theresa Mukandori’s torture and death is similarly told to Cornelius and a number of other accounts are disclosed to him throughout the chapter.

¹³ Ramadanovic, Petar. *Forgetting Futures: On Memory, Trauma, and Identity*. New York: Lexington Books, 2001, p. 1

Bojana COULIBALY

The thought of the different commemoration sites that Cornelius visited literally haunts him, as we note in his stream of consciousness: “toujours hanté pas ce qu’il venait de voir à Nyamata et à Ntarama” (*Murambi* 102). His return to Rwanda alternates between traces of genocide that he witnessed at the church of Ntarama, the church of Nyamata or the Murambi technical school, and what he presents as: “la vie de tous les jours” (*Murambi* 102). In addition, the revelation about his father’s involvement in the Murambi massacre further confuses him about reality, as he realizes that what he might have believed for many years concerning his father is far from being the truth: “Cornelius avait la tête en feu. Toutes sortes de sentiments et d’idées s’y bouscuaient dans une confusion absolue” (*Murambi* 106). Before Cornelius concedes his father’s actions, he at first denies them: “J’ai du mal à te croire. J’ai parlé plusieurs fois à mon père au début des massacres. Il était horrifié. Est-il possible qu’il ait fait cela? (...) Bien que hutu, mon père s’est battu toute sa vie, il a essayé de monter un mouvement contre l’impunité. Il a pris des risques” (*Murambi* 105). His confusion about reality is another step that Diop takes in order to urge us to seek evidence and truth in tragic events that we face as human beings. Cornelius’ experience shows us that it is not enough to read about an event in newspapers or books, it is not enough to talk to a few people who have faced a tragedy and it is not enough to call on our instinct. On the contrary, finding the truth about a human tragedy is a constant and a frequent exercise of open-mindedness, of investigation, of learning and of geographical mobility.

An instance of the complexity of the Rwandan genocide is revealed when Diop reminds us in *Murambi* of the ongoing tensions – exacerbated by the Belgians during the colonial period – between the Tutsi and the Hutu ever since the 1950’s. Stanley in the novel indeed explains when addressing Cornelius after his return: “Le génocide n’a pas commencé le 6 avril 1994 mais en 1959 par de petits massacres auxquels personne ne faisait attention” (*Murambi* 67). There is moreover a reference to the mutual responsibility of the Tutsi and the Hutu as pointed out by Cornelius who explains that the Hutu and the Twa used to be oppressed by the Tutsi (*Murambi* 91). The consequences of the past, we may conclude, necessarily impact the present conditions of life in Rwanda and the conditions of cohabitation of the Tutsi, the Hutu and the Twa. The return to past events is therefore in this context a necessary process which brings a broader understanding of the situation faced by Rwandans in 1994.

The same is demonstrated in *Thiaroye, terre rouge*, as we understand that the context of suffering of the French West African infantry goes back to the pain experienced during colonization. Returning to the circumstances that led to the tragic event becomes thus a necessary step toward the revelation of the truth about the event and a necessary step toward the healing of the wound engendered.

Haunting to heal

In light of Diop's two works of fiction engaged in this study, we shall ask ourselves if forgetting or in this case an intentional omission of events, leads to a healing of the trauma? Is there a "healthy forgetting", as suggested by Petar Ramadanovic¹⁴, that is, in our everyday lives trying to erase traces of tragedy that would haunt us and prevent us from leading our lives normally? Simeon Habineza in *Murambi* states, when addressing his nephew Cornelius, that remembering the positive and negative memories of a traumatic past helps us find our way (*Murambi* 178).¹⁵ In his view, memories of these moments could teach us where we come from, or as Simeon states: "– On sait ainsi quelles épreuves il a fallu surmonter pour mériter de vivre. On sait d'où on vient" (*Murambi* 178). Although Simeon is a reminder of certain of these traumatic moments in Cornelius' life, he encourages him to seek to mainly remember the positive (*Murambi* 180). He exclaims: "tâche de penser à ce qui peut encore naître et non à ce qui est déjà mort" (*Murambi* 183). The ambivalence of Simeon's position about memory is representative of traumatic situations, or situations of exile in which the victim seeks a balance between moments of joy and moments of violence and horror. Diop's novel urges the reader to reflect on such a problem, that is, how do we cope with our memories in a situation such as the one faced by Cornelius? There is, as Simeon implies, a necessary forgetting, and there is on the other hand, a necessary remembering which is designed for the future, intended to prevent a recurrence of the tragedy and which could also lead to the reconciliation of the groups involved.

¹⁴ RAMADANOVIC, *op. cit.*, p. 7

¹⁵ Diop writes: "c'est bien de se rappeler de certaines choses. Cela aide parfois à trouver son chemin dans la vie."

Bojana COULIBALY

The notion of “dark stain” raised by Cornelius echoes the “vague, enormous thing” recollected by Scott Momaday in *The Names* (1976) and analyzed by Petar Ramadanovic as a “process, fundamental for the work of memory” which in turn allows the victim to connect the past and the present.¹⁶ Ramadanovic refers to what some critics would call a “healthy forgetting,”¹⁷ which he seeks to nuance. He explains indeed that the relationship between forgetting and remembering is a complex one. Forgetting could be “a disease, a poison”, that it could lead to “ignorance, senility, paralysis, loss of speech, loss of self-identity (...) its moral consequences: negligence and carelessness.” Seeking to forget could also be a source of revisionism and could infringe on the people’s capacity and will for reconciliation (Licata, Klein & Gély, 2007). On the other hand, Ramadanovic offers another insight into the notion of forgetting, which could be envisioned as a “cure.” It is when the traumatic elements of memory are forgotten that forgetting of the trauma appears as a step toward healing. Petar Ramadanovic hence explains by pointing to the complexity of the notion of forgetting:

When we work, we work precisely against forgetting. In order to work, we forget. In order to be a we, we forget. Some then say that there is a healthy forgetting, a necessary and curative forgetting because it makes it possible for us to work, to tell stories, to present ourselves to ourselves, reconciling the present and the past, reconciling one and another we that ‘we’ are.¹⁸

A reference to the notion of “healthy forgetting” stressed by Ramadanovic could be observed in the description of Nyamirambo given by Cornelius upon his return. He notices indeed:

les événements de 1994 n’avaient laissé nulle part de traces visibles (...) [Kigali] refusaient d’exhiber ces blessures (...) Le pays était (...) intact et chacun juste occupé à vivre sa vie. Des rendez-vous amoureux. Un tour chez le coiffeur. La routine des jours ordinaires (...). (*Murambi* 69)

¹⁶ RAMADANOVIC, *op. cit.*, p. 2

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

The traces of the tragedy are invisible in the everyday lives of the Rwandans, and it is specifically this intentional omission of the events, which seems to allow them to live their lives going forward.

Cornelius nevertheless questions what he calls: “ce mépris du tragique” (*Murambi* 70), and he wonders what is it that drives them to forget: “Était-ce par dignité ou par habitude du malheur?” (*Murambi* 70). Stanley himself – addressing Cornelius who wonders why does Stanley constantly seek to avoid talking about the massacres – loses temper and firmly maintains: “Sache une fois pour toutes que je veux oublier...” (*Murambi* 74). On the contrary, Gérard who survived the Murambi massacre urges Cornelius to remember and to believe: “Si tu préfères penser que j’ai imaginé ces horreurs, tu te sentiras l’esprit en repos et se ne sera pas bien. Ces souffrances se perdront dans des paroles opaques et tout sera oublié jusqu’aux prochains massacres” (*Murambi* 226). Stanley is described by Cornelius as the one who suffers the most (*Murambi* 221), while Simeon, Gérard and Jessica, who on the contrary freely talk about the atrocities and force Cornelius to remember, seem to have overcome the trauma and to have healed.

Cornelius’ return could hence be depicted as a struggle against forgetting, as he also forces those around him to remember and to provide him with answers. The traumatic past haunts him but is also combined with experiences of human bond between him, Simeon, Jessica, and Stanley, which he underlines: “Du passé venait de ressurgir le lien secret qui les unissait et qui était plus fort que tout” (*Murambi* 56). Although, Cornelius first appears as confused upon his arrival to Rwanda, little by little the story of the tragedy is uncovered to him and many of his questions are answered. As Diop confirmed in 2000, Cornelius is among those who imagined the tragedy away from its actual occurrence, through history books, newspapers, TV documentaries, and then returned to its location to truly discover it, and in a sense, as Stanley in the novel concedes, to become Rwandan. Stanley articulates: “ce que toute cette période de ma vie m’a appris (...): personne ne naît Rwandais. On apprend à le devenir (...) C’est un travail très lent de chacun de nous sur lui-même” (*Murambi* 67).

After the revelation concerning the circumstances of the death of his mother, sister and brother, as well as of his family on his mother’s side, Cornelius reaches a certain

Bojana COULIBALY

form of understanding of the Rwandan tragedy. He cynically declares himself a perfect Rwandan: “il se découvrait brusquement sous les traits du Rwandais idéal: à la fois victime et coupable” (*Murambi* 106). He admits that his life bears a different meaning and he indeed experiences a form of rebirth: “A présent, son retour d’exil ne pourrait plus avoir le même sens” (*Murambi* 106). The acceptance of his father’s final act of cruelty and of his family’s fate becomes, as he claims, the only possible way for him to find peace and meaning in life: “accepter son passé était le prix à payer pour commencer à retrouver la sérénité et le sens de l’avenir” (*Murambi* 210). Simeon reminds us that there is no difference between victims and perpetrators, that it is all a question of circumstance. Perpetrators are mere victims of manipulation, of other people’s thirst for power and lack of freedom, which Simeon confirms when he exclaims: “si le maître est un esclave, il ne faut pas lui obéir. Il faut le combattre” (*Murambi* 220). Simeon further declares, addressing angry Tutsi victims, that revenge is a dangerous act, that once it is started it is almost impossible to refrain, and he adds: “vous avez souffert, mais cela ne vous rend pas meilleur que ceux qui vous ont fait souffrir. Ce sont des gens comme vous et moi” (*Murambi* 210). *Murambi* therefore helps perpetrators to understand that they have also been used, and victims to learn to forgive.

Diop’s first physical then narrative return to the location of the Rwandan genocide appears as a strategy designed to force us to remember the tragedy so as to avoid carelessness, inhumanity, insensitivity and to struggle against its future recurrence. In a conversation between Jessica and Cornelius, the issue of afro-pessimism and the spread of horror is raised regarding the Sierra Leonean civil war and blood diamond context, Cornelius indeed declares: “Et sais-tu qu’en Sierra Leone, ils se contentent de mutiler leurs victimes (...) Je ne sais pas où ils trouvent la force de couper les jambes et les bras d’une fillette avant de la laisser repartir. Et tout le monde s’en fout” (*Murambi* 88). Diop, by seeking to provide the victims’ account of the tragedy, further participates in opposing a political abuse of the collective memory which could lead to either retaliations or the recurrence of the massacres of the surviving victims. As Licata, Klein and Gély state: “A l’issue d’un conflit, la manière dont le passé sera présenté par les représentants officiels des groupes - les versions choisies pour constituer leurs mémoires officielles - orientera en grande

partie l'évolution de leurs relations : vers la réconciliation ou le conflit."¹⁹ In addition, the way that the traumatic past is officially accounted for undoubtedly impacts and is impacted by people's identity (Likata, Klein & Gély).²⁰

In *Thiaroye* the notions of love, resistance and collective consciousness are put forward as different means of healing the trauma. On the one hand love appears to be triumphant against suffering, as it is demonstrated in Kadia's love for Naman: "Le meilleur moment de la journée: celui où tous mes malheurs s'éloignent de moi comme un mauvais songe. Tu es là Naman, je t'aime et j'oublie tout" (*Thiaroye* 174). Nevertheless, Naman warns us that love could also lead to inaction and to further agony. In addition, the different tragedies re-enacted in the play including traces of colonization, the annihilation of Sanankara, the hunger engendered by the war effort and finally the Thiaroye massacre, help us understand the urge to fight and to prevent such tragedies from recurring. The immortality of those who have died while fighting for a common good and freedom from oppression and dehumanization is pointed out as Naman declares: "des morts qui ne mourront jamais" (*Thiaroye* 167). The epilogue is representative of the immortality of the Senegalese martyr soldier as the voice of Naman, is heard resonating: "je vous l'avez dit, camarades! Nous ne sommes pas morts, nous ne mourrons jamais" (*Thiaroye* 202). Diop indicates through this immortality of the soldier that the fight goes on through remembering. Moctar's closing words of the play force the reader to remember and to keep fighting as he directly addresses the audience. The return to the tragic event hence helps us remember what needs to be fought for and what needs to be fought against. The phrase "new resolutions", reiterated at the end of the play, suggests a step toward rebirth, independence and the immortality of the fight for freedom in Africa, as echoed in Kadia's words, who mourning for Naman, finally comes to voice out the importance of collective struggle:

¹⁹ Likata, Laurent et al. "Mémoire des conflits, conflits de mémoires: une approche psychosociale et philosophique du rôle de la mémoire collective dans les processus de réconciliation intergroupe" *Social Science Information* Vol. 46/No 4, December 2007.

²⁰ In Likata's, Klein's and Gély's own words: "l'identité d'un individu n'est pas stable. Elle fluctue en fonction du contexte, qui rend saillant certaines appartenances au détriment d'autres, facilitant l'accès à certaines mémoires" p. 10

Bojana COULIBALY

A l'avant-garde du ghetto désormais fermes en leurs mains les résolutions nouvelles.

Les fils sont debout sans cesse plus haut que Kilimandjaro Le cri des fils Indivisible Et unique O notre haine unanime

sera bourrasque sur Cabora Bassa

Arrière barbares dessus notre Mozambique alors le fleuve sera libre

Et l'enfant caressera les crêtes du soleil. (*Thiaroye* 201)

Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela insist on the existence of “re-enactments of trauma” which to them “happen in many countries that have endlessly repeated conflict” such as former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It is then important as they claim to not only talk about the past but to know how to talk about it in order to achieve a form of reconciliation and therefore to avoid re-enacting these conflicts.²¹ They observe that “repetition of trauma takes place because there is something unfinished”, that “dialogue with one another across different groups is vital, and in this dialogue we should not only remember past traumas, but work through them and transcend them.”²² Such a healing through remembering is accomplished through the truth and reconciliation dimension of the novel *Murambi* as voice is given to both the victims and the perpetrators. The two perspectives are disclosed and allow each side to express their views, as well as to recognize their responsibility in one of the worst human tragedies of the twentieth century. Diop’s initiative therefore joins for instance the initiative of the Rwandan traditional Gacaca courts which have sought to extend truth, justice and reconciliation at the community level.²³

²¹ VAN DER MERWE & GOBODO-MADIKIZELA, *op. cit.*, p. 35

²² *Ibid.*, p. 36

²³ The Gacaca courts were set up in 2001 to reduce prison crowding. They winded up in June 2013 and have tried near 1.5 million people for acts related to the 1994 genocide. Although the courts have helped many survivors and perpetrators to live together thanks to its traditional vision of community justice and social cohabitation, some have been critical about the courts’ capacity for reconciliation and claim that about 100 survivors have been killed for having testified in the Gacaca courts since 2001, many note that it has exacerbated new group tensions, and issues of corruption have been raised. Difficulties therefore still remain, which

Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela additionally reiterate a common understanding in trauma theory of the notion of “bearing witness” or “telling one’s story of trauma”, “[r]econstructing the trauma into narrative form is one of the most crucial processes in the journey towards the victim’s healing.”²⁴ As we have previously suggested, Diop through his narrative of two twentieth century African tragedies, attempts to help the victims achieve a certain level of healing. The writer who narrates the traumatic experience acts as an “empathic listener”, for indeed “in order for the trauma narrative to heal, one’s trauma narrative has to be received by an empathic listener” (Van der Merwe & Gobodo-Madikizela, 2007: 27). The writer further helps the victim find a compassionate readership, which in turn broadens the number of empathic listeners. Diop indeed demonstrates how readers from around the world, thanks to *Murambi*, identify with the victims and express their sincere compassion in the letters addressed to the writer. It undoubtedly shows how the narrative reenactment of the tragic event allows a type of global recognition of human suffering. In Diop’s own words, the identification of readers around the globe with the victims of the 1994 genocide is “a reassuring victory”.²⁵ It allows the victims to be re-humanized after they have been mistreated. Diop clear-sightedly concludes: “Le devoir de mémoire est avant tout une façon d’opposer un projet de vie au projet d’anéantissement des génocidaires et le romancier y a son mot à dire.”²⁶

The enterprise *écrire par devoir de mémoire* has indeed brought awareness to the Rwandan youth as explained by Diop²⁷ who claims that Koulsy Lamko for instance has initiated a number of cultural and drama programs in Butare. Such a task helps both the younger generations understand the pain that their parents and previous generations faced, and brings some answers to those who experienced the tragedy

further shows us that the reconciliation process is a very complex one and requires a clear understanding of the situation of conflict. The documentary *Rwanda, les collines parlent* by Bernard Bellefroid (2008) gives an insight into the way the Gacaca courts functioned.

²⁴ VAN DER MERWE & GOBODO-MADIKIZELA, *op. cit.*, p. 26

²⁵ DIOP, *op. cit.*, “Postface”, p. 269, Diop originally writes: “quand une lectrice, loin du Rwanda, réhumanise ainsi les victimes en s’identifiant à elles, on peut parler d’une rassurante victoire contre les tueurs.”

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 254

Bojana COULIBALY

without really understanding it. In addition, the University of Butare has integrated the project *écrire par devoir de mémoire* into its university curriculum by creating a “Centre Universitaire des Arts”. Following on their 1998 stay in Rwanda, Diop and Lamko, with the participation of Abdourahmane Waberi and Veronique Tadjou, have also collaborated with Palmira Telesforo Cruz in the creation of a collective book entitled *Genocidio de los Tutsis de Ruanda: la memoria en camino* (2010). It undoubtedly allowed connecting the Rwandan experience with some other tragic memories of genocide, massacre and human rights violations in Latin America, including events that took place in Argentina in the 1970’s, Chile and Guatemala in the 1980’s. Diop adds that many literary and scientific documents have been produced on the genocide and he affirms that it led to a greater understanding of the plight of its victims.²⁸ It undoubtedly shows that knowledge and information about Rwanda is presently widespread, contrary to other tragedies such as the genocide of the Bosnians which took place a year after the genocide of the Tutsi. Such a high level of information about the Rwandan genocide allows for a greater understanding of the circumstances that led to the tragedy, which teaches us further the type of situations that we need to avoid and how to avoid them.

By means of conclusion, the capacity of Diop’s *Thiaroye*, *Terre rouge* and *Murambi, le livre des ossements* to recall the horror, is remarkable. The trauma experienced by those who have witnessed these tragedies echoes through Diop’s perpetual act of remembering and leads us to constantly denounce actions that could direct us, human beings, to the most despicable. Being haunted by the return to the traumatic past is a necessary step towards healing and a step against revisionism, which indisputably allows the writer and his/her audience to initiate progress at a global level. The experiences faced by Naman and Cornelius are experiences faced by humanity as a whole and are not isolated cases that could be forgotten, for as long as we remember, we will perpetually struggle to prevent the recurrence of these most barbarous crimes. Diop has thus achieved to create an empathic listener who has equally learned to honor and commemorate those who have suffered as well as to fight for those who continue to suffer.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 256-7

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