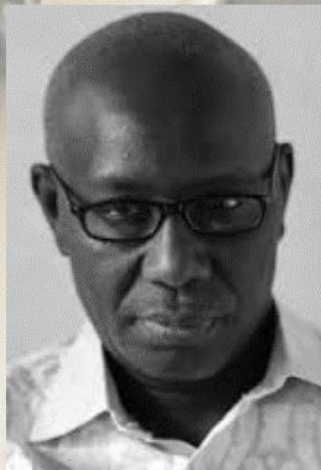




Revue du Groupe d'Etudes  
Linguistiques et Littéraires

# **Boubacar Boris Diop**

## **Une écriture déroutante**



Hors série

# **01**

Avril 2014

Coordonné par:  
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& Ousmane NGOM



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## **SOMMAIRE**

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

## *Langues et littératures*

Hors série n°1, avril 2014

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« 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-Narration ....187

### **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**

## A Narrative of Catastrophe: *Le Cavalier et son ombre*

Nasrin QADER\*

### Résumé

*Cet article prend pour son point de départ la relation entre une certaine notion de la catastrophe et la possibilité de la littérature; plus particulièrement, la possibilité de conter et raconter. Le roman de Boubacar Boris Diop *Le Cavalier et son ombre* fournit le site théorique et littéraire où cette notion se déploie dans toutes ses complexités et ses potentialités. L'analyse commence en précisant la catastrophe comme une rupture temporelle qui néanmoins met en rapport le toujours déjà et le pas encore de la dynamique catastrophique. Le récit se déploie dans l'espace de ce rapport constituant un présent sans fondement qui survient sous un double effet de la catastrophe : un événement passé et un événement à venir que le récit ne peut inscrire, ni l'un ni l'autre, dans ses plis. Ainsi, la catastrophe se caractérise par un effet de contagion, un débordement et un sans mesure, qui d'une part menace d'emporter le sujet récitant autant que le récit même, et d'une autre part devient la force d'une possibilité à venir, grâce à son caractère illimité et sans fin.*

**Mots clés:** Catastrophe, Narration, Récit, Politique et littérature, Le temps littéraire, Abjection, Le corps et le récit

Much of Boubacar Boris Diop's work is written on the traces of catastrophes. By "catastrophe" I do not mean only historically catastrophic events such as the Rwanda genocide, the subject of his best known novel, *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000), but also and more fundamentally as a temporal dynamic of *rupture* and *turning* that mobilizes storytelling in the first place.<sup>1</sup> In this sense, Diop's work, in general, and *Le Cavalier et son ombre*, in particular, provides us with a theoretical ground for reflection on the condition of possibility for storytelling. *Le Cavalier*

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<sup>1</sup> I begin my reflections on the relationship between catastrophe and storytelling with the etymology of the word. The Greek *katastrophein* (to overturn) is a composite of *cata* (down) and *strophein* (turn). My understanding of this relationship between literature and catastrophe owes much to the work of Maurice Blanchot, in particular *L'Écriture du désastre* (1980) (*Writing of Disaster* [1995]).

begins by foregrounding the specifically literary problem of beginning a story and becoming a storyteller and then moves within the story and through it toward questions of politics and justice thus linking the formal dynamics of the story to its political and ethical concerns. In this way, the novel relates literature to politics and ethics but without allowing us to forget or ignore that what we are dealing with is storytelling. With its playful labyrinthine structure and its masterful metaphorical language, in contrast with *Murambi*'s stripped-down style and comparatively straightforward narrative, *Le Cavalier*, in a desperate yet hopeful, critical yet promising mood, allows us to think of the literary and the political together and in relation to each other.<sup>2</sup>

Catastrophe marks a temporal break, a rupture that divides time, disjoining the past and the future. The literary comes about in and as the space of this disjuncture; the space of an *always already* and a *not yet*. However, because catastrophe is without measure, that is, without beginning or end, storytelling can neither point to a beginning, an inception, nor to an end. In other words, we can never know with certainty when a catastrophe begins and whether it has ended. This is what makes catastrophe so terrifying, for it cannot be restricted to a past event, finished and done. The literary then does not show us the event, the instant of the break, but rather comes forth in the *after the fact* of an event it can neither show nor name. It is for this reason that Maurice Blanchot speaks of the relationship between language and catastrophe by referring to light: "Light breaks forth: the burst of light, the dispersion that resonates or vibrates dazzlingly—and in clarity clamors but does not clarify. The breaking forth of light, the shattering reverberation of a language to which no hearing can be given (*Writing of Disaster* 39).

In *Le Cavalier*, the story begins in the aftermath of a catastrophe, where a rupture *has already* taken place. But it also announces the possibility of a catastrophe *to come*. The story takes place as the relationship between these two moments, neither of which is registered directly in the text. In my reading here, I show how in this novel narration constructs itself in the articulation between the time of catastrophe,

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<sup>2</sup> For a study of the relationship between Boubacar Boris Diop's work and politics in the context of African literature, please see Jean Sob's *L'Impératif Romanesque de Boubacar Boris Diop* (2007).

## Nasrin QADER

which has the modes of *always already* and *not yet*, and of avowal as storytelling. This avowal is not a confession, which can imply redemption, expiation of guilt, or justice in its strictly juridical sense. The sort of avowal I am thinking of is more intimately linked to the notion of *récit*, that is the story of a slice of life, but a slice of life that can only be told as a repetition, *réciter*, recited or recounted. Here avowal, in the sense of *récit*, and catastrophe join up since no repetition can ever take place without a temporal rupture and turn. In order for there to be an avowal, there must have been a catastrophe whose ripple effects in the story both threaten with engulfment and promise the possibility for a future. The story is both necessary and possible because of this double movement of exposure to the dangers of the catastrophic and of the effort for self-protection on the part of the subject, the storyteller. The story rises out of catastrophic rupture and remains exposed to an unknown path, an opening without content and without a projected end that the storyteller tries to define, order and familiarize in a gesture of self-protection. It is this space of the relation between danger and self-protection, a double economy of immeasure and measure, that narration in *Le Cavalier* negotiates.

The novel begins with the story of the narrator's (Lat-Sukabé) arrival the previous night in a "petite ville de l'Est," where he has taken lodging in Hotel Villa Angelo. The purpose of this trip is to find passage to the island of Bilenty to meet his ex-lover, Khadidja, who has summoned him to Bilenty with a letter. But first he must wait for an indeterminate period at the hotel until he finds the ferryman, Passeur. While waiting, Lat-Sukabé tells the story of his past relationship with Khadidja in Nimzatt, the neighborhood where they lived together years ago. This is the frame story of the novel. Once he begins telling the story of Nimzatt, the time of his waiting in this town becomes more and more entangled with the story of his past relationship with Khadidja.

As the novel progresses, the narration picks up momentum, reaching such a vertiginous speed that it becomes impossible to distinguish between characters, spaces, and times. Figures appear, disappear, and reappear. Transfigurations move the story forward from one space to another, one storyteller to another, one time to another, dissolving boundaries with a dizzying momentum, even though the storyteller tries to differentiate between here and there, now and then, self and other.

We learn from Lat-Sukabé that after years of poverty and desolate existence, Khadidja finally had found employment in a mansion where her job consisted of sitting in front of an open door and speaking. Not knowing who was on the other side listening to her, Khadidja created interlocutors for herself while weaving stories to relate to these interlocutors. In fact, the novel suggests that her tales could only come about in accordance with the character of her imagined interlocutors, who ranged from a sickly child, to a monstrous man, to a knight. Her final story is a tale called “Le Cavalier et son ombre.” In this story, the figures of Khadidja’s interlocutor and the character of her story, le Cavalier, merge and thus le Cavalier steps across the various thresholds of separation — here/there, real/imaginary — as a shadow, *ombre*, a figure, and kidnaps the storyteller taking her to the island of Bilenty, the imaginary setting for this same story.

We learn all this from Lat-Sukabé. The novel is therefore an intersection between Lat-Sukabé’s encounters and experiences while waiting, and the multiple tales *always already* constructed by Khadidja but related to us by Lat-Sukabé *after the fact*. The narrator of the tale “Le Cavalier et son ombre” is named by the narrator of the novel *Le Cavalier et son ombre*, who tells her story. Khadidja never appears in the novel except belatedly through Lat-Sukabé’s renditions, which begs the question of whether Khadidja’s storytelling is anything but Lat-Sukabé’s story told in the temporal mode of belatedness. However, in order for Lat-Sukabé’s story to even begin, he needs this other story and this other storyteller. Lat-Sukabé can recount—*écouter*— because there is already a story and a storyteller but this story and this storyteller do not necessarily precede Lat-Sukabé’s account; they provide its condition of possibility. This other story and its storyteller seem to constitute the call of the story, giving it movement and direction.

*Le Cavalier et son ombre* is therefore constructed as a complicated web of stories, one inside the other, imbricated, juxtaposed, one calling to the other, shuttling imperceptibly between the world of the everyday and the imaginary, effacing the distinguishable lines of demarcation between the two. Along with the stories, narrators similarly multiply, exchanging or even usurping each other’s positions and stories. Therefore, beginning to speak about *Le Cavalier et son ombre*, we run into exactly the same problem as our first narrator, Lat-Sukabé: where to begin and how



## Nasrin QADER

to continue. The novel begins with Lat-Sukabé's arrival in a town in the east. This easterly direction is perhaps the mark of the story's orientation, its being oriented toward something *to come*: a time to come in the story and as the story. The urgent message of the letter he has received from Khadidja, eight years *after* her disappearance, prompts him to embark on this journey toward the future: "Lat-Sukabé, come before it is too late" (13). But in order to tell his story, our narrator needs another beginning because here he has begun at the end, where all has been said and done and all that remains is unbearable and necessary patience for a crossing toward the unknown. It is not clear whether a passage to Bilenty is even possible as it is not clear in the novel whether this place of waiting, the little eastern town, is real or imaginary. The novel therefore must unfold in the duration constituted by waiting and by the hope for a passage that may never happen.

So he begins again, haltingly:

It is impossible to sit down quietly and roll out in a straight line the thread of one's life. As soon as you make this decision, emotions and images popping up from every side pull you along by the nose and very quickly you are floating on waves of fury. The kernels of corn crackling under my teeth, I barely have the time to see myself again retrieving Khadidja's letter from my mailbox when chaos settles in my soul. I nevertheless succeed in getting a hold of myself. I make an effort to keep my cool. I say to myself: "There is necessarily a beginning to this story and you must begin again, very patiently, from zero. You should be able to do this."

So, certain sequences of our common life in Nimzatt come back to me. Is this really where it all began? (31; all translations of this text are mine).

He begins again. The scene not only performs repetition, it also says this repetition: "revoir" (see again) "repares" (begin/take off again), "reviennent" (come back). This repetition inaugurates memory, for this is the story of a past life lived together. It is a *récit*. The necessity of repetition guides the story's movements and becomes the imperative for the storyteller: *you should* (il faut, tu dois) be able to repeat and through this repetition give direction to the story. Sheer effort and decision make the story possible, but this decision does not know exactly what it has decided on.<sup>3</sup> It

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<sup>3</sup> See Derrida on decision in "Force of Law" in *Acts of Religion* and in "Nietzsche and the Machine" in *Negotiations*: "A decision, if there is such a thing, is never determinable in terms of the knowledge. One cannot determine a decision. . . . A decision is an event that is not

allows a beginning, but in uncertainty and as reluctant questioning: “Is this really where it all began?”

There is the demand of the story; it must be told. Therefore order must be imposed, consciousness must find solid ground to check its chaotic vagaries. Beginning from zero, at the cipher, a slow and patient de-ciphering is required. But the decision to tell the story is a leap out of the closure of the cipher. The story comes forth out of this decision, which comes not from an individual will but from the story, as its imperative. The story demands a beginning, but it does not require that this beginning be originary. If zero is the originary ground, the story requires a leap out of this ground; it can only be told at a distance from any ground, from any cipher where nothing is offered. The cipher here refers to the structure of the kind of repetition that returns to itself, mired in its own circularity and inability to break free of this perpetual return. The notion of *récit* as a story a priori repeated, requires that this cipher be interrupted, ruptured, and that repetition no longer remain mired in self-enclosure. The imperative of the story foregrounded by this novel is the mark of this distancing and breaking with ground. For this reason, the beginning is given as resemblance: “To find for this story something that *resembles* a beginning, it’s enough to tell the story of the terrible years spent together in the neighborhood of Nimzatt” (32; my italics). If the law of the story is to begin from the beginning and slowly unfold the years of life spent together, this beginning can only resemble a beginning. The beginning that is a resemblance does not copy or duplicate another beginning since no other beginning is given. This dynamic of resemblance is underscored by the repetition of the two scenes of storytelling I emphasize here, (although there are other storytellers and stories in the novel) and by the two main storytellers, Lat-Sukabé and Khadidja. While Lat-Sukabé is the first narrator, that of the novel, his arrival upon the scene of the story follows the footsteps of the other storyteller, Khadidja, who has already come and gone. In other words, the narration retraces the steps of a past story and its storyteller, and in this gesture the figure of the storyteller splits in two, one substituting for the other, neither occupying the

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subsumable under a concept, a theoretical judgment or a determinant form of knowledge. If it could ever be subsumed, there would no longer be the need for a decision” (*Negotiations* 229).

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## Nasrin QADER

privileged position of an original storyteller, since just as Lat Sukabé cannot become a storyteller without Khadidja, this latter can only be a storyteller through Lat Sukabé's repetition. She is nowhere except in his story.

The time of the narration is the present. This present is characterized by waiting for a future announcing itself both as hope (to find Khadidja) and as risk for the future (crossing dangerous, unknown waters). But the story is also that of a past (a life spent together years ago) divided from the present both temporally and spatially. The status of the present as the time and space of storytelling is the most problematic thing, for as we enter the story further and further, we become less and less certain about the kind of place "this little eastern town" is. The narration takes place as the relationship between what is no longer (a past life) and, given the divided character of the beginning, perhaps has never been. Beginning in this fashion as a resemblance and a repetition, the text offers the possibility of the always already forgetfulness of memory, what Levinas calls "obliviscence."<sup>4</sup> The story is not the memory of that which was forgotten and is now recuperated, but rather the reverse: because there has been forgetting, the story can begin. The remembered past entrusts to the story what Blanchot calls the "non-historical forms of time, to the other of all tenses, to their eternal or eternally provisional indecision, bereft of destiny, without presence" (*Writing of the Disaster* 85). The little eastern town is thus the time and space of the story's orientation in two directions, the past and the future, without fixing its present. This spatio-temporal configuration distinguishes the story from a historical narrative.

This double directionality of the story's time bereft of a center and a verifiable present is illustrated by one of Khadidja's stories where she imagines herself having a conversation with one of her interlocutors, to whom she speaks but does not see. This imaginary dialogue focalizes two problems: that of beginning a story and that of the story's connection with a truth that cannot be verified, in the present. She begins with the formula "il était une fois" (once upon a time) (180). The formulaic status of this beginning locates it both within the story and without, both within time and without. It does not, strictly speaking, belong to the story yet the story cannot

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<sup>4</sup> See *Basic Philosophical Writings* (1996): 69.

begin without it. It is a generic marker of the tale. Shahrazad's formula in *A Thousand and One Nights* was *balaghani* (it came to me) or (I have heard). Because of this repeatability of the formula (it can attach itself to the beginning of any tale), Khadidja's imaginary interlocutor is suspicious. He shouts, "Hey, my friend, so many people have sat in that same place as you to begin their long rosary of lies with the same words!" (180; original in italics). The listener expects the story to be true, but what is the status of this truth that speaks of thousands of years — "a thousand years and another thousand years," another version of a *thousand and one*, perhaps? Khadidja, the storyteller, acknowledges the difficulty of the status of this unverifiable truth: "Sure, the witnesses are no longer among the mortals" (181). Impatient and suspicious, her interlocutor longs for the time "when the storyteller paid with his life for each error!" When Khadidja threatens to leave, he softens somewhat, saying, "Speak a little more, we will see, but know that I am not fooled." Khadidja tells her interlocutor that the character of the story she tells, the Princess Siraa, is not herself; is not Khadidja. However, the novel increasingly confuses this distinction and the reader, like Khadidja's interlocutor, falls in the trap of this confusion, taking the character for the storyteller. Khadidja's denial signals the necessary distance between the subject, that is the storyteller, and the story, which does not mean that the story is a lie but rather that it begins by abandoning its ground. Once again, it is the principle of resemblance that moves the story forward and not that of identity. The formulaic beginning, both belonging and not belonging to the story, marks this ungrounding of the story as evident by the incredulity of the interlocutor.

While in this scene the story continues because the invisible interlocutor asks Khadidja to speak, in spite of everything, the novel itself has begun with another call. Out of the past and directed toward a future, this call has come in a missive: "Lat-Sukabé, come before it is too late," Khadidja has written.<sup>5</sup> The command to

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<sup>5</sup> I have thought often about the possible relationship between this notion of a call to the story, coming from afar, and the theory of "Bendrology," or the "talking drum" proposed by the scholar and poet from Burkina Faso, Toting Frédéric Pacéré. A "talking drum" is a kind of drum used to convey messages to the community. As Christopher Wise explains in his essay "The Word Beyond the Word: Pacéré's Theory of Talking Drums" in *The Desert Shore* (2001), this theory's important gesture is toward undoing the hierarchy of writing and speech, and the

## Nasrin QADER

come rises out of silence and absence, its ghostly quality underscored by the fact that for years Lat-Sukabé has assumed Khadidja was dead. With Khadidja having been claimed by the shadow in and of her story, *l'ombre*, her call opens toward an ambiguous absence, neither negative nor positive. The call to tell the story is not a call for resurrection or return, but rather for a complicated contemporaneity, to share a time and experience of suffering, the pain of an undergoing. The missive calls Lat-Sukabé onto the scene of the story, as a figure, who then, through the story he tells, allows for the figure of Khadidja to emerge as that of the storyteller, doubling Lat-Sukabé. The present time of Lat-Sukabé's narration and the space of the little eastern town mark the time and space of this sharing and contemporaneity, one that does not render Khadidja and Lat Sukabé strictly contemporaries. What is shared in this space-time is storytelling, the condition of becoming a storyteller, where Khadidja's story, "Le Cavalier et son ombre," and Lat-Sukabé's *Le Cavalier et son ombre* communicate with each other from a distance, both temporally and spatially. More than the contents of the stories, the two scenes of storytelling communicate and expose the double condition of storytelling: self-protection and risk. Figures appear with the call of the story, but these figures are always already threatened with disappearance, heralded by Khadidja's disappearance, always already. Lat-Sukabé understands the risk of storytelling: "I am afraid it is too late to bring Khadidja back amongst us, I mean among people whom, right or wrong, one calls ordinary; but my

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priority of one over the other. Against Walter Ong, who assimilates the talking drum to the logic of orality, Pacéré refutes the orality of the talking drum, insisting on its autonomy from the human voice. The drum phrase comes from afar, from the drum, and not from a subject. Wise proposes that drum language may in fact "be said to *create* its subjects or to 'speak' them" (34). In his introduction to "Saglego, or Drum Poem (for the Sahel)," Pacéré says "there is imbedded within the talking drum a language that differs from current (Moré) language, a language that is shared among the ancients" (*Desert Shore* 46). Often this language, coming from afar, is fragmentary and does not follow the rules of grammar, syntax, and so forth. I wonder if the theory of *récit* as the story of life at a distance from life cannot be enriched and elaborated further in relation to certain articulations within this theory. Clearly, the theory of "Benderology" contains strong metaphysical implications that require careful thinking through. Additionally, any move toward Benderology, which takes as its object of study a nonliterary mode of expression, requires much work and elaboration. Therefore, I suggest this possibility for now and hope to return to it in the future.

place is at her side . . . I cannot bear the idea that for so long she has endured these atrocious sufferings all alone” (14). Khadidja belongs to the double-edged time of belatedness and fragile and threatened futurity. It is “too late” to bring her to the present, to pull her out of the other temporal order, that of the shadow, but her call to him is an opening toward a not yet belated, a hopeful possibility, expressed with the “before it is too late” of the missive.

A woman warns Lat-Sukabé of the difficulty of the task before him: “To wrest Khadidja from the shadow, you must first reach her. It won’t be easy” (28). To reach Khadidja is to become her contemporary and to appear with her in this temporal zone of the *always already* and *not yet*. However, as the woman warns, there may be a fundamental difficulty or even impossibility: this temporal order does not allow for the present. Therefore, to be Khadidja’s contemporary consists not in reaching her, but in being belated or not having yet arrived. To be her contemporary is perhaps to reside in the little town of the East, neither real nor unreal, neither here nor there, in an uncertain present. The time and space of the narration situates Lat-Sukabé’s relationship with Khadidja: a present suspended between an indeterminate past and a threatening and uncertain future, at the edge of a catastrophe that is perhaps to come, for no one knows when it will in fact be “too late” for Lat-Sukabé. Khadidja does not say in her letter when it will be too late but rather to come “before it is too late.” This possible tardiness announces the danger and the threat of a disjointed time that is perhaps yet to come *and* that has perhaps already come. “Before it is too late” is temporally indeterminate, suspending Lat-Sukabé between the possibility of arriving and its impossibility, for it might already be “too late.” No one knows.

The missive is then not a call to the experience of communality in the sense of bringing together estranged lovers in a happy or unhappy reconciliation after eight years. Instead, it seems to offer an invitation to the continuous suffering of a discontinuity, a rupture. Lat-Sukabé had already decided that Khadidja was dead and so he had settled into the ordinary life of a merchant. He had moved on. But now everything is at risk and uncertain again. Contemporaneity, in this sense, does not guarantee the experience of recuperating a lost presence, but rather invites Lat Sukabé toward the singular experience of endlessly suffering disjuncture, distance, and the impossibility of coming together. After all, as the old woman says to Lat-

## Nasrin QADER

Sukabé, “one does not go to Bilenty as one goes elsewhere” (29). This strange dynamic of suffering disjuncture as the condition of contemporaneity opens for Lat-Sukabé the question of his own destiny: “I ask myself whether, while believing that I am going to Khadidja’s encounter, I am not just accomplishing my own [propre] destiny” (30). Through spatio-temporal dislocations that characterize the impossible encounter with Khadidja, the complicated nature of this destiny reveals itself in the novel as impropriety of destiny, its fiction. One’s destiny must take distance from oneself, present itself as other, so that the story as avowal, *récit*, of this destiny may be told. The strange spatio-temporal disjunctions of the scenes of narration and the relationship between storytellers (Lat-Sukabé, Khadidja) dislocate the “I” so radically that it cannot find itself, except perhaps as a shadow of a self, without origin. If Lat Sukabé is Khadidja’s shadow, following in her footsteps, it might also be true that Khadidja is Lat Sukabé’s shadow, himself divided, never destined to accomplish a self. We know from Nietzsche that the shadow is always threatened by disappearance both in the absolute light of day (noon) and in the total darkness of night. The shadow indicates the point of contact characterized neither by full presence nor absolute absence, but by the contagion of one by the other. Khadidja herself dwells under the law of the shadow, *l’ombre*, but this shadow does not relate itself to an origin or proper identity. Since *le Cavalier* comes out of the story, he is already a shadow. Only as a shadow can he cross the boundaries between Khadidja’s imagined interlocutor and the character of her tale, between the space of storytelling (the mansion with its divided space where she sits daily to tell her stories) and the space of the story (Bilenty). How could Lat Sukabé arrive to this strange place, neither real nor unreal, unless he somehow belonged to it, like Khadidja belonged to it, as a shadow, always already.

*Le Cavalier* distinguishes between two different notions of togetherness: the ordinary community of people “one calls ordinary” and this other community where appearing together, or what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “com-paraître” (“to compear”) does not imply the totality of individuals ruled by common laws but rather the contemporaneity of singularities always temporally out of joint. The missive calls Lat-Sukabé toward a future possibility of togetherness, which is also a risk of never arriving. If going toward Khadidja points toward the fulfilling of his own destiny, as

he suspects, this destination seems most risky because indeterminately open. The time of the story follows the openness of destiny toward the impossible, since finally nothing is fulfilled in the story folding over itself, story upon story, in perpetual wandering. The narration begins in this isolated “little town of the East” in relation to which there is Nimzatt, in the past, and Bilenty, in the future. This strange little town is characterized by a paradoxical double quality of immobility and a place of passage dominated by the figure of the Passeur, the only one who can maneuver the mysterious waters toward Bilenty.

This Passeur himself is quite a strange being. The passage depends not only on the state of the waters but also on the unpredictable movements of this singular Passeur. Lat-Sukabé waits for him to announce the “right time” for the crossing, when it is neither too early nor too late. However, soon we learn from the Passeur himself that there is no right time since Bilenty is nowhere. The little eastern town may most aptly be characterized by untimeliness, which is indicated by the figure of the Passeur whose appearances and disappearances are always untimely and unpredictable. But the revelation that Bilenty is nowhere comes too late, at the end of the novel, when Lat-Sukabé no longer has any choice but to follow the destiny traced for him by the call of the story and its movement. Therefore, Khadidja’s missive calls Lat Sukabé toward an impossibility that nevertheless traces his destiny. In the little eastern town, Lat-Sukabé suffers both estrangement and risk. He leaves his ordinary life as a merchant of Thai toys, and arrives in this town located between the capital and an island, only to wait until the enigmatic Passeur announces the right time to cross the waters toward a place that is “nowhere.” The story of the past togetherness in Nimzatt, with the hope of future togetherness in Bilenty, comes forth under this double temporal condition.

The story of Nimzatt is also and already a story of estrangement and risk. It was a destitute time, “terrible years,” years of misery that threatened the foundation of the couple’s being and Khadidja’s in particular. What threatened the couple were not necessarily hunger and pain, though these were the constants in their lives, but abjection as indicated by Khadidja’s fights with the neighbors over dog excrement and her traumatic response to finding a cockroach in the soup bought, one day, at the shop across the street. In this world of misery and disintegration, Khadidja battled



## Nasrin QADER

against her own physical and mental deterioration with the obsessiveness of one who somehow knows she is teetering at the limit, threatened by an unfathomable and catastrophic experience. “Khadidja, whom I had known much more neglected, was spending long hours putting objects in the places she had assigned to them according to mysterious principles, from the beginning and once and for all. She grumbled as soon as she noticed a breadcrumb on the buffet or a towel on the bed” (35). With the experience of her body on the verge of disintegration — weakness, excessive loss of menstrual blood, malnourishment — Khadidja struggled to gain mastery over the objects of the world, objects which, despite all her efforts, did not guarantee the self’s mastery over itself nor over the world. This impossibility of grounding herself conditioned Khadidja’s abjection in the literal sense of being jettisoned and excluded, thrown away. As Julia Kristeva explains in *Powers of Horror*, the abject is not an object outside and opposite the subject but rather the subject becomes abjected, that is, rendered radically unfounded.<sup>6</sup> The abject world that surrounded Khadidja was both the indicator of the threat of disintegration and her safeguard against this threat with which her body presented her. “These fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as living being,” says Kristeva. “My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit — *cadere* [to fall], cadaver” (3). The abject does not eliminate the subject altogether, rather the abject condition marks the tension of the subject struggling to maintain itself, barely, at the border of annihilation. In a way, this struggle is the subject’s experience of itself, but without mastery of the self. At this border, the subject thus abjected cannot localize itself, cannot place itself on a solid ground. The question of “Where am I?” rather than “Who am I?” which Kristeva proposes as the concern of the one suffering the condition of abjection, marks the itinerant and

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<sup>6</sup> “When I am beset by the abject, the twisted braid of affects and thoughts I call by such a name does not have, properly speaking, a definable object. The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name and imagine . . . what is abject is not my correlative . . . The abject has only one quality of the object, that of being opposed to the I. . . . What is abject, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses” (1).

displaced condition of the subject. The abject object that draws the subject toward itself indicates to the subject that he or she is heading toward a great risk and a danger of total loss. The bug in the soup, the excrements, the loss of excessive menstrual blood from which Khadidja suffers, all protect and menace her, keeping Khadidja living at the limit, where the fall is always imminent.

The abjection that weighs down upon Khadidja most threateningly is constituted by her own body. The corpse, as Kristeva reminds us, “is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life.” Khadidja’s body has become nearly the corpse that carries away her life and her identity, “skin and bone”; “her gestures, punctuated by gentle tremblings, were less and less assured” (*Cavalier* 36). Her constant rubbing clean of her body and loss of bodily fluids mark and safeguard a life threatened by death. In this novel, the abject is not the relation with the filth surrounding her, but rather the relation with the self, which slips away slowly and returns to itself as abjected through the hollowing out of the starving body.

The depleted body, refusing to erase itself, draws all attention toward itself and its materiality; the body exposes itself as the space of contamination between life and death, as the limit. Shadowlike, abjection is the experience of the openness of the body, its exposure to the outside, its abandoned interiority. This being-body of the subject is an ontological state without certainty, without reassurance, and without a beyond. It is, instead, “gentle tremblings” at the limit of life and death, and an openness that *perhaps* allows a passage from one to the other without providing certainty that such a passage in fact took place. Abjection thus points toward the excess of the subject; the excess that the subject can neither bear nor contain. It is also that which gives the story. It is that with which the subject must live, at the limit of its life and death. Khadidja’s abjection has already infected Lat-Sukabé. But the effect of this contamination reveals itself belatedly, years after Khadidja’s disappearance, now that he has become a storyteller. He becomes ill during his stay at Villa Angelo: “You vomited during the night and you’re beginning to be delirious. — You mean: me too? — Yes, Lat-Sukabé, *You too*” (284).

The togetherness of Khadidja and Lat-Sukabé in Nimzatt was marked by a double-edged relationship of fascination with and resistance to death. Khadidja’s intimacy with death, her cadaverous life, provoked her to resist it, ordering the world

## Nasrin QADER

around her, insisting on bearing her physical deterioration and their financial destitution with dignity. Lat-Sukabé, on the other hand, was fascinated by the thought of dying of hunger: “Sometimes, I was fascinated by the idea that we were going to die together of hunger. Dying of hunger was a tragic and interesting possibility, totally worthy of our relationship, which you will see how tormented it was at times” (36). For Lat-Sukabé, the togetherness of the lovers found its ideal expression in dying together “lying side by side, hand in hand, remembering, perhaps, fantastic hours, at the same time tumultuous and gay . . . an end sublimated by a grandiose death” (36). But there was already a disjuncture between them hinted by the discord in their relationship. Khadidja already lived on the other side of the life and death divide, exposed to death without really having died. Lat-Sukabé inscribed their death within the logic of cause and effect. Dying from hunger assigned a meaning to death, almost romanticized it. Khadidja’s insistence on bearing it all gestured toward the refusal of a death with meaning; the refusal of the teleological as such. The suffering to which the figure of Khadidja was given over testified to the withdrawal of the threshold between life and death, which had undergone transfiguration. Khadidja resided under the effect of this transfiguration without being able to reveal its time or place. The experience of suffering marked the singularity of the one who resided in relation to such a transfiguration, and which could not be shared except as disjunction between those who appeared together. Much later in the text, Lat-Sukabé suffers a similar condition while in the little eastern town, at the end of the novel. Khadidja and Lat-Sukabé continued to live a seemingly ordinary life together in Nimzatt, but this togetherness was already under the effect of a profound discord. The narration registers the disjunctures of this togetherness as the difference between the time and space of their respective storytelling. The past togetherness of Lat-Sukabé and Khadidja thus already pointed to a dislocated relationship between them. Each storyteller is singular, temporally and spatially, and thus always more and less than the other, always out of place and out of joint in relation to the other. This singularity is marked in the novel spatially as Nimzatt and “little eastern town” and temporally as the then and the now of the narration.

The title *Le Cavalier et son ombre* foregrounds figurality as the space of the story by specifically referring us to Nietzsche's "The Wanderer and His Shadow" which, in addition to the famous dialogue between the wanderer and his shadow framing part 3 of *Human, All Too Human*, had introduced us to these two figures in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. In this appearance of the shadow, who surprises Zarathustra during his wanderings, the shadow characterizes its own wandering. The relationship between the shadow and the world is not one of reciprocity or exchange; rather it is based on imbalance and asymmetry. The shadow is profuse and excessive, falling upon all surfaces and spaces, giving endlessly of itself but receiving nothing in return: "I have sat on every surface, like weary dust I have fallen asleep upon mirrors and window panes: everything takes from me, nothing gives. I have become thin—I am almost like a shadow" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 285). And a little further, the shadow continues: "I have broken up with you whatever my heart revered. I have overthrown boundary stones and statues, I have pursued the most dangerous desires—truly, I once went beyond every crime." *Le Cavalier et son ombre* tells the story of this itinerary of the shadow as a figure replete with overthrown boundaries in the forms of statues, land borders, watery borders, textual borders, and dangerous desires that lead nowhere but to catastrophe. In "The Wanderer and His Shadow," the shadow insists on its freedom despite its attachment to the heels of another. The point of contact where the shadow touches the other does not subject the shadow to the will or whim of the other. The other does not choose the shadow nor can it will its disappearance. The only way in which this other can free itself from the grips of the shadow lies in the rejection of light. The light to which the shadow attaches itself differs from the absolute light of high noon that accepts and allows no shadow. This shadowless light, with its blinding effect, has something in common with darkness: it does not allow for figuration, for shadows. Shadows are figures because they too receive the law of their appearance from elsewhere than from the perfect correspondence between thing and the source of light. The shadow comes forth as the relationship with the elsewhere of light. When the other aligns itself with absolute light or absolute darkness, then the figure retreats. Yet, the figure does not disappear but lies in waiting: "And yet you called us 'importunate' — us, who know one thing at least extremely well: how to be silent and to wait — no Englishman knows it better. It is true we are very, very often in the retinue of men, but never as their

## Nasrin QADER

bondsmen. When man shuns light, we shun man — so far, at least, we are free” (*Human, All Too Human* 364). The shadow’s ability to retreat renders it terrifying, for it becomes aligned with death: “For when Zarathustra inspected him with his eyes, he was as terrified as if he had suddenly seen a ghost, so slight, dark, hollow, and spent did this follower appear” (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 284). The abject body of Khadidja, weakened and spent, withdraws further and further until it dissimulates itself in the depth of the story, without a body, properly speaking. Khadidja too had passed through Villa Angelo, where Lat-Sukabé is staying in the “little eastern town,” on her way to Bilenty. Yet no one in Villa Angelo knows Khadidja except as a phantom, a shadow. Her body used to disappear in the morning and she told her stories roaming around town, without a “body” properly speaking: “They [the clients] saw with fright that Khadidja did not have, as it were, a body. Around dawn, she would disappear (285). Khadidja is a shadow that belongs to the heart of the night and not to the light of day. Like the space that she faces during her storytelling sessions in the great mansion, the job she finds, “cut out in the very darkness,” she remains without a source (53).

While Lat-Sukabé struggles to keep order and relegate Khadidja’s story to a past that can be recuperated, Khadidja withdraws from her stories and his, leaving Lat-Sukabé bewildered and floundering, his story without a center. This withdrawal leaves Lat-Sukabé with no other option but to follow in the heels of Khadidja into the unknown. However, only because Lat-Sukabé already belongs to the shadowy domain, he can follow her, attempting to cross the boundaries and risking the most dangerous desire. Thus the only hope for survival and return remains in the shadowy folds of yet another story to come: “Finally, all this is nothing but the follow up to Khadidja’s story. She awaits her shadow, and it will be you,” says the Passeur to Lat-Sukabé. “— I like this. To be Khadidja’s shadow is a good destiny,” Lat Sukabé responds (288).

While my reading focuses on the narrative strategy of the story, *Le Cavalier* is replete with thoughts on politics, ethics and provides us with the beginnings of Diop’s reflections on genocide, developed to poignantly in *Murambi*, without ever abandoning the complex temporality traced here as the relationship between the *always already and not yet*. In this sense, Boris Diop belongs to the group of writers

whom Adorno has designated as “the most significant artists,” “the uncompromising radicalism of [whose] works. . . endows them with a frightening power that impotent poems about the victims lack.” (“Commitment” 88). In his discussions of *Murambi*, Diop has often pointed out the fact that when in Rwanda, survivors had asked the writers not to write fiction but to tell their stories directly. Yet, he opted for the novel. This decision testifies most eloquently to the writer’s profound sense of the temporality of literary writing and what it shares structurally with immeasurable historical catastrophic events.<sup>7</sup>

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**Nasrin QADER**

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