Questioning the Writing Cure: Contemporary Sub-Saharan African Trauma Fiction

by

Margaret Ellen Mahon

Department of Romance Studies
Duke University

Date: __________________________

Approved:

____________________________
Laurent Dubois, Supervisor

____________________________
Deborah Jenson

____________________________
Roberto Dainotto

____________________________
Charles Piot

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department
of Romance Studies in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2012
ABSTRACT

Questioning the Writing Cure: Contemporary Sub-Saharan African Trauma Fiction

by

Margaret Ellen Mahon

Department of Romance Studies
Duke University

Date: __________________________

Approved:

____________________________
Laurent Dubois, Supervisor

____________________________
Deborah Jenson

____________________________
Roberto Dainotto

____________________________
Charles Piot

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Romance Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2012
Abstract

This dissertation examines a series of novels by Aminata Zaaria, Ken Bugul, Gaston-Paul Effa, Boubacar Boris Diop and Yolande Mukagasana. At the heart of my study is a problem that haunts much literary production and literary criticism about post-colonial Francophone African writing: the layers of distance and misunderstanding that often exist between readers and writers. Several of the authors in this study express frustration at the limited expectations that readers have of them, complaining that readers outside of the continent continue to read their novels solely in order to gain a grasp of socio-political “realities” of Africa.

I propose a return to a select group of author’s largely semi-autobiographical texts in order to better understand each writer’s individual literary projects within the interdisciplinary framework of trauma studies. Interviews that I conducted with Senegalese and Cameroonian publishing directors, psychologists, sociologists and authors themselves offer an analysis of these texts within the context of broader social debates.

My first chapter focuses on Zaaria’s *La Nuit est tombée sur Dakar* (2004) and Bugul’s *Le Baobab Fou* (1983) and *Cendres et Braises* (1995) in order to examine intergenerational Senegalese semi-autobiographical representations of prostitution. My study ultimately finds that neither Senegalese society nor Zaaria and Bugul’s narratives evidence healing through writing. Rather, both present literature as a “default” chosen because the authors found no one with whom they could initially share their stories face-to-face. Chapter Two hones in on Bugul’s relationship with her mother, a painful theme revisited from one end of Bugul’s semi-autobiographical oeuvre (*Le Baobab Fou*, 1982) to the other (*De l’autre côté du regard*, 2002). Chapter Three examines the trauma of parental loss in Gaston-Paul Effa’s semi-autobiographical works, from *Tout ce bleu* (1996) to a more recent novel (*Nous, les enfants de*
la tradition, 2008) in order to examine the evolution of Effa’s personal identity quest and his extensive self-analysis over time in light of the author’s permanent exile in France. My fourth chapter begins with a study of genocide survivor Yolande Mukagasana’s recent narrative entitled N’aie pas peur de savoir (1999) in order to examine author/reader relationships in light of the often inconceivable trauma of genocide. I then move on to consider the ethics of speaking “for” genocide survivors by analyzing the well-known Senegalese author Boubacar Boris Diop’s Murambi, le livre des ossements (2000) and the related Fest’Africa project. I end Chapter Four with a critique of Etoke’s Melancholia africana: l’indispensable dépassement de la condition noire (2010) in order to question whether or not sweeping theories of the various traumas experienced by members of Africa and its diaspora are in fact helpful in every context. Finally, I end my study with Effa’s Voici le dernier jour du monde, which exhibits the interplay between autobiography, biography, fiction and the issue of literary violence.

I ultimately argue that a major difference between the “talking cure” of psychoanalysis and the process of seeking healing through literary narratives involves the question of audience. In the case of Sub-Saharan African literature, the author/reader relationship does not necessarily provide a safe space akin to the doctor/patient model in Freud’s “talking cure.” Therefore, I ultimately call for a closer analysis of the myriad ways by which authors are seeking healing and answers outside the realm of literature.
Dedication

This dissertation is for Carol, Bill, Elizabeth, Katie, Mimi and Maddie Mahon. Your unconditional love helped me to write every single page.
## Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................ iv

Acknowledgements..................................................................................................................... viii

Introduction................................................................................................................................... 1


3. A Self-Proclaimed Coconut: Effa’s Decision to Live as Division......................................... 61

4. Sharing Trauma with Another? The Challenges of Writing (and Reading) the Rwandan Genocide.................................................................................................................................. 84

5. “Eating Literature”: Effa’s *Voici le Dernier Jour du Monde*................................................ 120

Epilogue........................................................................................................................................ 138

Works Cited................................................................................................................................... 144

Biography....................................................................................................................................... 157
Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by thanking my professors and colleagues at Duke University for their helpful criticism and encouragement. Laurent Dubois continually provided me with spot-on suggestions and was my most faithful reader throughout my dissertation project. His comments not only enabled me to improve my initial project, but also spurred me to move beyond the field of literature to a more interdisciplinary approach to my authors’ novels. Charles Piot’s insights into contemporary Sub-Saharan African societies inspired me as I reflected back on my research in Africa, and discussions with Walter Mignolo, Roberto Dainotto and Deborah Jenson encouraged me to think of new bridges and breakdowns between literature and trauma. Informal chats with fellow graduate student Reginald Patterson challenged me to consider Africa, the Caribbean and contemporary discourses of trauma in new ways. I also wish to thank the Duke University Graduate School for the various scholarships and fellowships that enabled me to complete an undreamt-of two years of research abroad between France and Africa. A Fulbright-Hays fellowship through the U.S. Department of State gave me essential time on African soil that offered me much-needed insights into my authors’ literary projects.

In France, Professors Tumba Shango-Lokoho and Boniface Mongo-Mboussa prompted me to consider the Fest’Africa project in Rwanda, entitled “Ecrire par devoir de mémoire,” in helpful new ways. Electronic and face-to-face conversations with authors such as Gaston-Paul Effa and Boubacar Boris Diop showed me how humble and approachable talented authors can be, even towards students like me who continually hound them with questions. Correspondence with Nathalie Etoke of Connecticut College challenged me to hone my argumentation concerning her idea of melancholia africana. In the publishing world, Denis Pryen of Harmattan and Jean-Noël Schifano of the well-known “Continents noirs” Gallimard series opened my eyes to the challenges of publishing as an “African” author in France. The
staff of the bookstore “Les Oiseaux Rares” in Paris, France did a superb job in welcoming Boubacar Boris Diop for a reading of Murambi: le livre des ossements. I learned much about popular French perceptions of the Rwandan genocide from listening to enthusiastic readers’ questions during this event.

In Senegal, authors Ken Bugul and Aminata Zaaria generously invited me to their homes to discuss their novels on more than one occasion. I will never forget the hospitality and humor with which they shared their stories. An interview with Mamadou Bâ helped me to understand the unique place of prostitution in Senegalese society. Modou Awa Fall and Cheikh A. Tidiane Guèye of SOS Enfants, Dakar, and child psychologist Serigne Mor Mbaye enabled me to better understand contemporary mutations of the family in Senegal. The U.S. Embassy of Dakar helped me to feel right at home in Senegal, and the staff of U.C.A.D. (Université Cheikh Anta Diop), S.I.T. (Students in International Training), the Baobab Center and the W.A.R.C. (West African Research Center) answered each and every one of my questions as my research progressed. Bassirou Coly and Abdoulaye Diallo of Harmattan-Senegal fielded my questions with humor and grace. Mame Bineta Fall and Patricia Attiba proved tireless Wolof teachers and faithful friends. Conversations with Pastor Daniel Gomis and Anke Dissingh encouraged me to further consider extra-literary means through which authors sought healing from trauma through their relationships with God.

In Cameroon, the U.S. Embassy of Yaoundé did a wonderful job of connecting me with authors, publishers and NGO representatives in a very efficient manner. Their help enabled me to conduct all of my needed interviews during the mere four weeks that I spent between Yaoundé and Douala before leaving the African continent. Marcellin Vounda Etoa and Daniel Nadjiber of Editions Clé, Eric Nyitouek of Harmattan-Cameroon and Gabriel Tsala of PUCAC (Presses de l’Université Catholique d’Afrique Centrale) unveiled the world of Cameroonian publishing to me. Véronique Fulack of WOPA (Women’s Promotion and Assistance
Association) and sociologist Armand Leka Essomba helped me to better understand many aspects of Cameroonian cultures during my short time there. Finally, I greatly appreciated the sensitivity and insight with which psychologists Jacques-Philippe Tsala-Tsala and Herman P. Pouokam considered my authors’ trauma narratives. I hope to have done their suggestions justice.

My whirlwind of travels and academia in the past few years would have in no way been possible without the support of my family and friends. Many thanks go out to Carol, Bill, Elizabeth and Katie Mahon. Your joy, laughter and unconditional love has always encouraged me to believe that anything is possible, and I love you all more than words can say.

Conversations about trauma and healing with encouraging friends such as Hannah Benfield, Father John S. Dunne, Erica Dietrick, Cyndi Croum, Andrew and Anna Janssen and Jim and Cathy Laffoon emboldened and inspired me in my project. Finally, I could not close without thanking Jesus Christ, whom I wholeheartedly believe is the Ultimate Healer of all suffering. Thank You for making all things new.
Introduction

During the past decades, a number of writers from Francophone Africa have written novels that deal with both personal and collective experiences of violence. This dissertation examines a series of these novels by Aminata Zaaria, Ken Bugul, Gaston-Paul Effa, Boubacar Boris Diop and Yolande Mukagasana in order to understand how writers and publishers understand the value and role of such literary works. I chose these authors because of their international acclaim, as well as many of their prolonged involvements in the autobiographical literary sphere. Diop, on the other hand, brought another element to my study because of his largely biographical representations of Rwandan genocide survivors' stories. At the heart of my study is a problem that haunts much literary production and literary criticism about post-colonial Francophone African writing: the layers of distance and misunderstanding that often exist between readers and writers. Several of the authors in this study express frustration at the limited expectations that readers have of them, complaining that readers outside of the Continent continue to read their novels solely in order to gain a grasp of socio-political “realities” of Africa. In some cases, they respond with texts that seek explicitly to confront and undo those expectations, to force a different kind of engagement with their work. Yet the broader structures that shape publication, circulation, criticism, and readership continue to place Francophone African writers in a difficult bind, in some ways refusing them an escape from a role as voices taken to represent the contemporary difficulties in African society. In spite of these challenges, many authors still choose to weave autobiographical and biographical elements into their stories.¹ My project examines why such a movement continues in this specific pool of authors.

¹ Here I join critics such as Roger A Berger in arguing for a “decolonization” of African Autobiography. While Western autobiographical theory often insists that autobiography is impossible, Berger argues that these narratives by authors of African origin do succeed in attaining certain objectives in spite of Western
I first began this study with the goal of doing literary analysis of this series of novels, exploring their representation of experiences of violence. Quickly, however, I realized that given the very complex engagement between these writers and the broader discursive and political contexts in which they write, this also had to be a study about the world of publishing and editing. In order to obtain a better understanding of such Sub-Saharan African writers’ frustrations as well as editors’ expectations, I conducted interviews with publishing house directors of the well-known Harmattan in Paris, France; Dakar, Senegal and Yaoundé, Cameroon, as well as Editions Clé and PUCAC (Presses de l'Université Catholique de l’Afrique Centrale) in Cameroon. These interviews gave me helpful insights about editors’ and readers' expectations for Sub-Saharan African writers. For example, Denis Pryen, the Publishing and Distribution director of Paris Harmattan, one of the largest publishers of African literature in France, recently agreed that the best way of describing the position of African literature in France today was that of “littérature sociologique.” (“sociological literature”). French people read authors’ novels, he explained, in order to get to know the background of the city or town represented in the novel. Yet in spite of the frequent disconnect between writers’ projects and readers’ expectations, Francophone African authors must publish in Paris in order to achieve arguments against the genre. Berger speaks out against the colonizing tendency of such critics to declare such authors’ narratives as “non-existent,” as soon as they’re written. I join Berger in arguing that African autobiography does in fact exist, even as it is outlined by Philippe Lejeune: “Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.” Such declarations avoid “fetishizing generic ambiguity and instability.” My study will examine the potential of these autobiographies in new ways, related specifically to autobiographical trauma narratives. I use the term “semi-autobiography” to acknowledge the author’s liberty to add fictional elements to the text where he or she sees fit. See Roger A. Berger’s “Decolonizing African Autobiography” in Research in African Literatures Summer 2010: 32-54. See also Philippe Lejeune’s On Autobiography trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1989) and James Olney’s Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of Autobiography (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) as well as his “The Value of Autobiography for Comparative Studies: African vs. Western Autobiography” in African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays ed. William L. Andrews. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993) 212-223.

2 Denis Pryen, Personal Interview, 22 September 2011.
some semblance of literary success. Therefore, authors generally take up residency in France in order to promote their books in the vicinity of their readers.

At home, the battle between book prices and poverty, among other issues, makes it more difficult for Africans to have access to such authors’ novels. Furthermore, Africans themselves sometimes express doubt as to the ability of exiled authors to represent the realities of home. This doubt arguably keeps them from purchasing exiled authors’ texts in some instances. Representatives of Harmattan Senegal, Harmattan Cameroon and Editions Clé in Yaoundé agreed that African editors and other readers alike question exiled authors’ ability to accurately represent Africa. According to these editors, some African readers do not take exiled authors seriously for this very reason. These comments demonstrate that sociological expectations come not only from outside readers, but from African ones as well.

Joining in global discourses of hybridity, such writers seek to remind readers and critics alike that Africa and a concern about their home Continent are only part of their identities. Many of today’s authors reject the very label of “African.” In his Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine: pour une écriture préemptive (2007), Cameroonian writer Patrice Nganang asks how readers and critics should categorize authors such as Mongo Beti, an African author who no longer even possessed the Cameroonian nationality at the end of his life. Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiongo has also spent most of his life away from his home country. Can we say, Nganang asks, that Nurrudin Farah is Somalian when his country does not even exist anymore? How can critics classify this literature whose authors are becoming more and more international? Furthermore, what should readers expect from such representations of Africa, given how long it

---


may have been since some writers set foot on their homeland’s soil? Most internationally well-known authors have studied in France, the United States or another foreign country, and often have subsequently chosen a more permanent form of exile. Cameroonian Nganang, Nathalie Etoke and Gaston-Paul Effa, for example, have not lived in Africa full-time for decades. Effa’s passport now identifies him as a French citizen. While writer Ken Bugul recently chose to return home to her native Senegal, this choice came after years spent in Belgium, France and other African countries such as Benin. Even beyond countries of residence, many writers claim as much, if not more, identification with other parts of the African diaspora than they do with their home country. An author such as Cameroonian Léonora Miano has publicly declared that she sees herself as West Indian and African American, just as much as African. Yet Miano has only lived in Cameroon and France.

While many authors deny possessing either the ability or the willingness to attempt to “represent Africa” after years spent away from their home countries, editors continue to request such novels on grounds that sociological literature is what French readers want. Yet authors such as Effa continue to express a preoccupation with their ability to accurately perceive Africa. In recent texts such as Voici le dernier jour du monde, (2005) these cyclical thoughts haunt his text. Critic Justin Bisanswa argues that no literary text (be it African or otherwise) can fulfill such expectations of “authenticity.” Nganang insists that readers must begin to realize the great distance that separates many authors from the African streets that their novels represent in literary form. However, Bisanswa notes that contemporary writers persist in drawing more and more heavily from their home cultures in their writing. Therefore, he offers a new model for reading these African novels that takes into account the fact that “Aucune fiction n’est à prendre

---

6 Nganang 75.
7 Bisanswa 17.
pour un document authentique et, moins que toute autre peut-être, celle qui se pose trop facilement comme telle.” (“No fiction should be taken for an authentic document, and maybe less than any other, one that poses itself too easily as such.”).  

Aside from the potential issues of readers’ expectations and issues of representability, authors’ texts’ violence also often reflects the haunting memory of the suffering associated with the Transatlantic slave trade, Colonialism, and Neocolonialism. In her recent critical study entitled Melancholia Africana: l'indispensable dépassement de la condition noire (2010), Cameroonian author and literary critic Nathalie Etoke offers new insights into the effects of African diasporan memory on the present. A critic of Cameroonian origin who has lived in France and whose academic career has now led her to the United States, Etoke is particularly well-placed to analyze memory of the slave trade from both sides of the Atlantic. She argues that many members of what she calls the “conscience diasporique” (“diasporic consciousness,” meaning members of Africa and its diaspora) are not currently fulfilling their potential because of the weight of the chains of the past. They must realize that they, like their ancestors, “. . . ont appris à vivre dans le ventre de la mort. Traite négrière. Esclavage. Colonisation. Postcolonisation. Melancholia africana.” (“learned to live in death’s belly. Slave trade. Slavery. Colonization. Postcolonization. Melancholia africana.”). The latter term refers to Etoke’s new theory of loss, mourning and survival for the diasporic consciousness. Melancholia africana evokes survival that must contain an element of sorrow, for many oppressors of the past and present have yet to repent of their actions. However, members of the diasporic consciousness must move forward, coming to a greater realization of the dynamic nature of their survival and the possibilities that are theirs. If oppressors (be they French, American, fellow Africans or from any other area of the world) agree to ask for forgiveness, then they may move

---

8 Bisanswa 15, 16.
forward with the diasporic consciousness. If not, however, then these oppressors must be left behind. The survival of *melancholia africana* is not contingent upon the oppressor’s recognition of his or her errors. In order to achieve this dynamic survival, Etoke argues that each member of the diasporic consciousness must engage in a radically individual acknowledgement of the past and present’s trauma, and mourning of the same. Once this lacking individual mourning has taken place, collective mourning and survival may occur. In my study, I will consider Etoke’s theory in more detail as she relates it to certain literary texts written after the Rwandan genocide of 1994. African writers’ engagement with the topic demonstrates both the potential for empathy with the Other’s trauma through literature, and the limits of the extent to which a reader or writer who has not experienced a traumatic event him- or herself can identify with the subject’s experience.

The example of post-Rwandan genocide literature demonstrates that in addition to the pressure on African authors to represent Africa and the trauma of the past, authors often feel that they must speak out against the collective ills of contemporary African societies. Bernard Mouralis cites Sub-Saharan African authors as those who must most constantly distinguish between what pertains to an ideological discourse and what relates to the practice of writing as they engage in their craft.\(^\text{10}\) Whatever a writer’s individual literary projects, readers often wish for them to “speak for Africa.” In fact, it was for this very reason that many French-speaking African writers chose to sign the *Littérature-Monde* manifesto in 2007. The document declared the death of the ambiguous, politically-charged notion of the “Francophonie,” and encouraged more globalized ways of thinking about the role of the postcolonial author in the world today. It declared that like writers from other regions of the world, a postcolonial author should be free to write as he or she sees fit, without an imposed identification with collective social projects. The

---

second act of this manifesto, *Je est un autre* (2010), reiterates each author’s myriad identities in the specific context of contemporary France.

Although the time when African writers’ engagement served to combat colonialism is over, younger generations of authors still *sometimes* wish to speak of sociopolitical realities of their countries. Even so, Bisanswa carefully reminds readers that these contemporary novels can be both “engaged” in this new way, and works of art. I join Bisanswa in proposing a careful examination of the “itinéraire personnel du sujet” (“the subject’s personal itinerary”) in order to allow readers to “relire le réel collectif qui transcende l’environnement africain . . .”11 (reread the collective real that transcends the African environment . . .”). I propose a return to a select group of author’s largely semi-autobiographical texts in order to better understand each writer’s individual literary projects. These include a wide variety of agendas that only sometimes incorporate the idea of “representing the collective.” My study will provide a more in-depth analysis of a few of the myriad ways that contemporary African authors are representing the haunting pain of the past in their texts and their motivations in so doing. I will show that these contemporary authors’ texts are at the same time aware of the collective, and engaged in deeply personal, often violent trauma narratives. Given the combination of readers’ expectations, authors’ conflicting literary projects and personal and collective pain expressed in my authors’ texts, trauma provides one relevant framework through which readers can better understand the novels in question.

While trauma studies do represent a largely “Western” academic field, I argue that the use of trauma vocabulary to describe these Sub-Saharan authors’ texts offers one helpful means among others of understanding the predicaments facing such contemporary authors. While refusing to limit authors’ stories to the “trauma narrative” label, my study will show that symptoms associated with trauma in medical fields often erupt in these authors’ texts. Such

11 Bisanswa 10.
displays prove that no matter what terminology critics choose to use to describe these texts, scholars cannot deny the haunting nature of both collective and individual suffering in the narratives. I will also show that authors’ orientation towards “serial autobiographies” proves a desire to overcome each of their respective painful pasts. Certain authors’ own frequent orientations towards the field of psychology, such as Effa’s and Bugul’s, also demonstrate the need for greater connections between psychology and literature as one interprets the texts. Such writers often studied extensively in Europe, and their interest in the aforementioned field thus reflects a less-known part of their hybrid identities.

Trauma studies in literature find their roots in psychoanalysis. Many critics such as Ruth Leys, however, stress the lack of a linear historical development of trauma. In spite of these stops and starts in the field, Harvard Professor of Clinical Psychiatry Judith L. Herman cites three major historical periods in the last century during which trauma theory experienced significant growth and development. The first arose in the late nineteenth century and centered on the study of “hysteria” in France. Symptoms of hysteria included extreme fear or anxiety, loss of memory, convulsions, extreme emotional excitability, and physical or emotional paralysis. Studies came to show that such physiological symptoms had a psychological root. As long as the original traumatic event suffered remained a secret, (and at times, even afterwards) physiological symptoms persisted. Notable psychoanalysts in this movement included Jean–Martin Charcot, Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud. Freud’s studies focused on upper–class female survivors of incestuous childhood sexual abuse. The controversy of his father–daughter abuse studies led Freud to recant his position, attributing the


women’s hysteria to “imagined” sexual relations with their fathers. This denial of his patients’ abuse led Freud to his famous “Oedipal complex” theory that claims that children desire sexual relationships with parents of the opposite sex. This early controversy related to trauma has never left the field, according to Herman. Even so, Freud’s studies led to the development of psychoanalysis or the “talking cure,” in which traumatic memories lose some of their power over the subject through verbalization. I will return to this “cathartic” idea of the verbal relationship between the patient and his or her doctor at various points in my study. Psychoanalysts developed trauma theories in greater detail while studying combat victims of the First and Second World Wars, as well as the Vietnam War. Other trauma critics note the importance of Holocaust studies in helping researchers to better understand the psychic and medical trauma caused by concentration camps during the Second World War. Herman also states that thanks to the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1970’s, many critics began to consider domestic abuse and other daily trauma inflicted upon women as such. Even so, the syndrome of psychological trauma only achieved formal medical recognition in 1980. At this point, Post–Traumatic Stress Disorder became officially recognized as a disorder of memory.\footnote{Herman 1-28. For a more extensive version of such early trauma studies, see Freud’s publication entitled The Aetiology of Hysteria in The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud ed. James Strachey (Meridian: Stanford, California, 1997).} Patients must display related symptoms for more than one month to a degree that significantly interferes with their daily lives in order to be diagnosed with “PTSD.” Diagnostic criteria for the disorder fall into three groups including re–experiencing the trauma, avoidance of usual daily activities, and hyperarousal.\footnote{For more information, see the American Psychiatric Association’s DSM-IV: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1994).}
In both psychological and literary fields, traumatic symptoms refer back to an initial “violent” event. While many critics such as Odile Cazenave have already addressed the issue of general “violence” in contemporary African literature, a smaller number of novels focus specifically on trauma. In general, “violence” involves the use of physical force with the intent to hurt or abuse. In literature, a violent event can interrupt the text with or without subsequent consequences to the narrative. However, traumatic violence involves the cyclical return of representations of the memory of the traumatic event and the related psychological and physiological symptoms that these memories incite in the subject. The focus becomes, therefore, the effect of an event (be it violent or otherwise) on the character, even more so than the event itself.

Literary trauma theories took root in the 1990’s. However, the connection between trauma theory and postcolonial literatures is an even more recent phenomenon than that of literary trauma studies itself. Relatively new collections such as Stef Craps and Gert Buelens’ *Postcolonial Trauma Novels* (2008) seek to broaden readers’ understanding of trauma theory by analyzing suffering engendered by colonial oppression in both the French- and English-speaking literary worlds. The communication of traumatic experience in literary form reaches across cultures, they argue, enabling cross-cultural understanding. As literary trauma studies are still largely Eurocentric, Craps and Buelens’ collection aims to rectify this issue by “decolonizing” the field. Other literary critics who have thus far studied what they refer to as “trauma fiction” or “trauma narratives” tend to focus on English-speaking African texts more than Francophone novels. In her recent study of Nigerian trauma novels, Amy Novak argued that trauma fiction should not only refer to mass acts of violence such as war and massacres, but to

---

16 For more information, see Odile Cazenave’s “Writing the Child, Youth and Violence into the Francophone novel from Sub-Saharan Africa: The Impact of Age and Gender,” *Research in African Literatures* Summer 2005: 59-71.
the daily violence of women’s lives in the private sphere. Thus, critics’ interpretations of what constitutes a “traumatic” event are expanding to include tragedies in the public and private spheres and, above all, their related aftermath. Novak’s study includes literary displays of “classic trauma symptoms” such as “disassociation and withdrawal, including subjects’ inability to locate the words to recount their experience.”\textsuperscript{18} Caroline Brown has focused on French-speaking authors such as the well-known Cameroonian Calixthe Beyala, and defines such trauma narratives as “novels focused on emotionally damaged protagonists whose lives are testaments to their psychocultural woundings and their subsequent struggle for survival.”

Protagonists’ narratives “display . . . classic symptoms of trauma, including psychological fragmentation, dissociation or altered consciousness, (sexualized) anxiety, and violent outbursts.”\textsuperscript{19}

The authors of my study communicate differing forms of characters’ trauma to the reader by varying narrative techniques. For example, narrators often display more strictly “psychological” symptoms of trauma that they share with the reader through first-person narratives. These include cyclical speech patterns, references to the initial traumatic event, flashbacks and evidence of a stagnant, infantile self-image. For example, Bugul and Effa often declare within their semi-autobiographical narratives that their pasts have made them eternal children who will never succeed in growing up. However, other characters in my study exhibit more traditional physiological symptoms of trauma. Third-person narration communicates these symptoms to the reader, which include trembling, incoherent babbling, profuse sweating, yelling and crying for no apparent reason.

\textsuperscript{19} Caroline Brown, “A Divine Madness: The Secret Language of Trauma in the Novels of Bessie Head and Calixthe Beyala,” \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East} Volume 28: 98.
While psychologists often qualify the potential of writing to lead to healing, and sometimes even evoke the risk involved in potentially recreating trauma by writing or talking about the initial traumatic event, I will show that literary critics are often too eager to declare a correlation between writing and healing from trauma. For example, Chantal Kalisa recently examined relationships between trauma and Francophone literature by female authors, claiming that trauma narratives become “tools to repair and heal.” Yet the authors of my study often display skepticism about the ability of literature to lead to healing. I will rely upon texts of interviews that I conducted with Senegalese and Cameroonian sociologists and psychologists, as well as their publications in order to discern attitudes from various fields concerning the ways in which telling one’s story through writing can or cannot lead to healing. I will compare these findings to literary critics’ ideas of healing through trauma narratives in order to examine the validity of such claims in a broader psychological and social context. My study will demonstrate that “healing” expectations of various populations at home and abroad can differ quite greatly from a given author’s own opinion about the healing process, or the healing that his or her narrative actually demonstrates. I spent eleven months in Dakar, Senegal and a month in Yaoundé and Douala, Cameroon in order to conduct interviews with sociologists, psychologists and editors, as well as authors themselves when possible. This interdisciplinary approach will demonstrate that critics can gain valuable insights into the largely autobiographical corpus of my study and issues of healing by ceasing to isolate these texts from broader social debates.

In my study, any lack of healing through trauma narratives also has to do with issues of the genre of autobiography in Sub-Saharan African literature. Critics such as Bisanswa claim that writers never fully achieve autobiography in African novels. When representations of the collective erupt in the text, the author allegedly breaks his pact with the reader by interrupting

his or her personal narrative. The autobiographical narrative cannot, according to Bisanswa, be completely transmitted to the reader because of these interruptions. In this way, an author can’t help but talk of him- or herself in African novels, but the autobiographical voice can never free itself completely from the collective. The novel’s subject is “déchiré précisément entre sa propre histoire et l’Histoire tout court” (“torn precisely between his own history and History itself.”). My study will further analyze the possibilities of autobiography in contemporary African literature. A closer examination of authors’ texts will prove, I argue, that autobiography fails not only in the tension between the individual and the collective, but mainly because autobiographical trauma narratives do not succeed in producing the healing that many critics claim that they will. However, autobiography does succeed in communicating the trauma of the subject’s position to the reader.

The interdisciplinary methodology of trauma studies proves particularly helpful in the case of writers such as Cameroonian Effa and Senegalese writer Bugul, whose novels already exhibit extensive psychological self-analysis. Bugul, for example, has described her first semi-autobiographical novel, *Le Baobab Fou* (1982) as a self-psychoanalysis of maternity. Effa is also of a French educational background, and often takes on the role of a pitiless psychologist in his own semi-autobiographical texts. Questioning his own motives as a French and Cameroonian writer, Effa dissects his every move and searches for the motivation behind each of his thoughts and actions. This tendency in certain contemporary Sub-Saharan Africans’ texts demonstrates the increasingly multicultural background of authors, their interdisciplinary knowledge and their acute awareness of their position as hybrid postcolonial subjects. These tensions often play out as “trauma” in their texts. I ultimately argue that the specific manifestations of literary trauma in my study often reflect the suffering of the author’s personal life trajectory more than they refer to any notion of collective trauma or memory.

21 Bisanswa 202-203.
My study also considers the fictional elements that make a work “semi-autobiographical.” Writers use autobiography in part to fulfill editors’ demands for a sociological literature. Yet authors also interweave fictional elements into their stories, creating “semi-autobiographical” novels. By this strategy, writers’ hybrid texts experiment with ideas of knowability and the limits of reading novels through a sociological lens. I will show that the “semi-” in semi-autobiographical texts often becomes an author’s escape clause that enables him or her to create distance between characters in the novel and the author’s own identity. The reader can never assume familiarity with the author’s life story because of this escape clause. My interviews with authors sometimes displayed contradictions in which an author who had previously declared a novel to be 100% autobiographical would recant this position when speaking with me. In my study, I will offer possible explanations for these contradictions. Even so, autobiography tends to largely outweigh fiction in these authors’ texts. Towards the end of my study, however, I move from a strict consideration of semi-autobiographical texts to issues of trauma and biography, as well as more fictional novels, in order to examine the ways in which trauma interplays with genre in authors’ works.

My first chapter branches out from recent literary trauma theories by Brown and Kalisa concerning French-speaking Sub-Saharan African authors in order to question recent critics’ ideas of the ways in which trauma narratives do or do not lead to healing for their respective authors. I focus on semi-autobiographical works including Zaaria’s *La Nuit est tombée sur Dakar* (2004) and Bugul’s *Le Baobab Fou* (1983) and *Cendres et Braises* (1995) in order to examine intergenerational Senegalese semi-autobiographical representations of prostitution. Borrowing from the fields of Senegalese sociology and psychology, my study ultimately finds that neither Senegalese society nor Zaaria and Bugul’s narratives evidence healing through writing. Rather, both present writing as a “default” chosen because the authors found no one
with whom they could initially share their stories face-to-face. Therefore, I argue that trauma narratives serve a markedly different role in these authors’ personal literary projects than in American and European critics’ interpretations of the same. I also examine the value placed upon “speaking” and “silence” related to suffering in Senegalese society, in order to examine the ways in which publishing one’s trauma narrative as a Senegalese woman might in some ways prove more traumatic than remaining silent. Recent interviews with both authors show that Zaaria and Bugul both claim that healing from one’s past is not even possible, although they continue to seek extra-literary means of making peace with their personal histories.

Next, Chapter Two hones in on Bugul’s relationship with her mother, a painful theme revisited from one end of Bugul’s semi-autobiographical oeuvre (Le Baobab Fou, 1982) to the other (De l’autre côté du regard, 2002). Bugul’s narrators state that were it not for her mother’s abandonment when she was five years old, she would never have engaged in prostitution later in life. Some critics such as the Senegalese U.S.-based academic Ayo Abiéttou Coli have gone so far as to criticize Bugul’s decision to dwell on the subject. The incorporation of psychology into my analysis is especially pertinent given Bugul’s own interest in the discipline. Commentaries from the field of Senegalese sociology will also help the reader to understand more global implications of Bugul’s narratives in the context of the mutations of the contemporary Senegalese family. The recurrent nature of the maternal theme in Bugul’s works represents what I join psychologist Dr. Serigne Mbaye of Senegal in calling the “interminable mourning” of an individual whose society has never allowed her to properly mourn her loss. Indeed, since Bugul’s mother returned to her a year later, those around Bugul expressed little sympathy for her plight. Her novels share, however, that her mother returned to her as another person who proved emotionally distant and had effectively transferred her maternal affection from Bugul to her niece Samanar. Bugul’s novels demonstrate the cyclical trauma of this “passé
“qui ne passe pas.” Ultimately, I argue that the serial nature of Bugul's autobiographies is not, as Leigh Gilmore has put it in relation to English-speaking literature, “suspicious behavior,” but rather evidence of the ongoing trauma of Bugul’s case. Literature has hit a wall, but keeps trying to overcome its limitations in seeking a healing that has yet to come. In one of my recent interviews, Bugul denied the centrality of her mother’s departure to her semi-autobiographical oeuvre, which I argue indicates her attempt to manipulate her public image in distancing herself from critics’ interpretations of the importance of her mother’s departure. Her recent propensity to claim that her related novels are only semi-autobiographical, rather than autobiographical as she previously stated in interviews, reflects the same desire to reinvent herself in the public eye. Her recent comments also deny that literature can lead to healing, which contrasts greatly with certain interviews she gave in the 1980’s. Bugul’s recent recanting of this position mirrors popular Senegalese society’s attitudes towards writing and healing, and distances her from many literary critics’ ideas concerning trauma narratives’ role in a writer’s life.

Chapter Three examines the trauma of parental loss in Gaston-Paul Effa’s semi-autobiographical works. Like Bugul, Effa was separated from his mother at age five. However, this separation occurred because Effa’s father chose to offer him to a local French priest as a sign of the family’s allegiance to the Church. Effa would never again live with his parents. At age 14, a priest took Effa with him to France, where he would continue his studies. Effa has never relocated back to Cameroon, although he visits from time to time. I argue that this fact has led to another form of “interminable mourning” as evidenced in his serial autobiographies. Unlike Bugul, Effa’s texts indicate that he has overcome maternal loss, yet continually struggles with identity issues related to his bicultural identity. In this chapter, I analyze his semi-autobiographical oeuvre from one his first works (Tout ce bleu, 1996) to a more recent novel
(Nous, les enfants de la tradition, 2008) in order to examine the evolution of Effa’s personal identity quest and his extensive self-analysis over time.

Also keenly knowledgeable in the field of psychology, Effa has at times focused on the theme in his novels. Thus, commentaries from the notable Cameroonian psychologist Jacques-Philippe Tsala-Tsala will prove fruitful in interpreting Effa’s texts. I focus on Tsala-Tsala’s idea that “Partir c’est trahir” (“Leaving is betraying.”) in order to explain the interminable mourning of Effa’s narrators whose home society does not allow them to grieve for a departure that the narrators never wanted. Cameroonian cultures tend to view departures such as Effa’s as “fortunate” exiles that led to a better quality of life. Such exiles, therefore, have no reason to mourn. Effa’s own public comments indicate a keen awareness of this dilemma. However, writing allows Effa an outlet for this recurrent source of trauma. In Nous, les enfants de la tradition, the narrator deals with the responsibility of having been designated the “eldest” of his clan and therefore being obligated to financially support his extended family in Cameroon even though he has a family of his own in France. He struggles with these contradictory responsibilities, yet reaches the conclusion that he must continue to live as “division” between the two worlds. Such “resignation” demonstrates, I argue, a much more qualified freedom than that which Effa himself and various critics claim that he gains through the text. The cyclical doubt and re-submission to tradition as evidenced up until the last page of Nous, les enfants de la tradition show us that the narrator accepts trauma, rather than overcoming it. Effa presents us with a narrator and in a larger sense, a continent that cannot even overcome its identity struggles in literary form. Such a situation raises additional questions concerning the limitations of this very literature in relation to trauma.

My fourth chapter begins with a study of genocide survivor Yolande Mukagasana’s recent narrative entitled N’aie pas peur de savoir (1999) in order to examine author/reader
relationships in light of the often inconceivable trauma of genocide. I then move on to consider the ethics of speaking “for” genocide survivors in analyzing the well-known Senegalese author Boubacar Boris Diop’s *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000) and the related Fest’Africa project in which a group of twelve authors (most hailing from African countries other than Rwanda) traveled to the country in 1999 for a 2-month residency, led by Maimouna Coulibaly and Nocky Djedanoum. Their interviews with survivors and the resulting literary projects would aim to include a number of African intellectuals in more extensive reflections upon the genocide and its aftermath. Lisa McNee has shown that the “openly fictional nature” of many of these Fest’Africa texts, coupled with the fact that these were “Africans responding to an African crisis,” instead of “Western intellectuals trying to ‘meet the people,’” highlights the importance of this “new encounter” within the genre. Writers dealt with the ethical challenges of their position by trying to use survivors’ words, rather than their own, as much as possible in their texts. Diop and Mukagasana have collaborated in efforts to spread awareness of the genocide abroad, and Diop has analyzed many of Mukagasana’s published works.

I will also show that in the case of the Rwandan genocide, the idea of “trauma” is particularly connected to the notion of memory. In a recently published collection of survivor testimonies, Samuel Totten and Rafiki Ubaldo noted that in the majority of their interviews with Rwandans post-genocide, their interviewees did not speak of “trauma” when referring to horrific events which they suffered during the genocide, nor to post-genocide depression. Rather, for many survivors “trauma” only referred to survivors’ panic attacks whenever a sight or sound triggered a memory of a genocide experience. The results of this flashback included crying for days on end, screaming or yelling. This information will prove important as I consider critical theories of

---

trauma in light of the genocide, especially the ways in which flashbacks can be as traumatic to the subject as the initial traumatic event itself.23

Diop joins African intellectuals such as Nganang in declaring that the trauma of the Rwandan genocide affects all African intellectuals and requires a new reading of “post-genocide” African literature. Yet by admitting his own disgust and apathy while the genocide was taking place, Diop also offers an honest, somewhat unflattering portrayal of his position to the reader. I argue that such humble transparency with the reader and even self-deprecating irony is the only ethical manner by which to take on the role of spokesperson for a survivor of such trauma as the Rwandan genocide. I end Chapter Four with a critique of Etoke’s *Melancholia africana: l’indispensable dépassement de la condition noire* (2010) in order to question whether or not sweeping theories of the various traumas experienced by members of Africa and its diaspora are in fact helpful in every context. I use Etoke’s analysis of Diop’s *Murambi* and the case of the Rwandan genocide to highlight the issues that I find with Etoke’s study and her idea of a “diasporic consciousness.”

In my fifth and final chapter, I highlight Effa as one of the most forthcoming of contemporary Sub-Saharan African authors considering the issues of audience and literary markets faced by this group of writers. Effa’s acute self-analysis and his explorations of his own intentions as a writer and a self-proclaimed “coconut” (black on the outside, white on the inside) are often pitiless. They produce a style in his works that make him, I argue, an important author to consider when analyzing evolving notions of writers’ “roles” and “identities” in French-speaking Sub-Saharan African literature.

I end my study with Effa’s *Voici le dernier jour du monde*, which exhibits the interplay between autobiography, biography, fiction and the issue of literary violence. Effa’s novel offers a compelling example of what Bisanswa highlights as the tendency of contemporary novels to offer commentaries on novels themselves.\(^{24}\) I also analyze Effa’s *Voici le dernier jour du monde* in order to examine the ways in which the novel reflects Nganang’s central tenants. My analysis of Effa’s work presents his novel as a study of the limits of literature, as many of his semi-autobiographical works demonstrate in Chapter Three. Ultimately, Effa’s *Voici le dernier jour du monde* presents the reader with a mad, self-destructive Cameroonian society in which any being attempting to escape mediocrity is ruthlessly murdered by . . . as the reader finds out . . . the author himself. The narrator/author laments his unethical behavior even as he kills off additional characters in his literary attempt to become famous at long last by publishing a novel that degenerates into a true bloodbath. In so doing, Effa also raises questions about European readers’ tastes in today’s literary markets.

Fellow Cameroonian Nganang also underscores the importance of maintaining a self-aware, ironic sense of humor as a contemporary postcolonial author. However, Effa and Nganang’s approaches then part ways. Nganang argues for a post-genocide literature that will possess the power to anticipate and prevent future tragedies on the African continent. Elsewhere, Nganang refers to this literature as “l’écriture préemptive” (“preemptive writing”).\(^{25}\) A number of important African thinkers lent to Nganang’s project, including Achille Mbembe, Chris Abani, Alain Mabanckou and Sami Tchak. However, the biting irony of Effa’s self-analysis ultimately prevents the entry of his novel into Nganang’s new “preemptive writing” category by demonstrating the ultimate powerlessness of Effa’s literary project.

\(^{24}\) Bisanswa 204.  
\(^{25}\) Nganang 296.
Effa’s techniques serve to highlight the contrast between his novel’s storyline and the writer’s commentaries on the same. The end result of this technique is that the reader learns to doubt the sincerity of the most superficial layer of a text.\textsuperscript{26} My study joins that of Bisanswa in discouraging the attentive reader from reading African novels as simple mirrors reflecting African realities. Rather, such a reader will come to more fully appreciate the complexities of representations and commentaries available in each author’s texts.

\textsuperscript{26} Bisanswa 204-206.

In this chapter, I will examine Kalisa’s recent claim that trauma narratives become “tools to repair and heal.” She details how women’s trauma narratives serve as efforts to “denormalize violence against women, to reconstruct intergenerational narratives of female trauma, and offer, albeit in narrative form, a record of resistance to violence.”

One important expression of the traumatic violence perpetrated primarily against women in Francophone African literature is the theme of prostitution. From Ousmane Sembène’s *Les Bouts des Bois de Dieu* (1960) on, Senegalese literature has provided many figures of the prostitute, and Bernard de Meyer cites Ken Bugul as the first notable female writer to have treated the theme of prostitution in a semi-autobiographical vein in her novel *Le Baobab Fou* (1983). Bugul also echoes the theme in *Cendres et Braises* (1995). Aminata Zaaria is a part of the latest up-and-coming generation of Senegalese writers who follow Bugul in this regard. Zaaria’s *La Nuit est tombée sur Dakar* offers another semi-autobiographical story whose main focus is the prostitution of the narrative’s central characters. While both authors published under pen names, both have declared that the narrators’ stories are their own. This fact raises a host of issues separate from those one considers when judging a fictional text. One uses the term “semi-autobiographical” to refer to Bugul and Zaaria’s texts. As Bugul puts it, “je crée des personnages de fiction qui représentent peut-être ce que je ressens et que je n’arrivais pas à extirper de moi-même.”

---

1 Kalisa 13.
2 From now on, I’ll refer to Bugul’s novels as *Baobab* and *Cendres*, and Zaaria’s as *La Nuit*.
are the same person.”\textsuperscript{4} In the same manner, Zaaria recently explained in an interview that the narrator of \textit{La Nuit} has no name because it is a “je transparent.” (“transparent I”). In other words, the narrator is the author, she says.\textsuperscript{5} Unlike Bugul, Zaaria has yet to recant her autobiographical claim. I will show that the largely autobiographical nature of these texts, as well as the authors’ propensity to publicly proclaim this fact thereby cancels any potential privacy or anonymity that a pen name might afford. It also raises a number of important questions concerning the reader/author relationship and the very idea of using “trauma narratives” to recount the pain of one’s past. Studies and commentaries from Senegalese sociologists, other cultural specialists, medical professionals and the authors themselves will provide an interdisciplinary context in which the reader can better understand the specificity of writing trauma narratives as a Senegalese author.

When asked why she wrote her story, Bugul readily talks about the “valeur cathartique de l’écriture-confession,”\textsuperscript{6} (“the cathartic value of confession-writing”). Zaaria equally mentions the “valeur thérapeutique” (“therapeutic value”) of writing, and says that it is the narrator’s only hope in \textit{La Nuit}.\textsuperscript{7} However, aside from discourses about the healing benefits of writing, how much evidence of healing from trauma is visible within the framework of these narratives? Why use written form to convey one’s story when the very idea of the trauma narrative is borrowed from mental health discourses, and usually relates to a verbal narrative rather than a written one? Finally, what is the particularity of writing a trauma narrative as a contemporary Senegalese author? How do the idea of trauma narratives and the taboos of Senegalese

\textsuperscript{5} Aminata Zaaria, Personal Interview, 19 June 2011.
\textsuperscript{6} Brézault 181.
\textsuperscript{7} Zaaria, Personal Interview.
society either encourage or hinder these authors’ projects to make peace with their painful pasts through writing?

While Bugul’s narrator in *Baobab* and *Cendres* recounts her emigration to Belgium and subsequent involvement in prostitution there, as well as the label of “prostitute” which follows her to France, Zaaria’s narrator falls into sexual tourism among “Toubabs” (“white men”—here Frenchmen) in Senegal. She states her reasons for doing so as early as the first lines of the novel. Although she risks, as she puts it, the flames of Hell, she is “prête à tout pour échapper la pauvreté.” (“ready to do anything to escape poverty”). Her escape becomes rich “Toubabs” in Dakar. She ends up following the lead of her best friend Dior Touré in acquiring a much older white French boyfriend and ceding to his nauseating advances. As Senegalese sociologist Rosalie Aduayi Diop explains, this choice represents a common form of what Senegalese sociologists call “prostitution déguisée.” (“disguised prostitution”). Like many young Senegalese women, the narrator takes on the role known in Wolof as *mbaraan*, which involves having romantic partners solely for material gain, rather than mutual affection. This form of disguised prostitution is surprisingly accepted in Senegal as it is not seen as prostitution. Girls’ families and even their partners often accept this behavior. Symbolizing a current mutation of the values of Senegalese society, Diop says that many Senegalese tend to view being an *mbaraan* as a simple survival strategy. Zaaria’s narrator moves with her boyfriend to chic home on Gorée Island. The connections between the former Atlantic slave trade that took place on the island and the girls’ contemporary, more insidious form of selling their bodies is apparent. Indeed, the

---

trajectory of Zaaria’s story mirrors Diop’s findings that girls exercising the *mbaraan* profession often end up falling into “real” prostitution.\(^\text{10}\)

Initially, mere survival is not the driving force in the girls’ decision to become involved in this disguised form of prostitution. Indeed, this occupation has held a certain appeal for the characters since their childhood. The narrator’s first impressions of prostitution are tied to adult television and sexual liberation. While the trauma of the narrator’s first sexual encounter with her elderly Frenchman sharply contrasts with the narrator’s received ideas about prostitution, the following day’s shopping spree with her newly-acquired money and her subsequent physical transformation temporarily raise her spirits. As she tries on a new outfit in a store, “le miracle a lieu.” (“the miracle takes place”).\(^\text{11}\) Everyone she encounters is impressed with her elegant new look. When she comes across her Frenchman’s maid (a fellow Senegalese woman), she responds to her bonjour “en insistant sur le r pour faire plus chic.” (“while accenting the r to be more chic”).\(^\text{12}\) This form of prostitution is, as Diop explains, an art form that

> “nécessite une culture et un savoir-faire. En effet, pour la majorité des filles qui font du *mbaraan*, c’est par la manière de s’habiller (l’élégance vestimentaire), la manière de s’exprimer (le langage étudié, même si la plupart d’entre elles sont analphabètes ou ont un faible niveau d’instruction) et par la capacité de s’adapter dans leur comportement à des milieux sélectifs qu’elles parviennent à exceller dans cet exercice.”

(“requires a culture and a know-how. In fact, for the majority of girls who are *mbaraans*, it’s the way of dressing (elegance in dress), the way of expressing oneself (studied language, even if most of them are illiterate or have a low level of education) and by the ability to adapt their behavior to selective environments that they are able to excel in this work.”).

However, while being *mbaraans* initially represents the characters’ means of accessing the money and culture of the upper-class French, being abandoned by their Frenchmen leads the two young women to the less glamorous side of prostitution. The reader witnesses a steady progression of events through which the narrator eventually loses her sense of humor, ending

---

\(^{10}\) Diop 156.  
\(^{11}\) Zaaria 135.  
\(^{12}\) Zaaria 137.
the novel on a tragic note. The girls end up living in a brothel, and Dior Touré eventually kills herself. Before she does, Dior says that they must finally admit that they are prostitutes and that such a lifestyle was never what they should have chosen. In this way, she counteracts Senegalese society’s discourse by declaring “disguised prostitution” to be “prostitution” per se. After Dior’s death, the narrator ultimately chooses to tell their story in written form in order to carry on. Zaaria herself admits, however, that this decision to become a modern “pleureuse” (i.e. autobiographical writer) represents intergenerational rehabilitation in the form of the author’s relationship with her mother (a traditional “pleureuse”) just as much as healing through the act of writing. This reconciliation mirrors the fact that Zaaria’s own mother’s love for writing inspired Zaaria to become an author.13

Traumatic vocabulary abounds in the text as the narrator describes sexual encounters with her elderly, unattractive Frenchman, whom she secretly nicknames “le Crapaud” (“the Frog”). She describes his naked body as a “horreur” (“horror”) with his “énorme crâne d’extraterrestre sans un seul cheveu, ses lèvres affaissées . . . et surtout ses yeux inhumains qui finissent de faire de lui un véritable crapaud.” (“enormous alien skull without a single hair, his sagging lips . . . and above all his inhuman eyes that end up making him a true frog.”). The narrator “ravale vite [sa] nausée et [se] jette sur le lit comme on plonge dans le vide avec la peur au ventre.” (“quickly swallows [her] nausea and throws herself onto the bed like one dives into an abyss with fear in one’s stomach.”). Then, like “une gamine entre les mains d’un bourreau,” she says, “. . . j’attends traumatisée qu’il me libère, tout en me demandant jusqu’où ça ira.” (“like a kid in the hands of her torturer, I wait traumatized for him to free me, all the while asking myself how far things will go.”).14 As the scene plays out, the narrator spares no detail. As the

13 Zaaria, Personal Interview.
14 Zaaria, 126-127, 130.
old man finishes she thinks he’s having a stroke, but realizes he’s only climaxed. This mix of trauma and humor are trademark to Zaaria’s style. Speaking of her writing style, Zaaria says, “j’ai appris à l’école du drame qu’il fallait surtout rire des mauvaises blagues de la vie pour ne pas en crever.” (“I learned in drama school that one had to laugh at life’s bad jokes in order not to die from them.”).\(^{15}\) However, when examining this passage of her book in a recent interview, Zaaria exclaimed that she could not even finish reading this episode in her story because of the traumatic memories that it evoked.\(^{16}\) Such a reaction demonstrates that the pain of these authors’ narratives is real, and raises questions concerning the healing that is possible through trauma narratives in the literary context.

Indeed, the progression of Zaaria’s narrative shows that while the narrator feels a strong need to write her story, this reconstitution does not bring healing. Once the narrator has finished writing her story, flashbacks of her deceased best friend still takes up all of her thoughts. She resigns herself to this fact, saying “. . . il me faudrait désormais vivre avec cette absence ou plutôt cette présence en moi . . .” (“. . . from now on, I would have to live with this absence or rather this presence in me . . .”).\(^{17}\) So her pen, “comme saisi de nausée, crache sur le papier . . . l’écho ultime des sanglots qui me sont restés dans les tripes parce que je n’ai pas osé hurler chaque fois que n’en avais envie.” (“as if seized with nausea, spits onto the paper . . . the ultimate echo of the sobs that I kept inside of me because I didn’t dare to yell each time I wanted to.”)\(^{18}\)

Zaaria herself explains the need for others’ forgiveness in order to be able to move forward. She says that the narrator “doit composer, ne sera pas à l’aise sur la terre si elle n’est

---


\(^{16}\) Zaaria, Personal Interview.

\(^{17}\) Zaaria 222.

\(^{18}\) Zaaria 230.
pas pardonnée par les hommes.” (“needs to live with others in harmony, won’t be at ease on earth if she is not forgiven by men.”). Thus, the narrator’s possibility for true healing lies in the readers’ hands. Mamadou Bâ, a Senegalese sociologist well-known for his studies on prostitutes in Senegal and his affiliation with the Association AWA\textsuperscript{20}, affirms that rehabilitated prostitutes “pensent qu’elles ont fait du mal à la société.” (“feel that they have harmed society”). So, they search for a way in which to be forgiven publicly. He explains,

“C’est une quête au pardon à trois étapes : à la famille dont le nom a été sali, à la société en général, et puis à Dieu— parce que la religion n’accepte pas la prostitution au Sénégal.”

(“It’s a forgiveness quest that has three steps: [first], regarding the family name that has been dishonored, [then] to society on the whole, and then to God—because religion does not accept prostitution in Senegal.”).

In many ways, Zaaria’s narrator’s quest for forgiveness mirrors Bâ’s description exactly, since the narrator describes the novel as a confession towards both God and man that seeks the forgiveness of both. While their writing styles differ greatly, Zaaria declares that the thirteenth-century Sufi poet Maulânâ Dialâl Od-Dîn Rûmî, whose poems speak primarily of the quest for God, has greatly influenced her writing. She explains that she discovered Rûmî’s poetry while wandering around a bookstore one day in France, mentally crying out to God “Pourquoi m’as-tu abandonné?” (“Why have you forsaken me?”), as did Jesus Christ of Nazareth as he hung dying on the cross. This search for God’s presence, rather than the pursuit of writing, represents Zaaria’s primary quest. She sees writing as one means among others of reaching out to God and learning more about who He is. Influenced by her late husband’s Judaism, her family’s adherence to Muslim Sufism, and a recent interest in the lives of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene, Zaaria’s future writings will mirror her spiritual journey.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} Zaaria, Personal interview.

\textsuperscript{20} This organization, located in Dakar, Senegal, is the premiere NGO in Senegal dealing with medical care for prostitutes, as well as consulting and career rehabilitation services if needed.

\textsuperscript{21} Zaaria, Personal Interview.
Zaaria’s personal quest aside, Bâ is quick to say that unlike Zaaria, a prostitute in Senegal would never publish her story in all of its detail to an undisclosed public. He explains that these requests for forgiveness would tend to take place face-to-face with a limited, symbolic group of trusted individuals. Since most Senegalese prostitutes have only been educated through primary school, they give spoken rather than written testimonies, and their story:

“n’est pas dit à n’importe qui. La confiance est installée. La personne doit te connaître . . . La diffusion doit être faite avec l’avis favorable de la personne. Dans la publication, on ne mets jamais le nom. C’est à ce moment-là qu’elles parlent de leur passé.”

(“isn’t said to just anyone. Trust must be established. The person must know you . . . The diffusion [of the testimony] must be done with the person’s permission. In the publication, we never publish names. It’s then that they talk about their past.”).

So, while Zaaria’s narrator’s desire to ask for public forgiveness may be understood in the sociological context explained by Bâ, I argue that literature affords the author little to no means of experiencing the desired forgiveness of the faceless reader with whom he or she usually has no contact. However, Zaaria’s choice to publish under a pen name affords her some of the anonymity mentioned by Bâ as being essential, although Zaaria does not admit to a desire to hide her true identity (Her real name is Aminata Sophie Ndiaye). Rather, she explains the need she felt to rehabilitate the image of a thirteenth century Nigerian princess who eventually inspired the television series “Zena.” This princess, Zaaria says, suffered from a negative reputation because she supposedly killed her lovers after sleeping with them. However, the choice of a pen name also afforded Zaaria protection from a certain amount of criticism at home following her novel’s publication.

Another reason that Zaaria experienced fewer negative consequences from her novel’s home reception than did Bugul is that Zaaria chose to publish her novel in France. While little critique has been published on Zaaria’s novel, commentaries from her mostly French readers

22 Mamadou Bâ, Personal Interview, 12 July 2011.
23 Zaaria, Personal Interview.
tend to focus on media-fed ideas of sexual slavery and women’s rights, rather than critiquing the author for her “taboo” narrative, as many Senegalese readers critiqued Bugul. For example, *World Magazine* states that the subject of Zaaria’s *La Nuit* is nothing other than “L’esclavagisme le plus insidieux” (“the most insidious slavery”) which is “celui des traitements que subissent les femmes et les enfants un peu partout dans le monde.” (“that of the treatments that women and children endure all around the world”). Such a point of view is immediately problematic since the girls’ choice of prostitution is a pact into which the young women enter willingly. Another popular critic claims, “En lisant l’ouvrage de notre consœur sénégalaise, certains touristes européens vont peut-être y réfléchir à deux fois avant de se lancer dans certaines expériences ‘sentimentales’, notamment avec les mineures.” (“In reading our Senegalese colleague’s novel, certain European tourists will maybe think twice before involving themselves in certain ‘sentimental’ experiences, notably with minors.”). Zaaria vehemently counteracts this statement, exclaiming, “J’ai horreur de faire la leçon aux vieux Toubabs.” (“I detest the idea of teaching old white men a lesson.”).

It is a little known fact among readers that Zaaria has yet to publish her true first semi-autobiographical novel, *La Putain amoureuse d’un pèlerin juif* (2007). In an interview, she explained that editors found the style of the text to be too “vulgaire.” (“vulgar”). Likewise, she had originally wanted the title of *La Nuit* to be *Le Baiser du Crapaud* (referring to the narrator’s older unattractive white Frenchman and her traumatic sexual experiences with him), but the French publisher Grasset told her that the title was too crude. The publishers themselves invented the title *La Nuit est tombée sur Dakar*, and also required that Zaaria change certain

---


25 Zaaria, Personal Interview.
profane, as they saw it, parts of the text. Thus, authors are not entirely free to represent traumatic violence as they see fit. This anecdote also reveals that, although many would argue that a European market for literary violence fuels the publication of trauma narratives, French editors sometimes require that these narratives be tempered lest they “shock” European sensibilities. Such a fact is positive in the sense that it shows that authors are not producing violent texts solely as a response to the demands of a certain type of European reader.

Unlike Zaaria, Bugul’s representations of prostitution bridge her purely fictional and semi-autobiographical works. However, the treatment of the theme proves more schematic in her fictional novels. In *La Folie et la Mort* (2000), *La Rue Félix-Faure*, (2005) and *La pièce d’or* (2006), the reader observes brief snapshots of various forms of prostitution, all of which serve Bugul’s specific objectives for the novel in question. In *La Folie et la Mort*, innocent characters are preyed upon in the city when men mistake them for prostitutes. Elsewhere, prostitution often represents a “last choice” for characters at the end of their rope. Indeed, in *La pièce d’or* the narrator says that the entire city’s population has taken to selling their charms. On the other hand, *Rue Félix-Faure* presents prostitutes as an untapped source of colonial knowledge. The narrator states that if prostitutes from the colonial era could share what they knew in a context where others would listen, then Senegalese society would understand itself a lot better.

Yet in Bugul’s semi-autobiographical works, prostitution takes on a very different tone. Her earliest and most well-known novel, *Baobab*, is the first book of a semi-autobiographical trilogy and treats prostitution the most thoroughly. At the time of its publication in 1982, it was

---

26 Zaaria, Personal Interview.
one of only three overt autobiographies by West African francophone women,\textsuperscript{27} joining Nafissatou Dia Diouf’s \textit{De Tilène au Plateau} (1975) and Simone Kaya’s \textit{Les Danseuses d’impé-eyá: jeunes filles à Abidjan} (1976). The first segment of \textit{Baobab} is labeled “Préhistoire de Ken,” and offers the reader a mythical story leading up to the moment when, at the foot of the baobab tree, an anonymous child pushes an amber pearl bead into her ear, and screams because of the pain. In the next section of the novel, “Histoire de Ken,” the reader learns that the child was in fact the narrator, Ken, who also represents the author. Ken prepares to set off for Belgium on her first trip outside of Senegal. She describes herself as “une vierge en offrande.” (“a virgin offering”).\textsuperscript{28} The comparison is especially interesting, given the fact that the narrator will eventually fall into prostitution in Belgium. Identity issues abound in this text as well. She wonders why Belgians don’t recognize her in the street. She notes with frustration that while she can readily identify with Europeans, having spent her formative years studying their history and culture, they do not identify with her. She continually questions her own identity as a result of this disconnect, and goes through phases of resenting her own color, and that of her short-term Caucasian boyfriend.

The traumas inflicted upon the adult Ken always provoke painful memories of her childhood. A painful breakup in Belgium brings about the narrator’s first childhood flashback of the novel. She remembers her mother’s leaving her when she was five years old. This memory colors Bugul’s oeuvre. While her mother returned to her one year later after having taken care of a niece in another town, no one explained the situation to Ken and she believed that her mother had abandoned her forever. Every subsequent trauma in her life, including her eventual experiences of prostitution, recalls her mother’s departure to her mind. Critic Judith Butler notes

\textsuperscript{27} At this point and time, Bugul declared her first novel to be a pure autobiography.

\textsuperscript{28} Bugul, \textit{Baobab} 51.
that “repetition” of a traumatic memory is “wishful reparation.” In so doing, the victim wishes to enact a “fantasized reconstruction” of the memory in which the pain will be assuaged.\textsuperscript{29}

As critic Susan Stringer has noted, prostitution only represents the ultimate stage of Ken’s quest to fill the emptiness inside of her due to her feelings of rejection not only in Belgium, but back home in Senegal from age five on.\textsuperscript{30} I will examine Bugul’s relationship with her mother more extensively in Chapter Two. Yet it is important to note that this lack is at the base of Bugul’s identity issues that led her to prostitution. Critic Karine Rabain agrees that becoming a prostitute is only the ultimate step in a process through which Ken had already experienced “une prostitution psychique et sociale” (“a psychic and social prostitution”).\textsuperscript{31} In Belgium, Ken’s friends encouraged her to prostitute herself, telling her that because she was black she could make a fortune. Such statements are, as critic Brown has shown, “misrecognitions” that lead the narrator to capitulate.\textsuperscript{32} The real issue, though, is a “mis-recognition of the self” that causes Ken to accept their world views as true. Desirous to receive the attention she craves, Ken is disgusted when her first client loses interest in her as soon as their relations are over. He leaves the hotel room, and her mind wanders back to her mother’s departure yet again.

In this flashback, she remembers another case of mistaken identity. When she was in high school, she lived with a guardian and his family while completing her studies. The wife unjustly accused Ken of seducing her husband, and forced her to leave their house. Ken returned home to her family, crushed and ashamed. The guardian’s wife had inexplicably called

\textsuperscript{32} Brown 119.
her a “putain,” a word that she had never heard before and did not understand. Ken reflects back on the unfairness of being called a prostitute in her youth, whereas now she is actually exercising the profession as an adult. Her flashback moves through her adolescent years, all the way up to her selection for the scholarship to study in Belgium. After this flashback, the narration returns to Ken’s client’s hotel room, where she contemplates suicide after his departure.

Near the end of the novel, Ken admits to exalting from a “puissance superficielle sur ces Blancs qui ne m’acceptaient que pour la consommation.” (“superficial power over these White men who only accepted me for consummation”). She claims that her decision to enter into prostitution was no one’s fault but her own, and says her conscience has been destroyed. Her heart has been torn into “mille lambeaux” (“a thousand shreds”) and she feels these experiences are distancing her even more from her mother. She later admits that her motivation for this work is not even money. Rather, she is looking for her lost childhood, which disappeared the moment her mother left her.33 Ken’s decisions are always wrapped up in her personal identity quest. She is searching for the security of parental love, as well as for her purpose in life. In an interview, Bugul also explains that Senegal’s colonial history and the French’s violence towards African women had traumatized her.34 However, Ken’s issues are ultimately deeply personal.

The narrator’s worst experience of prostitution finds her having to bodily drag a drunk, unconscious client out of her apartment and downstairs to the street, while his dog barks and neighbors shout at her to be quiet. As in every traumatic instant of Ken’s life, the narrative is

33 Bugul, Baobab 210.
interrupted by a flashback to her mother’s departure when she was five. This time, however, Ken sees herself playing alone under the famous baobab tree. She mentally reproaches her mother, saying “Il ne faut jamais laisser l’enfant seul sous le baobab. La mère ne devait jamais partir. Pourquoi était-elle partie?” (“One should never leave the child alone under the baobab. The mother never should have left. Why did she leave?”). At her wit’s end, she pushes her male client onto the stairs and watches in horror as he rolls to the bottom of the staircase like a dead body. She is petrified to find him bleeding profusely afterwards and wonders if she has killed him. After verifying that he is alright, she leaves him lying outside on the sidewalk with his dog and locks herself back upstairs in her apartment. She wants nothing but to kills herself. Not having eaten, drunk, or gone out of her home for two days and nights, she sneaks to Jean Wermer’s house under cover of darkness and tells him all of her life’s woes, except the fact that she has prostituted herself.

What she cannot tell her former lover, however, she does not hesitate to tell the reader. Thus, the reader has a certain privilege concerning his or her access into Ken’s world. The pact between the narrator and reader is indeed stronger than her connection to any character in the book. The only “hiccup,” as it were, is that this relationship is one-sided. The reader can listen passively, but cannot, of course, interact with Ken. This connection is, thus, incomplete. However, I argue that Ken needs this crucial step of someone’s listening to her without judging her story. In an interview, Bugul explains,

“C’était difficile de pouvoir dire ça, de l’expliquer, de pouvoir partager avec les autres sur ce sujet. Souvent les gens n’écoutent pas. Je ne pouvais pas parler à personne. Et je ne pouvais plus parler avec ma famille parce qu’il y avait eu déjà la rupture et c’était douloureux . . . quand j’ai commencé à écrire, la feuille de papier ne s’est pas plainte. Elle ne m’a pas dit ‘je suis fatiguée,’ elle ne m’a pas demandé qu’on se rappelle. Elle ne m’a pas dit ‘demain.’ Elle m’a écoutée. Et je pense que c’est parce que la feuille m’a écoutée que je me suis laissée aller, et c’est comme ça que je suis devenue un écrivain.”

---

35 Bugul, Baobab 214.
("It was difficult to be able to say that, to explain it, to be able to share with others about this subject. Often people wouldn't listen to me. I couldn't talk to anyone. And I couldn't talk to my family anymore because there had already been a rupture and it was painful . . ., when I started writing, the sheet of paper didn't complain. It didn't tell me ‘I'm tired,’ it didn't ask me if we could call each other back. It didn't tell me ‘tomorrow.’ It listened to me. And I think that it's because this sheet listened to me that I let myself go, and that's the way that I became a writer.").

This unconditional acceptance was the only means by which Bugul could initially communicate the pain of her childhood and her experience of prostitution. As she put it, she wrote “pour se guérir d’un mal profound” (“in order to heal herself from deep pain.”). However, her texts evidence writing as a step towards healing, rather than an activity that brings healing in and of itself. Bugul herself expresses a desire for a human listener that was not to be found. Writing, thus, appears as a lesser alternative to talking to a willing listener face-to-face.

*Cendres* continues the story of the narrator’s painful identity quest. Now, Marie (the author’s real name) is able to communicate her traumatic relationship with a man she refers to only as “Y.” to a listener who can in fact react to her story, unlike the muteness Ken imposed upon the reader while she told stories of her prostitution in Europe. However, at one point Marie says she isn’t sure whether her listening audience is a character in the story, a reader, herself, the environment, objects, or all of the above. Over all, the reader and the character of Anta Sèye share the role of the key listener to her story. Sèye is perhaps the ideal listener for Marie’s story, since she is a Senegalese woman who has never left her country and many African authors dream of having such readers from home. However, Anta will hear Marie’s story, rather than reading it. She jokingly cautions Marie that she won’t listen to her story for so long that she ignores her household duties. Thus, Marie now possesses a witness to her story who has her own voice, and her own will. This fact represents an important step in the narrator’s healing

process. In this way, narrative strategies of *Baobab* and *Cendres* mirror the narrator’s process of both recording unhealthy patterns in former relationships and experiences, and finding peace with the past. Trauma still manifests itself, however, by glimpses of life back in Senegal that frequently interrupt the text when the narrator’s story about Y. overwhelms her.

In *Cendres*, Marie at no point engages in prostitution as such. She has put this portion of her former life behind her. However, the theme persists in another form. She becomes the mistress of a white Frenchman who begins to treat her violently when his wife decides to leave him. When Y. falls into jealous rages, he frequently calls Marie a “putain” (“whore”) as he beats her. And the insults don’t stop there. One night, he throws Marie against a wall and yells, “Sale nègre, sale race, on comprend pourquoi ce fût avec vous qu’on fit la traite des esclaves. Vous ne pouvez être que des esclaves ou des putains; vous n’avez rien, vous n’êtes rien; et moi je vous connais; je connais votre sale race.” (“Dirty negro, dirty race, one understands why it was with you that we did the slave trade. You can only be slaves or whores; you have nothing, you are nothing; and me I know you; I know your dirty race.”). Racism, reflecting the entire history of slavery and French colonialism, always lurks under the surface of their relationship. Y. beats her until she can no longer feel anything.

One day, Y. beats her so savagely that the neighbors call the police. When they arrive, Y. denies a relationship with Marie, insinuating that she is only a prostitute whose services he has paid for. He reduces Marie to “une femme si fragile, au statut de putain; une femme noire, une étrangère, plus fragile encore.” (“such a fragile woman, with a prostitute’s status, a black woman, a foreigner, even more fragile.”). Unfortunately, the police voluntarily believe Y.’s version of the story, since it fits in with their ideas of “Les étrangers qui venaient dans leur pays

---

38 Bugul, *Cendres* 66.
39 Bugul, *Cendres* 131.

37
manger leur pain et fromage . . . se prostituer en targuant d’une hypersexualité mythique et de fesses cambrées et sales nègres et sale race.” (“Foreigners who came to their country to eat their bread and cheese . . . prostituting themselves while boasting of a mythic hypersexuality and black backsides and dirty negros and dirty race.”). The disordered nature of this passage communicates the hateful nature of the prejudice that the policemen and Y. demonstrate in the moment. The policemen force Marie to accompany them to the police station, while Y. calmly returns to his apartment. Y’s denial of a true relationship with Marie is more traumatic to her than her former involvement in prostitution.41

The reader is not privy to the details which lead Marie to leave Y. once and for all. The narrator only shares that she eventually returns to Y. for the last time, and the text jumps back to Marie’s older self who is back in Senegal, telling the story. Y. is never again mentioned in the text, nor is Marie’s former life in France. She rediscovers the wonders of Senegalese food and the changing of the seasons, and the final lines of the chapter take a surprising turn. Marie learns from her mother that she has been offered to her friend the Marabout as his next wife, and she proclaims “Mille Gloires Au Créateur des Harmonies Eternelles.” (“A Thousand Glories to the Creator of Eternal Harmonies.”).42 Thus ends Cendres, in a sort of adult reconciliation with the mother,43 and an unexpected upward movement towards God. The trauma of the narrator’s life in Europe has not been healed through writing, but the hope of a new, different future helps her to believe that this healing is possible. Her third and final semi-autobiographical work, Riwan ou le chemin de sable, will detail her new life as the Marabout’s confidante and twenty-eighth wife.

40 Bugul, Cendres 143.
41 Bugul, Personal Interview.
42 Bugul, Cendres 190.
43 The narrator is reconnected to her mother through her marriage to the Marabout, as she lives with her mother from that point on, making trips to his concession when she wishes to see him.
However, Bugul’s franchise as demonstrated in her autobiographical trilogy has had its consequences. Unlike Zaaria, she published *Baobab* with a Senegalese publishing house, Nouvelles Editions Africaines du Sénégal, and had to deal with an extraordinary amount of criticism after the novel’s publication. The novel was not well-received at home, as many Senegalese felt it didn’t respect the Wolof idea of *kersa*, or personal decorum and propriety that is one of the three “cardinal values” taught to all Senegalese children and is especially important for young women. Senegalese sociologist Kodou Wade explains that the other two cardinal values are “l’abnégation et la patience *muuñ*,” and “le sens de son propre honneur et celui de sa famille *jom*”.44 (“self-sacrifice and patience or *muuñ*,” and “the sense of one’s own honor and that of one’s family or *jom*”). A Senegalese woman transgresses each of these values by going public with a story of her own prostitution. Some readers criticized Bugul for the scandalous passages of the book detailing her sexual deviance. Others found the book too personal, without enough of a political bent. Some Senegalese readers refused to believe that *Baobab* was a true story.45 Stringer goes so far as to claim that Bugul was forced into literary and political exile because of the reception of *Baobab*.46 Anticipating this potential for scandal, her editor had initially required that she publish under the pen name of Ken Bugul (“Nobody wants [her]” in Wolof) rather than her real name, Mariètou Mbaye.47 On the contrary, Bugul claims she wanted to be published under her own name, declaring, “. . . tout cela, je l’ai vécu. Vous pensez


que cela va faire scandale . . . et moi qui ai vécu ça . . . ça ne me scandalise pas?"48 (“All that, I lived through it. You think that it will cause a scandal . . . and I who lived through it . . . does it not scandalize me?”). However, African critics such as Adrien Huannou criticize Bugul not for her novels’ franchise, but for her propensity to publicly declare in Senegal that the narrator’s story was her own.49

In Theories of Africans: Francophone Literature and Anthropology in Africa (1990), Christopher Miller is quick to point out the different value that “silence” vs. “speaking out” possesses in various African cultures. When female African writers first spoke out in literary form in the 1970’s, as Awa Thiam notes, they did so to prove that they exist, and to show they had rights “à la liberté, au respect” and “à la dignité.”50 (“to freedom, respect, (and) dignity”). Many critics lauded these writers were lauded for breaking their societies’ taboos by talking about social issues. But in Senegalese society, the ability to muuñ (“endure [i.e., in silence],” in Wolof) is fundamental, especially for women. So, whereas European and American critics see these female writers as liberated and courageous, their Senegalese readers tend to view them as weak and offensive. “Silence” during traumatic events and their aftermath still equals “strength” of character in Senegalese culture. Speaking out about sexuality outside of marriage is especially taboo, which makes Zaaria and Bugul’s stories doubly offensive, as well as the fact that prostitution is even more taboo than other topics related to sexuality.51

Mame Bineta Fall, a professor of Senegalese culture and languages in Dakar, Senegal, explains the typical Senegalese attitude towards these writers in the following way. She cites

49 Huannou 170.
51 Mame Bineta Fall, Personal Interview, 6 July 2011.
the Wolof proverb which says “Fen buy defar, moo gën dëgg buy yak.” (“A lie that unites is better than a truth that destroys.”). According to this proverb, women would do better to remain silent about the abuses from which they suffer in order to maintain harmony within their families and, in a larger sense, in society on the whole. Explaining how taboo sexuality is for a single Senegalese woman, Fall declares, “Une jeune fille sénégalaise n’oserait jamais parler de ça.” (“A young Senegalese woman would never dare to talk about that.”).52 As Wade explains, it is difficult even to conduct a study on single women’s sexuality in Senegal because “une jeune fille non mariée doit rester ignorante des choses sexuelles.” (“a young unmarried girl must remain ignorant of sexual things.”). Thus, Wade found that her female subjects often lied concerning their sexual experiences, at least initially.53 This reticence also involves the cultural value of sutura, or respecting the privacy of the family. One does not shame one’s family by talking about one’s problems in public. Taking the example of sexual child abuse within the family, Fall says that a Senegalese family will be extremely hesitant to press charges, especially if the perpetrator is a family member. Preserving family honor and harmony is culturally more important to many Senegalese than the very safety of the child in question. Speaking of writers such as Zaaria and Bugul, Fall declares, “Une vraie africaine ne ferait pas ça. Quelque part, elles n’ont pas gardé le sutura, surtout celles qui parlent de la sexualité hors du mariage.” (“A true African would not do that. Somehow, they haven’t kept the cultural value of privacy, above all for those writers who talk about sex outside of marriage.”). Fall highlights the shame of publishing such revelations,54 which is a far cry from the praise that these writers receive from outside readers and critics. Taking Senegalese commentaries on Bugul’s semi-autobiographical novels into account, I argue that publishing a trauma narrative of this nature as

52 Fall, Personal Interview.
53 Wade 20.
54 Fall, Personal Interview.
a Senegalese women can introduce more trauma into the author’s life, rather than leading her to any sort of substantial “healing.” Indeed, Bugul herself recently told a Senegalese audience at the 2010 Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres that “nous sommes dans des sociétés où on refuse à l’individu d’exister . . . Si on exprime des tabous, tout de suite, on est marginalisée.” (“we are in societies where the individual isn’t allowed to exist . . . If you express taboos, right away, you’re marginalized.”)

What is a culturally acceptable way for Senegalese women to talk about such traumatic experiences? Dr. Bâ explained to me that “Ce n’est pas comme chez vous. Les gens [au Sénégal] ont du mal à parler de leur passé si ce n’est pas joli.” (“It isn’t like [in America]. People [in Senegal] have a difficult time talking about their past if it wasn’t pretty.”). Popular Senegalese culture teaches that evoking the past will negatively affect one’s relationship with one’s spouse, and one’s children’s chances for success in life. In the Association AWA, if rehabilitated prostitutes wish to receive emotional counseling they may. However, many do not. As Fall puts it, “En général, les gens ne racontent pas leurs histoires. On ne va pas chez la psy ici. Mais on a quelqu’un à qui se fier—une amie intime, etc. Il peut t’écouter, ou te donner des conseils.” (“In general, people don’t tell their stories. We don’t go to see the shrink here. But we have someone to confide in—a close friend, etc. He or she can listen to you, and give you advice.”) However, she claims that “que ce soit au téléphone ou face-à-face, on a besoin d’interaction avec l’autre personne” ("whether it’s on the phone or face to face, one needs interaction with the other person.”). Zaaria herself admits that writing aside, “j’aime

---

55 Bugul, Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres, 17 December 2010, Dakar, Senegal.
56 Bâ, Personal Interview.
57 Fall, Personal Interview.
raconter des histoires face à face aussi . . . quand je vois que quelqu’un est réceptif.” (“I also like to tell stories face-to-face . . . when I see that someone is receptive.”).

The counseling staff at the Clinique Américaine in Dakar, Senegal echo Fall’s formerly expressed point of view concerning the need for face-to-face interactions when telling one’s story. However, contrary to Fall’s opinions about counseling’s lack of popularity in Senegal, in the last few years hundreds of Senegalese women have taken to paying clinical fees in order to share their emotional burdens with the largely Senegalese medical staff and receive counseling. Anke Dissingh, a member of the staff with 25 years’ experience in trauma counseling, attests to the necessity of validating patients’ emotions in order to help them to heal from traumatic experiences. The listener, she says, must interact with the victim in order to affirm that the victim’s feelings and experiences are normal. Dissingh explains that this process is necessary no matter what culture one comes from, although for Senegalese women the shame associated with being upset by trauma and loss makes this validation especially crucial. Another important step in recovering from trauma is that the listener review the victim’s story with him or her, in order to help the victim process the memory in an orderly fashion. Additionally, Dissingh’s patients claim that prayer during their counseling sessions invites God to enter into their situations and enables healing to occur that transcends what is possible through the doctor/patient relationship. These commentaries echo Zaaria and Bugul’s continued quests for healing through religion. Dissingh agrees that recurrent flashbacks such as those experienced by Zaaria and Bugul’s narrators are “proof” that they have “never dealt with the trauma or properly processed it” through writing their stories.59

58 Zaaria, Personal Interview.
59 Anke Dissingh, Personal Interview, 28 June, 2011.
Zaaria and Bugul’s choice to engage with a topic such as prostitution in their texts was a decision that came with certain risks. As the above critiques and commentaries have shown, many openly criticize or misinterpret their texts’ meanings and motivations. I have shown that neither Senegalese society nor the current field of trauma counseling in Senegal places value on writing one’s story instead of telling it to a trusted face-to-face interlocutor. In a clinical context, a trauma victim will tell his or her story to a medical professional, and will in turn receive crucial feedback in order to better understand the experience and eventually overcome it.

However, publishing a literary trauma narrative involves “going public” with what is clearly a deeply personal and painful story, thereby relinquishing control over the diffusion of one’s harrowing ordeal. One’s readers cannot, therefore, constitute a “safe space” where mutual trust has been established. Nor is the reader in a position to offer the author validation of his or her story in the form of feedback, since most readers will never interact with the author directly. Additionally, the monetary nature of the author/reader relationship (the story having been written, after all, in order to be sold) implies the intervention of one or more editors who might, as Zaaria has shown, force the author to change what he or she may see as crucial details to the story, in order to make the story more “marketable.” These facts problematize the very idea of the trauma narrative, and call into question the amount of healing that can come from an author’s publishing his or her story. The cathartic nature of the act of writing remains, of course.

However, the traumatic symptoms of the authors’ texts and their own commentaries show that they themselves do not consider this process alone as sufficient to enable substantial healing to occur. Furthermore, Bugul’s case shows that writing one’s story may cause more trauma to the author than forgoing its publication.

In this way, while trauma narratives surely offer an African author entry into a certain literary market, I argue that the writer’s personal healing from the trauma expressed in his or her
story must come, in general, from another source. The authors’ texts’ emphasis on quests for healthy relationships with those around them, as well as their persistent spiritual journeys, attest to this fact. My study suggests that healing from trauma through publishing one’s narrative represents more of a popular idea among literary critics than one upheld in the field of trauma counseling or in Senegalese society.

Examples of “bad parenting” abound in contemporary literature written by authors of African origin. In the case of purely fictional works, one can often assume the symbolic nature of such representations. For example, Léonora Miano’s *Contours du jour qui vient* (2006) opens with a horrifying scene of a mother having strapped her young daughter to a bed and dousing her with gasoline in hopes of setting her afire. These fictional scenes of familial animosity often represent the intergenerational disconnect of modern African families. Younger generations more imbued with outside cultural influences than ever before strive to define themselves in relation to previous generations whose own struggles were markedly different. The older generation can at times represent a mythic Mother Africa whose children feel that she rejects them. There is often a sense of intergenerational incomprehension involved and, in some cases, abandonment.¹ Such literary devices, however, often hold different meaning in the case of “autobiographical” or even “semi-autobiographical” novels. Such is the case of the well-known Senegalese author Ken Bugul, whose semi-autobiographical oeuvre is imbued with references to her mother’s abandonment when Bugul was five years old. Bugul’s narrators claim that their mother’s departure caused them to remain forever frozen as five-year-old girls waiting on a train station platform, watching their mother’s train pull away from the station.

Bugul’s novels take a clear stance in current debates about family in her home country of Senegal. On a personal level, the author has repeatedly stated in both novels and interviews that were it not for her parents’ neglect at home, she would never have engaged in prostitution in Europe.² While her semi-autobiographical account of her brief encounter with, among other

---

² Bugul, Personal Interview.
things, the world of prostitution in *Baobab* initially caused a scandal among readers back home in Senegal, it is instead the ever-present trauma of parental loss that has colored Bugul’s entire semi-autobiographical oeuvre. Sooner or later, Bugul’s narrators compare the majority of their life experiences to their mother’s infamous departure when they were only five. In this chapter, I will analyze the evolution of Bugul’s personal identity quest by focusing on one of her recent works, *De l’autre côté du regard* (2002), in light of her earlier semi-autobiographical works (*Baobab* (1982), *Cendres* (1994), and *Riwan ou le chemin de sable* (1999)) in order to assess how Bugul’s narrators (presumably the same character) process their mother’s physical and then emotional abandonment over time.

This evolution, or lack thereof, demonstrates the traumatic, haunting nature of a “passé qui ne passe pas” and helps the reader to understand why critics such as Chantal Kalisa highlight Bugul as an important author in the study of the relationship between trauma and literature. Bugul herself delineates the act of writing as one in which the author constantly examines and questions him- or herself in a process of self-discovery. She also claims that “il faut se faire violence” (“one must inflict violence on oneself”) in writing in order to accurately communicate the violence of a novel’s character. Such comments reinforce the importance of trauma’s expression to Bugul’s personal literary projects and also identify psychology as a pertinent field to consider while interpreting Bugul’s semi-autobiographical texts. Thus, psychological commentaries will offer a possible interpretive lens for better understanding Bugul’s objectives, as well as potential contradictions between points of view expressed by Bugul’s semi-autobiographical narrators and those expressed by the author in interviews. Such dichotomies demonstrate the leeway afforded the author in the semi-autobiographical genre. Finally, interdisciplinary perspectives from the field of sociology will allow the reader to situate
Bugul’s claims within larger debates concerning societal mutations of family structures in Senegal.

I have shown that critics are often quick to speak of the “healing” process evidenced in Bugul’s texts. Mildred Mortimer, for example, alludes to the scene of Ken’s return to the baobab tree at the end of Baobab as proof that “writing has resulted in self-affirmation and healing.”\(^3\) In previous interviews, Bugul herself has alluded to the therapeutic nature of her writing, which served as a default when she found no one around her with whom she could share her story.\(^4\) Bugul experienced multiple exiles in her life, beyond those that were strictly “geographical” in nature. Losing the maternal connection to her mother at age five, Bugul felt an exile in her own family from that time on. She was also in a sense exiled within her home community, as others identified her as part of an intellectual “elite” from a very early age. As she puts it, “Je menais déjà une vie exceptionnelle . . . j’étais traitée comme une occidentale, comme une aliénée, comme différente.” (“I already led an exceptional life . . . I was treated like an Occidental woman, like an alienated person, as someone who was different.”).\(^5\) Furthermore, Bugul left Senegal to study in Belgium as a teenager. Baobab shares her experiences of alienation as a foreigner in Belgium. Thus, at the aforementioned time when Bugul first desired to “share her story” back home, she had returned to Senegal after having experienced layer upon layer of subsequent alienations. She explains that she had lived through a thousand years of experiences in a short period of time and had to write out her story in order to “évacuer” (“evacuate” [herself of it]) and be able to enjoy life. Otherwise, as she puts it, she would have


\(^5\) Bugul, Personal Interview.
had to retire to the Himalayas as a monk. She says that writing helped her to process her experiences psychoanalytically, and yet I demonstrated in the previous chapter that Bugul herself disagrees with the idea of healing through writing. She does, however, adhere to an idea of “transformation” that a writer can achieve through his or her craft. In this way, Bugul feels that writing enables her to become a wiser person, even if her profession cannot bring healing from her past experiences.

In her childhood, Bugul only remained physically separated from her mother for one year. As she shares in _Baobab_ and later in more detail in _De l’autre côté du regard_, her mother inexplicably left her in order to care for a niece in a different town. Rejoining her mother a year later, however, Bugul discovered that her niece Samanar had taken her place in her mother’s affections. Bugul felt like an outsider in her own home for the rest of her life. The shadow of her mother’s fundamental departure haunts each successive semi-autobiographical text. I showed that after experimentally prostituting herself in _Baobab_, the narrator meditates upon her life "depuis le départ de la mère." In _Cendres_ (1994), she continues to experience flashbacks to her mother’s departure whenever her companion beats her or is cruel to her. In addition to these cyclical thought processes, the narrator remembers various other instances when her mother treated her poorly. For example, when Marie was ten years old, her mother failed to believe that the narrator had not purposefully caused her beloved niece to fall down. The narrator bemoans the lack of a mother “avec qui je pouvais sceller un pacte de confiance.” (“with whom I could seal a trust pact.”). She later fantasizes that her mother believes her version of the story. In _De l’autre côté du regard_, the narrator remembers a scene where her

---

6 Bugul, Personal Interview.
7 Bugul, Personal Interview.
8 Bugul, _Baobab_ 155.
9 Bugul, _Cendres_ 49.
mother began inexplicably to insult her in front of her daughter’s niece. Her words were “d’une telle vulgarnité” (“of such vulgarity”) that the narrator could not even translate them. She wondered how the woman in front of her could be her mother, and what she had done to deserve such treatment. Was it because she did not have a job, was not married, didn’t have children, or was just plain different?¹⁰

In a recent interview, however, Bugul declared that her mother’s departure was only “la croûte du gateau” (“the cake’s crust”) for Baobab, and that it served only as a pretext for examining other parts of her life and character.¹¹ Yet if critics continually refer to Bugul’s relationship with her mother when examining her semi-autobiographical novels, it is in large part because of the obsessive nature of the subject, which surfaces repeatedly from one end of the texts (Baobab, 1982) to the other (De l’autre côté du regard, 2002). Interestingly enough, the latter work offers an even more striking instance of the circular return to her mother’s departure even though it was published a full twenty years after Bugul’s first literary treatment of the subject. Some scholars go so far as to criticize Bugul’s decision to dwell on the subject. In “Autobiography or Autojustification: rereading Ken Bugul’s Le Baobab Fou,” the Senegalese critic Ayo Abiétoo Coli claims that Bugul presents herself as a “victim who should not be held accountable for her actions.” Coli claims that neither a girl’s lack of closeness with her father nor her mother’s departure are uncommon phenomena in Senegalese societies. The critic bemoans Bugul’s propensity to justify all of her later actions by her “traumatic childhood.”¹² On the other hand, opinions differ greatly within Senegalese society concerning whether or not Senegalese family structures support Coli’s claims. Cheikh A. Tidiane Guèye of the Senegalese national chapter of “S.O.S. Enfants” has observed the lives of thousands of orphans and other

¹⁰ Bugul, Cendres 143.
¹¹ Bugul, Personal Interview.
¹² Coli 60, 63.
children in difficulty that come through the organization’s doors, and he insists that Bugul’s experience was in no way typical. A Senegalese mother, he claims, would not normally leave her daughter for an entire year. Such an action, he says, is “contre les droits de l’enfant.” (“against children’s rights”). Guèye goes on to highlight the importance of the mother figure in a child’s home, saying that once an abandoned Senegalese child is placed in one of his organization’s surrogate families, the new mother takes on the role of “therapist” for the child. Such a presence is, he explains, all that the child needs in order to move on.

Bugul, however, never received a replacement for the lost closeness with her mother. Even after being reunited with her mother, her family shuffled her from house to house. Sociologist Diop highlights the prevalence of this phenomenon, which she describes as a symptom of the instability of today’s Senegalese family. Its structure has undergone profound disruptions and mutations in contemporary society, leading to a lessened sense of solidarity in Senegalese families caused by massive exoduses to large cities. Therefore, children find themselves being sent from one extended family member’s home to another. Yet unlike in the past, the children often have no basis for a relationship with the family member in question. Child psychologist Serigne Mor Mbaye agrees that “la solidarité traditionnel . . . quand l’enfant va chez l’oncle ou la tante, etc. . . .ne marche plus parce que les relations affectives ne sont plus là.” (“traditional solidarity . . . when the child goes to the uncle or aunt’s house, etc. . . . doesn’t work anymore because the affective relationships are no longer there.”) Furthermore, he laments the fact that what he calls traditional, community-centered African society does not value “les relations fusionnelles” (fusional relationships”) such as the exclusive love between a

---

13 S.O.S. Enfants is a humanitarian organization that has provided housing, health care and families to thousands of orphans throughout Senegal and the world. It was founded in Austria in 1949, but its staff in Senegal is comprised of members of the local population.

14 Guèye, Cheikh A. Tidiane, Personal Interview, 29 June 2011.

15 Diop 68-69.
mother and her child. In this sense, both Diop and Mbaye’s analyses demonstrate that neither current societal mutations nor traditional Senegalese family structure favors the close mother-daughter relationship that Bugul craves.

Mbaye goes on to speak to the specificity of Bugul’s case, pointing out that she was in some sense “orphaned” by her experience, even if her mother did not actually pass away during her childhood. However, even if she had truly been orphaned, she would have been deprived of the opportunity to truly mourn the loss of their parent as a member of a traditional African society. The public funeral ceremony is a communal endeavor, and passes very quickly. As a means of offering some form of recognition of the orphaned child’s pain, Senegalese community members, for example, have the tradition of detaching a piece of the mother’s clothing, attaching it to the child, and momentarily placing the child on the deceased mother’s chest to symbolize the importance of their attachment during the funeral ceremonies. Even so, “Le deuil n’est pas individuel,” (“mourning is not individual”) he explains, but collective. Therefore neither the ceremony nor the period following the event offers the child the needed chance to grieve. The result of this lack is that, in Mbaye’s words, the child’s mourning is “interminable.” (“unending”). Therefore, if a parent’s very death does not allow a Senegalese child to mourn as he or she requires, according to Mbaye, it is easy to see how Bugul’s case was not understood by those around her. Mbaye’s idea of the “interminable mourning process” plays out in Bugul’s semi-autobiographical oeuvre, in which the shadow of the lost mother haunts each successive novel.

Once a young adult, Bugul’s geographical exile to Belgium leads to her seeing herself as physically different from those around her for the first time. She stares at herself in a store

16 Mbaye, Serigne Mor, Personal Interview, 21 July 2011.
17 Mbaye, Personal Interview.
window and wonders, “Comment ce visage pouvait-il m’appartenir?” (“How could this face belong to me?”).\textsuperscript{18} Interactions with others offer no help. She avoids her fellow countrymen, and exclusively spends time with “les Occidentaux,” (“Occidentals”), as she calls them. However, she soon realizes that while she knows everything about their culture, they know nothing about hers. Nor do they seem interested in learning about it. She shares, “Je comprenais de plus en plus que les Gaulois n’étaient pas mes ancêtres.” (“I understood more and more that the Gauls weren’t my ancestors.”).\textsuperscript{19} Due to her colonial education in French schools in Senegal and then in Belgium, Ken knows her ex-colonizers in a way in which they refuse to know her. During this time period, Ken is hardly ever alone, living through the seventies as a part of “une chute qui n’était pas mienne” (“a fall that was not my own”), but that of those around her. She feels extremely alone, yet claims that even then, “La vraie solitude” (“true solitude”) goes back fundamentally to “le départ de la mère” (“the mother’s departure”).\textsuperscript{20}

Her later marriage to her hometown Serigne (“marabout”) in \textit{Riwan ou le chemin de sable} will provide a fleeting respite for these identity issues. During this time, the narrator lives with her mother, unlike the Serigne’s nearly thirty other wives. In this way, her marriage not only introduces her to someone who understands her as she longs to be understood, but allows her to grow closer to her mother.\textsuperscript{21} The union also temporarily reconciles her to her community. As a wife who is “si proche intellectuellement du Serigne,” (“so intellectually close to the Serigne”), others now treat the narrator with almost as much deference as the Serigne himself. Everyone shows her respect and seeks to please her. This “réhabilitation” (“rehabilitation”) of the narrator in the village where she was formerly rejected is also her mother’s rehabilitation, as she says.

\textsuperscript{18} Bugul, \textit{Baobab} 60.
\textsuperscript{19} Bugul \textit{Baobab} 91.
\textsuperscript{20} Bugul \textit{Baobab} 118.
\textsuperscript{21} Bugul, \textit{Cendres} 113.
Her mother had suffered in silence because of what her unmarried, intellectual daughter represented in the eyes of the villagers.\textsuperscript{22} Thus, as Etoke has shown, the narrator’s marriage to the Serigne gives her an “identité retrouvée.” (“newfound identity”).\textsuperscript{23} I would add that this rehabilitated image affects multiple levels of the narrator’s previously experienced alienation as it concerns her place in her home culture, her relationship to her mother and even her mother’s communal identity.

However, just as another wife in the novel, Rama, finds only “provisoire” (“temporary”)\textsuperscript{24} relief for her frustrations in her relationship with the Serigne, the narrator’s respite proves short-lived as well. Rama’s fall into adultery and, ultimately, her death expresses a “désir d’indépendance”\textsuperscript{25} (“desire for independence”) that Etoke claims the novel upholds in spite of its apparent glorification of submission to the Serigne. Given Bugul’s personal trajectory and personality, this tension in \textit{Riwan ou le chemin de sable} makes sense. Bugul has declared that unlike \textit{Baobab} and \textit{Cendres}, she wrote \textit{Riwan} without worrying about the opinion of, as she puts it, a white reader. She felt “bien dans [sa] peau” (“comfortable in her own skin”) as a writer at last.\textsuperscript{26} Yet after having written \textit{Riwan} she went on to write novels that in many ways challenged religious and cultural traditions, taking up her more “rebellious” literary personality again. If, as Cameroonian psychologist Jacques-Philippe Tsala Tsala claims, the works of every exiled African author present not only criticism of the home culture, but a “demande de reintegration” (“reintegration request”)\textsuperscript{27} then I argue that \textit{Riwan} represents a significant part of Bugul’s reintegration request. However, the Serigne passes away at the end of \textit{Riwan}, widowing the

\textsuperscript{22} Bugul, \textit{Riwan} 168.
\textsuperscript{24} Etoke 120.
\textsuperscript{25} Etoke 127.
\textsuperscript{27} Tsala Tsala, Jacques, Personal Interview, 13 August 2011.
narrator and ending this somewhat idyllic interlude in her semi-autobiographic story. After losing her rehabilitated status in her community, Bugul returns to a more critical appraisal of her home culture in later works.

In *De l’autre côté du regard*, the traumatic cycle of flashbacks to her mother’s departure has in fact worsened. Rather than having healed, the mother wound looms ever larger, at times overpowering the text. I explain this anti-resolution by the narrator’s “unending mourning” as proposed by Dr. Mbaye that now encounters the physical death of the narrator’s mother. An interminable mourning process for lost emotional closeness with the mother confronts the physical loss of the relationship. Marie feels that the bones of her face are detaching from one another right before hearing the news that her mother has died, mirroring the emotional disorder and pain to come. Once she hears the news, issues with her mother can no longer be repaired. Or can they? While the pain of this intensified mourning paints almost every page of *De l’autre côté du regard*, Bugul continues to seek a fictional means of laying the past to rest. The novel represents her most recent attempt to find answers and healing to her relationship with her mother through literature.

While Bugul insists that her daughter’s birth also brought her closer to her mother and dedicated *De l’autre côté du regard* to her daughter to reflect this fact,²⁸ the story opens with a song in Wolof describing a baby crying because her mother has left her to go to Saloum. The narrator, named Marie, explains that her mother has just passed away and has now set off on a metaphysical quest to discover the real reason for her son Bacar Ndaw’s presumed murder years earlier. The narrator bemoans the fact that ever since abandoning her at age five, her mother has never worried about her in this way, knowing that Marie would make it through “quoi

²⁸ Bugul, Personal Interview.
More than any other novel, this text lays out all of the narrator’s complaints against her mother. First and foremost, the latter presumably avoids talking to the protagonist, preferring conversations with her younger niece. The mother also does nothing to intervene when the narrator’s sister burns her shoulder with a scalding iron, leaving a lifelong scar that seems to reflect the narrator’s mother wound. Assy also has the narrator’s cat murdered, sends a letter to her mother labeling the narrator as a woman of ill repute, and ultimately leads the narrator’s mother to abandon her when she gives birth to Samanar. The mother at times inexplicably insults her biological daughter in a vulgar manner, and Marie also shares that her brother would sometimes abuse her during the night while her mother lay sleeping in the same bed. This maternal figure fails miserably in fulfilling her role. Her presence affords no safety or comfort to her child. Ultimately, the narrator finds fault with the mother for not trying to find a “solution” other than abandoning her to take care of her niece. Wondering obsessively why her mother abandoned her, she laments that “Pendant quarante années j’étais persuadée que ma mère ne m’aimait pas.” (“for forty years I was persuaded that my mother didn’t love me”).

The scene of Marie’s reunion with her mother at age six, as communicated in De l’autre côté du regard, displays a tragic tone. The child runs towards her mother, “pleine d’espoir” (“full of hope”) but receives the “choc” (“shock”) of her life when her mother does not run to her, take her in her arms, or even wipe away the sweat running down the girl’s forehead. Marie discovers

---

29 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 22.
30 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 34.
31 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 311-314, 323.
32 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 105, 141.
33 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 107.
34 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 72.
35 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 79.
that her mother is no longer her mother.\textsuperscript{36} At other times, however, she wonders if this rejection is somehow her own fault. Such thoughts haunt her as she can find no answer to her questions. This return to scenes from Marie’s childhood, already represented in \textit{Baobab} many years before, reflects the cyclical nature of the author’s unresolved search for answers.

Indeed, Bugul wrote this last semi-autobiographical novel in order to “catch up” with her recently departed niece whom she feared would beat her to her mother in the afterlife. Hearing about the death of Samanar (“my Arab” in Wolof, an affectionate name given to the niece by Marie’s mother),\textsuperscript{37} the narrator alternates between grief, indignation and fear of additional abandonment. She admits her jealousy of Samanar and prays “Dieu, ne laissez pas ma nièce Samanar atteindre ma mère de l’autre côté du regard.”\textsuperscript{38} (“God, don’t let my niece Samanar reach my mother on the other side of the gaze.”). The novel represents this fantastic quest, and the style of the story mirrors Bugul’s choppy, breathless attempt to catch up to her niece. The narrator details the love triangle between herself, Samanar and her mother in the course of the novel and shares various stories involving family members who reunited for her mother’s passing. Although she claims to want to forget everything, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} revisits every cause of hurt in the narrator’s past.

I argue that another one of Tsala Tsala’s “reintegration requests” manifests itself in the story. If “partir c’est trahir” (“leaving is betraying”) whenever an African decides to emigrate elsewhere, then Marie’s explanations for her exile at the time of her mother’s death appear in another light. I already showed that after the Serigne’s aforementioned death, the narrator lost all significance in her community since she had no husband or children. She explains that these

\textsuperscript{36} Bugul, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} 81.
\textsuperscript{37} Bugul, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} 93.
\textsuperscript{38} Bugul, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} 63.
“références que les autres exigeaient” (“references that others required”) from her, including marriage and children, made her leave her home country. She says, “Les gens voulaient que je renonce à moi-même. Les gens voulaient que je renonce à tout pour faire ce qu’ils voulaient.” (“people wanted me to abandon myself. People wanted me to relinquish everything to do what they wanted”).

Earlier in the story, she refers to her choice of exile again, blaming those around her for her decision. “Je suis loin des miens, mais ce n’est pas de ma faute. Personne ne m’avait rien dit quand j’avais perdu ma mère pour la dernière fois. Personne ne m’avait retenue quand je disais que je voulais partir . . . pour chercher Dieu. L’Unique Dieu, Celui de la Thora, de l’Evangile et du Coran.”

“I am far from those around me, but it’s not my fault. No one told me anything when I lost my mother for the last time. No one held me back when I said I wanted to leave . . . to search for God. The Unique God, That of the Torah, the Gospels and the Koran.”)

She later laments how “terrible” it can be to live far away from one’s loved ones for so long. It is “impardonnable” (“unforgivable”), in her words, that she never has shared a beautiful sunset with her family and that she experienced an exile that was “forcé et voulu en même temps.” (“forced and desired at the same time.”).

In this way, the narrator justifies her choice of exile by blaming her entire family, just as she criticizes her mother’s preference for her niece Samanar.

According to a number of Senegalese psychologists and other medical professionals such as Mbaye and Dissingh, such widespread criticism of one’s loved ones mirrors behavior exhibited by a large number of orphaned patients both in Senegal and abroad. These tendencies include focusing on the faults and weaknesses of authority figures in their lives, reacting with hurt, losing basic trust in others and protecting themselves from relationships.

39 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 212.
40 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 28-29.
41 Bugul, De l’autre côté du regard 32.
Orphaned patients they work with often develop a “spirit of independence” in the sense that they stop relying on anyone other than themselves. Individuals may also seek comfort in “counterfeit affections” such as possessions, position, drugs, alcohol and sex. The end result is a life of self-imposed oppression that Dissingh calls the “orphan spirit.”

One of Bugul’s narrators describes herself in the following terms: “... je n’avais eu que trois amies toute ma vie ... Je n’avais jamais pu en trouver d’autres.” (“... I only had three friends during my entire life ... I was never able to find others.”). She finds it easier to confide in strangers that she will never see again. Moreover, a critic recently described the trajectory of *Baobab* in a way that perfectly describes Bugul’s descent into counterfeit affections. Natalie Edwards summarizes the novel as a “series of unsuccessful relationships, an abortion, prostitution, drug addiction and a mental breakdown.” Bugul also speaks repeatedly of an overarching solitude in her life, a life lived far away from loved ones and in which “la vraie solitude était le départ de la mère, l’école française, la mort du père et toujours la solitude” (“true solitude was the mother’s departure, French school, the father’s death and always solitude.”

The final scenes of *De l’autre côté du regard* detail the means by which the narrator comes to a certain acceptance of the trauma of losing her mother through the literary device of sublimation. Marie feels an overwhelming calm invade her immediately after hearing of her mother’s death, and soon discovers that this peace means that her mother is not really dead. Rather, she is painlessly suspended between life and death in the afterlife. Marie discovers that she can communicate with her mother whenever it rains. During these times, she feels a

---

42 Dissingh, Personal Interview.
43 Bugul, *De l’autre côté du regard* 136.
44 Bugul, *De l’autre côté du regard* 280-281.
46 Bugul, *Baobab* 118.
“bonheur d’enfant” (“the happiness of a child”).\textsuperscript{47} Her mother promises her, “Je vais tout te raconter. Toi aussi tu vas tout me dire.” (“I’m going to tell you everything. You’re going to say everything to me too.”).\textsuperscript{48} However, such a close mother-daughter relationship proves impossible even in Bugul’s literary works, for by the novel’s end her mother has failed to respond to her most important question: “Pourquoi l’avais-tu aimée plus que moi?” (“Why did you love her [i.e. Samanar] more than me?”). The mother remains silent, eventually explaining that she doesn’t know what to say because she is “bouleversée.” (“overwhelmed”).\textsuperscript{49} After this scene, the narrator resolves not to tell her mother that Samanar has died, in order to keep the two women from being reunited in the afterlife.

As the novel closes, her mother has learned the truth about her son’s death and can finally die in peace. Her voice and person will now become one with the narrator’s. In this way, Marie hopes to avenge herself of her niece. She ends the novel with the same Wolof song that she imagined her mother singing to her as a child, this time without offering the reader a translation. However, the second-to-last line of the song has changed. The narrator adds words of comfort for the crying baby of the song, telling her “Boul dioyati,” which means “Don’t cry anymore.” She also speaks words of comfort to herself, now that she has taken on her mother’s identity. In this fantasy, she can remodel her mother into the caring, comforting figure that she always desired. As her previous novels have shown, however, the aching trauma of her relationship with her mother always remains in spite of whatever temporary “fix” the narrator has found, including a departure to Europe, dabbling in prostitution, drug and alcohol addictions, romantic relationships, marriage to the Serigne, isolation, etc.. This pain is a self-renewing fountain that springs up anew in spite of the peace that marks the last pages of each successive

\textsuperscript{47} Bugul, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} 203.
\textsuperscript{48} Bugul, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} 162-163.
\textsuperscript{49} Bugul, \textit{De l’autre côté du regard} 325.
semi-autobiographical book. I argue that the trauma is not, therefore, "conquered" by the creative process, although it is expressed in great detail.

Recent interviews and the themes of novels since *De l'autre côté du regard* indicate that Bugul has chosen to leave the topic of her mother’s departure on the shelf for a while. This decision, paired with claims that her mother’s departure was only the outer “crust” of novels such as *Baobab*, demonstrates her desire to distance herself from an automatic association with her mother’s departure. Here, the very label of “semi-autobiographical” proves itself very useful to Bugul’s manipulation of her public image. I argue that the “semi-” represents an author’s “escape clause.” For any event or situation in a text, the writer can claim that the scene was in fact fictional. No one really knows the truth except for the author and perhaps a few close friends and family members. Despite claims that she has moved on, Bugul’s texts show that she can find no satisfactory answers to her fundamental questions of “Why did my mother leave me?” and “Why did she prefer her niece to me?”

The last pages of *De l’autre côté du regard* introduce a markedly different style than the rest of the novel. Their subject matter and chanting, repetitive style mirror that of her next novel, *La Rue Félix-Faure* (2004). The narrator enters a litany in which she claims, “De plus en plus de gens ne croyaient plus en Dieu . . . De plus en plus de gens ne voulaient pas croire en Dieu. De plus en plus de gens avaient honte de croire en Dieu. De plus en plus de gens voulaient être Dieu. De plus en plus de gens voulaient être Son fils . . . De plus en plus de gens disaient que Dieu leur avaient parlé. . .”50 (“More and more people no longer believed in God . . . More and more people didn’t want to believe in God. More and more people were ashamed of believing in God. More and more people wanted to be God. More and more people wanted to be His son . . . More and more people said that God has spoken to them. . .”). In the same

50 Bugul, *De l’autre côté du regard* 357-358.
manner, Bugul’s next novel will turn away from autobiography to the topic of the supernatural. *La Rue Félix-Faure*’s philosophical mission is markedly different from that of its predecessor. In it, Bugul reveals the hypocrisy of insincere followers of religious precepts while highlighting the existence of a God who is involved in people’s daily lives and surpasses all religious dogma. Explaining her inspiration for the novel at the 2010 Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres in Dakar, Senegal, Bugul insisted that “Dieu n’est pas dans le châpelet. Dieu est dans l’intimité. . .” In her trademark polemical style, she continued “. . . ici au Sénégal, les gens pensent connaître Dieu mais ils passent à côté.” (“God isn’t in prayer beads. He’s in intimacy . . . Here in Senegal, people think they know God but they miss Him completely.”).  

51 Bugul gamely fielded Senegalese journalists’ plethora of questions following these controversial statements. Her choice to address such topics in recent novels demonstrates the upward movement of a literary and life quest that was not satisfied by either human relationships or literature. Since the novel’s publication, Bugul has not written any more semi-autobiographical texts.

I argue that Bugul’s decision to focus on transcendental matters also indicates a desire to distance herself from autobiographical associations in the public sphere. She recently claimed that she has never, and will never, write a book that strictly focuses on her mother’s departure. Her current comments indicate a desire for readers to recognize the multitude of different themes within her semi-autobiographical novels, rather than focusing on such personal trauma as a dominant theme.  

52 Thus, Bugul’s recent turn away from autobiography has both personal and public motivations. Yet even so, Bugul has elsewhere explained that she has

---

52 Bugul, Personal Interview.
been profoundly spiritual since, and because of her mother’s departure. In this way, the traumatic cycle remains unbroken even while Bugul turns to more strictly “fictional” works.

Bugul’s current novel has yet to be published, and will focus on the topic of, as she calls it, “l’enfermement.” (“imprisonment”). This subject suggests a culmination of all of Bugul’s efforts in deconstructing certain aspects of Senegalese and European societies in her texts. She explains that “on est tous enfermé dans des boîtes.” (“We’re all closed up in boxes.”). “On est tous clônés dans nos têtes.” (“We’re all cloned in our minds.”). She declares the passion of her life to be freedom, and denotes writing as a means of escaping the “forces” (“powers”) that would try to condition her. She explains, “Les gens sont enfermés par leurs idéologies, alors qu’il faut sortir de cette prison.” (“People are trapped by their ideologies, so they need to get out of that prison.”). Ideologies, according to Bugul, lead to every sort of violence in the form of wars, racism and class struggles. Revealing the “personal growth” part of her writing project, she explains “Après ce livre je serai encore meilleure.” (“After this book I’ll be even better.”). For Bugul, “better” means “more free”. Humorously, Bugul identifies cockroaches as the beings that, paradoxically perhaps, represent the freedom that she craves. These insects surmount all sorts of odds in order to survive. Nothing can stop them. Humans should, therefore, get rid of prejudices against cockroaches, just as they should overcome all other misconceptions that mar their existence, such as racism and class-related prejudice. In this sense, cockroaches can, she says, teach us how to break free from our prisons.

A large part of Bugul’s idea of “imprisonment” includes the idea of most, if not all, sorts of group adhesion. Such a literary project seems particularly critical of Bugul’s native Senegal, a

---

53 Bugul, Personal Interview.
54 Bugul, Personal Interview.
country where community is traditionally so highly valued. However, I have shown that her semi-autobiographical novels demonstrate both a profound need for relationship, as well as a paradoxical rejection of those around her. Such conflicting desires prove exponentially aggravated for Bugul as a post-colonial subject whose hybrid identity often causes her to encounter incomprehension from others in Senegal and in Europe. I argue that Bugul holds any idea of collective identity at arm’s length and that her literary projects are fundamentally, deeply individualistic. As she puts it, “On doit se changer soi-même. C’est le changement individuel . . . qui peut changer le monde . . . Les autres, on n’est pas ensemble. Ce sont des êtres existentiels. Il faut s’occuper de soi-même [pour pouvoir aimer les autres].” (“One has to change oneself. It’s individual change . . . that can change the world . . . Other people, we aren’t together . . . they’re existential beings. One must take care of oneself” [in order to be able to love others].”

However, even though Bugul now champions freedom from all types of “imprisonment,” the manifest literary trauma of her relationship with her mother and her desire for reintegration prove themselves prisons that she has yet to overcome. In spite of Bugul’s claims in interviews that one cannot heal from anything in life, I argue that the “serial” nature of her semi-autobiographies and her fictional works demonstrates a continued striving towards this ultimate, currently unattained freedom.

---

55 Mbaye, Personal Interview.
56 Bugul, Personal Interview.
3. A Self-Proclaimed Coconut: Effa’s Decision to Live as Division

“Il y aura toujours cette voix en moi que rien n’a jamais pu réduire au silence et qui s’acharne à me souffler que vivre, c’est descendre toujours plus loin dans ces régions blessées en nous, que le seul combat qui vaille la peine d’être mené, c’est celui qui descelle et dénude.”

(Gaston-Paul Effa, Nous, les enfants de la tradition)

(“There will always be that voice in me that nothing has ever been able to reduce to silence and that insistently whispers to me that living is always descending further into these wounded regions in us, that the only combat worth carrying out is that which breaks apart and bares.”)

(Gaston-Paul Effa, We, the children of tradition)

Nimrod declares Effa the “prince” of an autobiographical vein that mirrors that of V.Y. Mudimbe. The critic claims that Effa’s writing style is one of the few that consistently roots itself in autobiography, with the writer’s childhood as an ever-present “veine cher” (“dear vein”). Were he (only) French, Nimrod says one would quickly label the author’s works as autofiction.¹

Ironically, French critics do not categorize Effa as a French writer. His novels still find themselves under the classification of African literature, in spite of the fact that Effa is a French citizen who only spent the first five years of his life in his native Cameroon. Critics generally fail to extend the genre of autofiction to Sub-Saharan African authors. Additionally, I argue that Effa’s propensity to declare his novels such as Tout ce bleu as strictly autobiographical distances him even further from the autofiction genre. Finally, interviews with Effa by French readers and critics often demonstrate a similar desire to focus on the more “autobiographical” aspects of his texts. Effa himself expresses little interest in questions of classification, nor does he offer insight into the play between fiction and autobiography in his novels that would make classifying his style an easier task. Rather, his focus remains that of better understanding

himself and the world around him through the act of writing. I argue that the category of trauma studies proves most fruitful as a new way of considering Effa’s semi-autobiographical works.

Mirroring Douo’s trajectory in Effa’s *Tout ce bleu* (1996), the author himself was offered to a local French priest by his father at age five. However, he recently described the situation to a Cameroonian audience as “banale” (“banal”) in the sense that “tout Africain est susceptible de [le] vivre.” (“any African could theoretically experience [it].”). In spite of such attempts to relativize the pain of his childhood in front of an African audience, his early novels attest to the trauma of the separation from his mother, whom he would not see again for the rest of his childhood or adolescence. In a more general sense, the author describes his novels as in part reflecting an ancient truth of the Midrash, a Hebrew method of biblical exegesis that explains that an angel hits each child in the face when he or she is born so that the child forgets the happiness of his mother’s womb. Life becomes, in Effa’s words, a search for this lost paradise.

Elsewhere, Effa describes himself as “celui qui rentre dans la nuit, les yeux ouverts.” (“he who goes into the night with his eyes open”). A Cameroonian child growing up in the midst of French priests and nuns, Effa found refuge in books. University of Yaoundé professor and literary critic Marcellin Vounda Etoa cites Effa’s first exile as one into books, while still in his home country at a French convent. Describing himself repeatedly as a “noix de coco” (“coconut”), black on the outside and white on the inside, Effa works through the challenges of his double-identity in his semi-autobiographical works. Often, his fictional work mirrors this quest. For example, *Le...*
*Cheval-Roi* (2004) reproduces the theme of the orphaned boy torn between two countries and cultures, although this child hails originally from France.

However, like Bugul, Effa does not describe his literary quest as a search for healing, although he mentions the desire to “exorciser ce passé de souffrance.” ("exorcise this past of suffering"). Rather, he explains that he writes “pour mieux connaître ce petit rien qu'on est” (“to know this little nothing that we are better”) and to continue to rip apart the veil separating him from the world and himself. When one compares his later semi-autobiographical works such as *Nous, les enfants de la tradition* (2008) to *Mâ* (1998) and the more strictly autobiographical *Tout ce bleu* (1996), one notes much more of an evolution in Effa’s quest than that seen in Bugul’s. The adult protagonist of *Nous, les enfants de la tradition* strives to make peace with his past by truly becoming an adult. In this way, he moves past the trauma of his childhood’s parental loss in order to deal with his bicultural identity quest as an adult. The past still haunts Effa’s hero as it did Bugul’s heroine, but the adult narrator’s struggle is markedly different from that of his youth. A philosophy professor as well as a writer, Effa’s novels also demonstrate an acute awareness of psychology. One of his fictional works, *La Salle des Professeurs*, (2004) revolves around a school teacher’s visits to her psychoanalyst’s office in France. The author’s semi-autobiographical works also demonstrate a critical, often ironic level of self-analysis as Effa examines himself as a multicultural individual. Thus, commentaries from Cameroonian specialists in the fields of psychology, literature and sociology will offer new perspectives about

---

10 Effa, “Écrire d’Ailleurs” 238.
the idea of “trauma” as it relates to Effa’s oeuvre, as well as the ways in which his novels work through his French and Cameroonian bicultural heritage.

Bernard Magnier has described Tout ce bleu and Mâ as “deux quêtes pour combler le vide d’une même absence,” (“two quests to fill the void of the same absence”), referring to the loss of Effa’s mother.\textsuperscript{11} Indeed, the author’s choice to entitle his first autobiographical novel\textsuperscript{12} Tout ce bleu (“All this blue”) demonstrates yet again his uncanny awareness of the psychology of parental loss. Blue is the color of mourning in Africa, which is why Effa chose the title.\textsuperscript{13} However, it represents not only Mbaye’s “unending mourning” for Effa’s lost mother, but also a mourning for his lost home country.\textsuperscript{14} This first autobiographical novel, as well as the first part of Mâ, give full reign to the expression of the hallmark Freudian Oedipal complex. The narrator remembers being held so closely by his mother that the two formed “une seule chair” (“a single flesh”)\textsuperscript{15} and the very name of Douo expresses the closeness and exclusivity of his relationship with his mother. He remembers the “sensation inoubliable” (“unforgettable sensation”) of her rubbing palm oil into his skin, and flashbacks such as these surge up in the middle of conversations and take all of his attention. He cannot escape them.\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, Effa presents Douo’s father as a distant, one-dimensional, cruel figure who forces the mother to give up her only source of comfort. He calls the decision an “enlèvement” (“kidnapping”)\textsuperscript{17} in Mâ, and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Effa has declared, “Effectivement, Tout ce bleu est une autobiographie.” See the written synopsis of the Paris Colloquium entitled D’encre et d’exil 8 d’Afrique . . . Si près, si loin: Huitièmes rencontres internationales des écritures de l’exil. (Paris: Editions de la Bibliothèque publique d’information/Centre Pompidou, 2009) 12. On the other hand, Effa takes much more fictional liberty with his second novel in this vein, Mâ.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Magnier, <http://www.cec-ong.be/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=64>.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Effa has chosen a definitive exile in France, and has only returned to Cameroon on short trips since his childhood.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Effa, Tout ce bleu 12.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Effa, Tout ce bleu 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Effa, Mâ 13.
\end{itemize}
the narrator-mother feels nothing but revolt towards her husband. Sexual relations with this man can be nothing but traumatic, and the mother’s wedding night is one of “sang” (“blood”) and “douleur” (“pain”) in which the mother becomes absent to her own soul, to the point of disappearing. She later wonders if she will survive the departure of her child, the only source of joy in her life.

Still, Douo finds father figures in the convents’ priests, and describes his childhood as “heureux.” (“happy”). A class clown, the Douo-Papus strives to captivate the attention of his teachers whom he adores. Yet he admits that for him, happiness has always been an “avant-coureur” (“precursor”) to disaster, which makes him distrust it. Each instant reminds him of the idyllic age of five when he was suddenly torn away from his mother. Sociologist Dr. Armand Leka Essomba of the University of Yaoundé highlights what a privilege many Cameroonians found it for a child to receive a European education at the hands of the French during the time period of Effa’s childhood. According to this prevalent logic, the child in question should have been grateful. Thus, Effa’s tendency to simultaneously denounce his parents’ decision to give him away, and declare that his childhood was nonetheless “happy,” demonstrates an acute awareness of the perceived good fortune of his position in terms of many at home, and his desire to express thanks for his opportunity. At the same time, however, he speaks to the unending wounding that his parents’ decision caused, which leads to the primary tension of the novel. In spite of the benefits of a French life and education, the French language is a “langue

---

16 Effa, Mâ 37.
19 Effa, Mâ 36.
20 Effa, Mâ 84.
orpheline” (“orphan language”) and he has “racines orphelines” (“orphan roots”). His happiest
moments remain those spent remembering his mother and his first games with her.22

Due to the pain of the loss of his mother, the narrator explains that he gave up intimacy
with those around him. Like Bugul, he lived a solitary life during all of his years at French
convents in Yaoundé and then Douala. Elsewhere, he speaks of the “impossible rapport à
l’autre” (“impossible relationship with the other”) and his all-encompassing desire to shatter his
solitude.23 He explains that his transition to life in Paris led him to replace the conscious
mourning of his mother with an overarching sense of shame that led him into further isolation.
In some sense the narrator displays the belief that his being sent away was his own fault. Yet
he also rejects Paris, and feels that it rejects him as well. The narrator even receives a new
name, Papus, while in France. The narrator describes himself as lacking a family, a house or a
country. He is “à jamais isolé, sans racines.” (“forever isolated, without roots”).24 His loved
ones, although still alive and well, have become ghosts that he cannot even look back upon, lest
he lose them again. The initial loss of his mother before he had been loved enough,25 as he
calls it, is a “source de pleurs” (“source of tears”) that is can never be silenced. Exile reinforces
his bitterness.26 He says that only death will deliver him.27 Yet literature becomes his refuge,28
and memory his passion.29 Likewise does writing prove his way of continually inventing the
mother and the son, as he puts it.30 The novel ends with the narrator claiming to have found his
home country again within himself, and declaring that it will never leave him again. He does not,

22 Effa, Mâ 53, 66.
23 Effa, Mâ 54-55.
24 Effa, Mâ 91.
25 Effa, Mâ 110.
26 Effa, Mâ 117.
27 Effa, Mâ 113.
28 Effa, Mâ 45.
29 Effa, Mâ 110-111.
30 Effa, Mâ 54.
however, seem to have overcome the trauma of his “deuil” (“mourning”) that he had mentioned just one page earlier. Thus, the ending of Tout ce bleu reinforces the ambiguity of the narrator’s position as one who strives both to capture and appreciate the present, and to mourn the painful past of his lost family, childhood and country.

In Mâ, the role of narrator changes hands. Douo’s mother supposedly narrates her life after being separated from her son. She does so, however, in an extremely literary style that betrays her son’s educational background. An uneducated, adolescent village girl would undoubtedly refrain from waxing poetic about the “cri lugubre et hargneux” of a “phacochère . . . qui déchirait la brume”32 (“mournful and snarling cry” of a “warthog . . . that tore the fog”) or meditating upon the “froissement épineux des broussailles vivaces.” (“prickly rustling of the dancing undergrowth”). The reader must suspend his or her disbelief in this regard. However, once he or she does so, Mâ offers a deconstruction of the former attachment to the mother because the author bequeaths the character of Sabeth (representing in part his own mother) with not only a temporary lover named Emmanuel, but also reconciliation with her husband and, as the grand finale, a release from mourning the loss of Douo through the birth of another baby, Sylvie. Thus, the narrator of Tout ce bleu demonstrates an extraordinary movement from praying in the former novel that God would forever deprive his mother of the ability to have other children as punishment for her abandonment33 to allowing his mother to walk off into the light at the end of Mâ, accompanied by her husband and their new baby. He recreates the family without Douo and thus, in some sense, without the author. The story’s trajectory expresses the author’s desire to force himself to overcome his past by rewriting the present and future. In Mâ, the eventual erasure of Douo from his Cameroonian family frees him to embrace a new and

31 Effa, Mâ 120.
32 Effa, Mâ 59.
33 Effa, Tout ce bleu 70.
different destiny. It is ironically in Douo’s becoming an orphan more fully that he gains a certain freedom. At least in a literary form, Effa succeeds in working through and overcoming the traditional Oedipal complex.

While a reader outside of the author’s home culture, as are most of Effa’s readers, might typically explain this progression as simple forgiveness or the quest to overcome one’s past, the well-known Cameroonian psychologist Jacques-Philippe Tsala Tsala (whose practice is based in Effa’s hometown of Yaoundé) also feels that the key to this transition lies in the guilt of being exiled. “Partir c’est trahir,” (“Leaving is betraying”), he insists. Those who leave must come back to live permanently in Cameroon. Otherwise, according to Tsala Tsala, they always experience the guilt of their supposed betrayal. Constantly justifying their departure, they seek to make amends by every means possible:34 even in a literary sense. Effa has lived in France ever since he was sent there for his studies as an adolescent thirty years ago. Indeed, in his 2002 address at the University of Yaoundé, he declared, “Mais je vous dis que je n’ai jamais quitté la terre africaine, je l’ai emportée avec moi.” (“I tell you that I never left African soil, I took it with me.”). He goes on to explain that if he had not left, he would not have been able to become a writer. As he put it, “il faut s’absenter des choses pour qu’elles reprennent leurs droits.” (“one must absent oneself from things so that they take back their rights.”). In this way, the distance between France and Cameroon is an “heureux exil” (“happy exile”).35 However, in Tout ce bleu the author describes the very same exile as one creating a ghost child who starts to cry every time he thinks of losing his mother, the day she abandoned him, and the fact that he would die far from her, “dans l’anonyme communauté des exilés” (“in the anonymous

---

34 Tsala Tsala, Personal Interview, 13 August 2011.
community of ex-patriots”). Elsewhere, his novels still speak of an “angoisse du départ” (“anguish of departure”). Leka and Tsala Tsala’s analyses help to explain this paradox. The exiled writer must declare himself “fortunate” to have been given an exile that he never initially wanted. As an adult who has adapted to the situation, he defends his decision not to return home by using literature as a means of justification.

The author declares that distance enables him to represent Cameroon more accurately, although many Cameroonians would fail to agree. For example, Eric Nyitouek, publishing director of Harmattan’s Cameroonian branch, declares that “les auteurs en France, ils ont une autre vision que les auteurs au Cameroun. Dans leur façon de décrire, ils n’insistent pas sur la misère.” (“authors in France, they have a different vision than authors in Cameroon. In their way of describing [home], they don’t stress poverty.”) After having spent a certain amount of time in France, Nyitouek says that authors begin to “relativiser” (“relativize”) their people’s suffering. Such statements from my interviews demonstrate a prevalent perception of exiled authors at home and to call Effa’s particular justification argument into question. However, the fact remains that writing enables him to express the mourning process for a family and home culture that do not allow him to grieve for them. This forbidden grief is unending, but literature gives it a voice.

Although the tension of this permanent grief is remarkable in Effa’s works, it is in some sense the situation of every exiled African writer who cries, in Dominique Maingueneau’s words, “. . . mon lieu n’est pas mon lieu, où que je sois je ne suis pas à ma place.” (“my place is not my place, wherever I am I’m not where I belong.”). Tsala Tsala, a former exile who, like Effa,

---

36 Effa, Tout ce bleu 103.
37 Effa, Nous, les enfants de la tradition 21.
38 Nyitouek, Eric, Personal Interview, 10 August 2011.
received his academic credentials in France, describes exiled writers as individuals “dans un pays d’accueil qui ne les acceuillit pas”40 (“in a host country that doesn’t host/welcome them”), where they are unable to integrate as they wish. Furthermore, their families back home often require both that they integrate well enough to be successful in their new country, and constantly prove that they have not forgotten their family back home. Exiles cannot, however, accomplish both of these tasks simultaneously. This paradox lies at the heart of the trauma of exiles like Effa who have been declared the eldest of their clan. In an effort both to revolt against their host culture and to express allegiance to their home country, some writers write to declare, (or even to shout, in Tsala Tsala’s words), that they are African. In the aforementioned University of Yaoundé address, Effa told the assembled group of Cameroonian students that he considered himself “d’abord comme Africain.” (“first and foremost as an African.”).41 Elsewhere, he has declared “L’Afrique est mon pays, la langue française ma patrie.” (“Africa is my country, the French language my homeland.”). However, he assures his Cameroonian public elsewhere that he initially hated the French language, and could have continued to do so.42 Furthermore, his knowledge of his homeland’s traditions and his native language has been described by Vounda as “imbattable” (“unbeatable”), a fact that is all the more impressive considering that Effa has spent most of his life outside of his native culture.43 Effa himself admits to embarking upon his writing career as a “revendication” (“assertion”) in order to say

---

40 Tsala Tsala, Personal Interview.
41 Effa, “Ecrire d’Ailleurs” 239-240.
43 Vounda, Personal Interview.
“voici qui je suis.” (“here is who I am”). However, he no longer claims to feel the need to do so.44

Despite the new relational freedom afforded the mother in Mâ, one could argue that the narrator trades one imagined union with his mother for another in this second semi-autobiographical novel. The two characters become, in some sense, the same person. In Mâ, the absent Douo shares an extraordinary amount of characteristics with the maternal figure of Sabeth. She too describes herself as the eldest of her family, and experiences an overpowering sense of shame for being a woman that is akin to Douo’s shame for having been rejected by his Cameroonian family and French culture. Both characters’ families give them animal names. They call Sabeth a sacrificial goat or “Elékà,” and Douo (presumably the unnamed narrator of Nous, les enfants de la tradition) later takes the name of “donkey” in his family’s language in order to symbolize his responsibility to provide for his family. Sabeth also describes herself as having been “arrachée” (“torn away”) from her family, like Douo.45 Both refer to their childhoods prior to their respective traumatic events (marriage for the mother, departure for the convent for Douo) as their “paradis perdu” (“lost paradise”).46 Both characters also become catechumens for the same priest, Père Delanoé. At one point the mother wonders aloud, “Etais-je si différente de l’enfant que j’avais perdu?” (“Was I so different from the child that I had lost?”).47 Like her son, the mother is “étrangère” (“a foreigner”) and “déracinée” (“uprooted”) in her husband’s family.48 She wonders how she can avoid being haunted by the pained expression on her son’s face as the sisters took him away. The moment that she receives her baptismal

45 Effa, Mâ 29.
46 Effa, Mâ 23.
47 Effa, Mâ 160.
48 Effa, Mâ 34.
name of Elizabeth, however, the promise of meeting someone who will transform her life gives her hope for a fresh start. While she believes that her quest will lead to finding her lost child, it is ultimately the search for the answer to Douo’s own question: “Comment se procurer le baume réconfortant de la mémoire?” (“How can one obtain the comforting balm for memory?”).  

The end of the mother’s quest to find a man whose unbroken cord links him to the innards of the earth leads the mother from witch doctor to witch doctor, and from priest to priest. However, her search ultimately finds fulfillment in her new daughter’s painless, effortless birth which allows her to forget her lost paradise. In this way, Effa also rehabilitates the myth of the “femme fautive” (“the guilty woman”) that permeates his home culture. Women are no longer the source of death in the world, but the source of life. Effa mirrors this fact by a new myth that he includes in the narrative. Here the woman takes the fault for a trespass that she did not commit, and the Creator God blesses her for her sacrifice. Thus, the end of Mâ not only gives the maternal figure healing from her trauma, but offers a counter-myth that redeems all women in a literary form. Outside of his writing career, Effa has proven himself equally concerned with women’s rights. He is the owner of a restaurant in Sarrebourg, France, named “A la table des Tropiques,” whose funds support various causes back home in Cameroon. He has also founded a middle school that caters primarily to girls in Yaoundé known as the “Collège Effa Gaston-Paul,” located in his childhood neighborhood. Additionally, he is the author of an association for the promotion of progress and women’s rights in particular which is entitled “Association pour les Arts du Monde.” (“Association for the Arts of the World”). His most current

---

49 Effa, Mâ 165.
project underway in Yaoundé is the construction of the very first Cameroonian public library aside from the Centre Culturel Français.50

Effa’s generosity in undertaking the aforementioned projects in Cameroon tempers the somewhat anti-traditional message of a later semi-autobiographical novel, *Nous, les enfants de la tradition*. Effa’s hero shares many characteristics with the author himself.51 This book made waves in France and in Cameroon due to its polemical content. The author criticizes the Cameroonian tradition requiring that certain children take full financial responsibility for their extended family. No longer an abandoned schoolboy, the narrator is an adult who has “mal grandi” (“grown up badly”)52 and wishes to reconcile his Cameroonian and French cultural heritages. His French wife has left him, however, because he sends three-fourths of his hard-earned salary to family back in Africa while his wife and children go without, in some sense, in France. Whereas critics such as Fotsing Mangoua highlight the number of Effa’s characters who find the refuge of a certain therapy, as he puts it, in exile, this narrator feels haunted by his Cameroonian family’s needs in spite of the distance.53

The narrator details the process by which an elderly wise man of his village marked him as the symbolic eldest of his family from a young age. Due to the child’s intelligence which promised a successful career, the elder designated him as the one who would be able to provide for everyone in his family which included, at the time, thirty-three children. As a result of this ceremonial distinction, the narrator works twelve-hour days as a successful engineer in France so that he can provide for his family’s material needs and ceremonies back home. His wife, a Frenchwoman, cannot understand the situation. She bemoans the fact that their children

don’t have winter coats or boots, while her husband offers everything he has to insatiable “vieillards qui ne sont que ruse et chantage” (“old people who are nothing but ruses and blackmailing”). The narrator, on the other hand, accuses his wife of being selfish, and the two end up separating before the novel has progressed much further. The novel offers traumatic cycles through which the narrator attempts to free himself from the shackles of this tradition of being the eldest, only to fall back into the same pattern. While outrightly refusing to send money to his family hurts his mother, he finds that inventing excuses works no better. As he puts it, “Ces ruses me ruinaient intérieurement.”54 (“These ruses destroyed me inwardly.”). He feels humiliated by his dishonesty, yet keeps resorting to it each time that his family calls.

Unlike Bugul, Effa rarely refers to his childhood separation from his mother in his later works. In Nous, les enfants de la tradition, it is not his departure from his family but a former instance in which he temporarily lost his mother that surfaces briefly in the text before disappearing again. In this instance the mother returns, and the child ceases being a “petit garçon abandonné et désespéré” (“small abandoned and desperate boy”).55 Perhaps the narrator’s very role as the eldest of his family enables him to feel “needed” to the point where his childhood trauma of parental loss has almost vanished from the text. At one point, the adult narrator stands up to his mother and refuses to send her more money, even daring to question the truth of her request. Thus, the mother of Nous, les enfants de la tradition no longer holds a mystic power over the narrator and simply represents another member of his family. However, the narrator’s ability to seemingly “move on” from his aforementioned childhood suffering could also lie in the very role of the male in Cameroonian cultures. As he himself explains in the text, he finds it difficult to cry, to laugh out loud or to talk about pain, since as a child his elders always told him that “un homme qui s’émeut ostensiblement ressemble à un cheval qui saute

54 Effa, Nous 67.
55 Effa, Nous 45.
une haie très haute sans son cavalier, lequel, lui, mord la poussière un peu plus loin.\textsuperscript{56} ("a man who is easily upset is like a horse that jumps over a very high hedge without his horseman, who bites the dust a bit further along."). \textit{Nous, les enfants de la tradition} demonstrates the persistence of such beliefs, however, in spite of distance. Even if the narrator feels at liberty to speak of the pain of his past in novel form, he also desires to be a true man of his Cameroonian family and reminisces about his success in withholding all emotion during rites of passage in his youth. The narrator justifies his right to complain about certain aspects of his home culture by proving his commitment to his family and expressing his desire to be a perfectly generous man of his home community who “ne garde plus rien pour lui” (“no longer keeps anything for himself”).\textsuperscript{57} Yet, the very act of writing this semi-autobiographical text represents a cultural transgression of which the narrator is well aware. Describing himself as a “torsion” between the child he was and the adult he desires to become, the narrator declares obstinately that in spite of his torment, “Je ne voulais pas raconter mon histoire” (“I did not want to tell my story”) since he had been taught in his Cameroonian youth to measure his words and not to share everything he was thinking and feeling.\textsuperscript{58}

This tension demonstrates Effa’s personal “deman de réintégration” (“reintegration petition”). While transgressing his home culture both by remaining exiled and denouncing certain aspects of his home culture in \textit{Nous, les enfants de la tradition}, the author paradoxically peppers the story with “proof” of his identification with his home culture and markers which display his allegiance to his home country. He delineates rituals, for example, that he still respects daily in France. These include everything from not shaking hands with the first person

\textsuperscript{56} Effa, \textit{Nous} 29.
\textsuperscript{57} Effa, \textit{Nous} 28.
\textsuperscript{58} Effa, \textit{Nous} 38.
he sees in the morning, to touching a charm in his pocket when he sees an accident. Additionally, the fact that the narrator spent most of his childhood with his Cameroonian family identifies him even more with his home culture, in a sense, than the author himself who left his family at age five. The narrator, on the other hand, leaves his family as an adolescent. Thus, he displays a wealth of knowledge about his home culture that the author himself acquired through research and trips back to Cameroon as an adult. In this way, the narrator represents part of the realization of the author's reintegration fantasy.

However, the element of the narrator's childhood trauma that remains is his perceived inability to grow up, in spite of being married with children. Throughout the story, he refers to himself as an “enfant éternel” (“the eternal child”). His loved ones in France see him as nothing more than a father unable to provide for his wife and children. Finding that his mother-in-law is particularly disgusted with his behavior, the narrator pinpoints the dichotomy of his situation: “Pour l'Europe, j'étais un enfant qui n'arrivait pas à grandir; pour l'Afrique, j'étais l'aîné qui porte la responsabilité de toute sa famille.” (“For Europe, I was a child who couldn't seem to grow up; for Africa, I was the eldest who carried the responsibility of his entire family.”). The irony of the impossibility of pleasing everyone leads the narrator to describe himself as the very “division” between pleasing and rebelling against the mandates of tradition. He wonders if he’ll ever be unified. Existing as division is an uncomfortable, even traumatic place. He describes his state as that of being in chains “dont les éclats me blessent.” (“whose splinters wound me”). Still, he continues to express identification with beliefs of his home culture that he left decades before.

---

59 Effa, Nous 141-142.
60 Effa, Nous 69.
61 Effa, Nous 112.
62 Effa, Nous 35.
Once his French family has left him, the narrator transitions from mourning his solitude to temporarily glorying in his newfound freedom and the possibility of associating with other African immigrants in France. Eating every meal “chez Madame Diop,” the narrator proudly plunges his hand into the common bowl at mealtimes, explaining to the reader that he wants to live “comme eux.” (“like them”). He feels a new peace, which proves temporary. The narrator’s very declaration that he wants to live “like them” (i.e. like other African immigrants) demonstrates the division between himself and those around him. Even other African immigrants seem in some sense too foreign, or too “other,” for the narrator to achieve a true communion with them.

At this point, the author interrupts the text with a six-page interlude detailing the history of the Atlantic slave trade. This story takes the form of a monologue by Daniel, an Afro-Caribbean man that the narrator presumably meets while eating at Madame Diop’s. In this way, interactions within the diaspora (the owner of the restaurant possesses a Senegalese name, the author can be understood to be Cameroonian, and Daniel is from Guadeloupe) enable the narrator to begin to heal from his identity crisis. Daniel’s story both brings the narrator temporary relief from his own identity quest, and gives a voice to the victims of the Atlantic slave trade. The narrator claims at various points that he does not want to tell his own story, but it is the enunciation of the slaves’ story, as well as Daniel’s thoughts on Afro-Caribbean and African identity, that free the narrator to believe that the world still holds a place for him. He even proclaims that the words of this passage of the text have “dispensé” (“excused” or “exempted”) him from having to speak. Thus, this passage proves key in the narrator’s personal identity quest. On the contrary, though, the interlude has a much different effect on its Afro-Caribbean speaker, Daniel. The more that Daniel speaks, the more he loses and exhausts himself. Traumatic symptoms abound in the narrator’s description of his friend. Daniel looks at people

63 Effa, Nous 21.
but seems not to see them, and he cannot stop talking about his interpretations of Afro-Caribbean history, “déjà répétée pour la centième ou la millième fois.” (“already repeated for the hundredth or the thousandth time.”). Obsessed with his history, Daniel is fascinated with an identity that he cannot understand because deep down he doesn’t want to “tout voir” (“see everything”). Yet he claims that it is tradition, in the end, that will enable the Afro-Caribbean population to bind up their wounds. According to Daniel, Africans don’t understand tradition because they remain in a “dépendance enfantine” (“childlike dependency”) that oddly mirrors the narrator’s own words about himself. Africans must take responsibility for their future without fear, Daniel says. The irruption of Afro-Caribbean history in the text gives the narrator respite from wrestling with African traditions and a new perspective towards them that enables him to move closer to the feat of “growing up.”

Yet each time that the narrator finds peace with his dual role, it proves fleeting. The narrator neither fully capitulates to tradition, nor adopts his French wife’s philosophy of solely supporting his French family. A self-proclaimed coconut, the narrator cannot choose sides and will forever exist between two cultures. As he lessens tradition’s grip on his psyche by refusing certain monetary requests from home and at times cutting off contact with his relatives, he also repeatedly presents the reader with commentaries demonstrating that he will never fully adhere to French culture either. Even if the French language is his “home” language, its culture leaves him in a perpetual state of uneasiness. This uncomfortable position has much to do with stereotypes that many people around him express about Africans. He enumerates epithets such as “Les Africains aiment la famille. Ils sont généreux, souffrent en silence et dansent avec la mort.” (“Africans love family. They are generous, suffer in silence and dance with death.”). Interestingly enough, the narrator both rejects such generalizations and elsewhere seems to

64 Effa, Nous 97.
65 Effa, Nous 25.
support them. As previously discussed, he expresses the desire to be a true man of his home community, which he describes as someone who gives until he can give no more. Also, he describes all “enfants de la tradition” (“children of tradition”) as those who know how to be silent and take their time to act, since they’ve learned their lesson “auprès des animaux sauvages.” (“with wild animals”). In this way, they can walk without making noise, although their “peau est épaisse de douleur.” (“is thick with pain”). Such statements closely reflect the aforementioned stereotypes that the narrator purportedly abhors, and I argue that this contradiction mirrors the narrator’s own distance from his home culture. A consciousness of the irony of his position surfaces in the text at certain junctures. He criticizes his own deep passivity, “rupture de soi” (“rupture with oneself”) and “dédoubllement de personnalité” (“split personality”) that has led him to this situation in which he cannot rest as long as there is one person on earth who is suffering. He is, as he puts it, “à la merci des autres.” (“at others’ mercy”).

He also demonstrates his refusal to fully adhere to French culture in a brief story that he relates from his childhood. A small boy having just arrived at the French convent, the narrator attempts to share his grandmother’s peanut paste with another child. Suddenly, he receives a violent clout from behind, and turns to see the priest (elsewhere described as his father and his hero) glaring at him disapprovingly. “Idiote,” (“Idiot”), the priest exclaims cruelly. “Est-ce que tu crois que c’est pour que tu les distribues que ta grand-mère t’a écrasé ces arachides?” (“Do you think that your grandmother crushed these peanuts for you so that you could give them away?”). The narrator-child is dumbfounded by such a judgment, after having learned that one should model Christ by giving everything away. Deciding that “ce monde me resterait à jamais inconnu” (“this world would forever remain unknown to me”), he retreats from everything except

66 Effa, Nous 28.
67 Effa, Nous 117.
68 Effa, Nous 41.
inner meditation and prayer. These activities and books are the narrator’s solace from the anguish of his double-exile. Flashing back to the narrator-adult, the protagonist decides that he must write in order to be “sauvé” (“saved”) from his current predicament. This undertaking, however, carries enormous risk as this would be “Le livre qui me causerait des ennuis: on n’expose pas en public les secrets de sa tribu.” (“the book that would make trouble for me: one does not expose the secrets of one’s tribe in public.”). Nous, les enfants de la tradition, is the novel that emerges from this project.

Besides renegotiating his relationship with tradition throughout the text, the narrator also reexamines his relationship with his father. Unlike the stoic, cruel father of Tout ce bleu and Mâ, this third semi-autobiographical representation of the father initially consoles and encourages his son in the role he has been assigned. Shortly after leaving for the convent, the narrator reads a letter from his father addressed to his “très cher fils” (“very dear son”) that encourages him to dry his tears and promises him that he will return home to his family in a few years. The letter also, however, reminds the narrator that as the eldest he must live not for himself but for others. Unfortunately, the narrator’s commentaries make it clear to the reader that the father’s promise of the son’s preeminent return home rings hollow: the son knows that as tradition mandates, the eldest is offered as a sacrifice to God. In this way, this attempted rewrite of the father proves futile. The paternal figure must ultimately remain distant and cruel, and only the mother can harbor any real love for her son. The narrator places the blame for this situation squarely on the shoulders of the mother, for her “dédain” (“disdain”) for the father irremediably

---

69 Effa, Nous 132-133.
70 Effa, Nous 136.
71 Effa, Nous 72.
colored her son’s perception of him. Indeed, the protagonist claims that he will never be fully himself, because he will always live his parents’ story.\textsuperscript{72}

Fear of breaking with tradition haunts the text. Halfway through the novel, the narrator worries that he has adopted the wrong attitude towards tradition, saying “On a toujours tort face à elle. Il faut . . . se soumettre à elle . . .” (“One is always wrong compared with [tradition]. One must . . . submit to it . . .”).\textsuperscript{73} When he refuses to send money back home, his uncle Noah warns him by phone that he will die a few days later. The narrator fears that tradition is stalking him and remembers the destiny of another man who broke with tradition. A man of his village once interrupted a baptismal ceremony and by so doing offended the dead. His punishment was years of errancy and eventual death. If one revolts in this way one will supposedly have an accident, die suddenly, lose what one possesses, and end up “comme un chien dans le caniveau.” (“like a dog in the gutter.”). Not respecting tradition is thus an abominable crime, and yet the character of Omar demonstrates, on the contrary, the possible trauma of acquiescing. The immigrant is also in some sense the “eldest” of his family back in Africa, and appears to the narrator to have nearly escaped death. He tears off his bandages one by one. Speaking so lowly that no one can hear him, Omar falls back to his native language, malinké, which no one around him understands. He then suddenly becomes quiet. His lips, however, keep moving and he twists his beard mechanically. He is no longer able to distinguish between dreams and reality. He is lost.\textsuperscript{74}

Towards the end of \textit{Nous, les enfants de la tradition}, the protagonist describes himself as a “caméléon” (“chameleon”) who has one eye fixed on the past and one on the future. He reunites with his children, his reunion with his wife appears imminent and he has fully come to

\textsuperscript{72} Effa, \textit{Nous} 119. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Effa, \textit{Nous} 105. \\
\textsuperscript{74} Effa, \textit{Nous} 128.
terms with his role as a father. Still, he claims that his tendencies towards mimicry push him to imitate those around him. All the while, he says that tradition is to thank for his ability to finally grow up, a declaration that the reader may find surprising and perhaps curious. Two pages later, he deplores this tradition that has no pity for its children, and he tells his wife that he has grown up because he has now turned his back on the “chantage” (“blackmailing”) of tradition. The confusion afforded the reader in this regard is due to the fact that the narrator seems to use the general term of “tradition” to refer to two different ideas: first, all traditions (be they deemed positive or negative by the narrator), and secondly the specific tradition of designating a child as the “eldest” of his family. It is this latter tradition that, in the protagonist’s eyes, has no pity for its children.

Ultimately, the novel represents more of a study of the limits of freedom as a Cameroonian exile. As Effa himself has said, “L’écriture est le seul espace de liberté qui nous reste.” (“Writing is the only space of freedom that we have left.”). Reconciliation seems to more closely resemble a grim resignation. The narrator’s struggles have born a scar in him that sometimes carries him to limits of the bearable. He explains, “L’Afrique sera toujours là.” (“Africa will always be there”). His desire to belatedly become an adult has become what he calls one of the most inaccessible myths of an entire continent.” Thus, he resolves to endure the same “malaise” and vain questioning that he has dealt with since his childhood. Tradition will outlive him, but without it he would have been unable to write his novel. Whatever he does, he will remain at the “frontière” (“border”). The novel’s dénouement, however, offers him a small victory. Throwing a bequeathed charm out of his window, the narrator challenges family obligations one last time and the act enables him to find a healthy balance between tradition and

---

76 Effa, Nous 159.
77 Effa, Nous 162.
78 Effa, Nous 165.
his present life. When the charm falls, “la frontière tombera” (“the border will fall down”) and he will breathe more easily. The narrator has finally found some sort of equilibrium. It is a partial victory that contrasts greatly with Effa’s claim that the novel’s ending is a “libération littéraire” (“literary freedom”) that shows “l’aboutissement et le sublime” (“success and the sublime”) that does not mirror reality.79 Rather, I argue that the narrator fails to achieve such total victory, as is evidenced by the cyclical doubt and re-submission to tradition which he demonstrates right up until the last page of the book.

In conclusion, the reader joins Papa Samba Diop in wondering if Effa “Ne serait . . . pas lui-même inexorablement déchiré entre un continent d’origine et une terre d’adoption?” (“Would . . . not himself be inexorably torn between a continent of origin and a land of adoption?”). Despite Effa’s declared desire to reconcile these two lands: “la terre d’ailleurs et la terre d’ici” (“the land of elsewhere and the land of here”), the protagonist admits at the closing of Nous, les enfants de la tradition that he will always be “cet homme encombré de traditions qui l’enferment dans le tombeau de la mémoire.” (“this man encumbered by traditions that close him up in the tomb of memory.”). He refuses to abandon tradition. Replacing tradition by freedom has proven to be a “leurre” (“illusion”). This statement contradicts claims by critics such as Nimrod that the novel is a story of freedom. In a similar vein, Marie-Hélène Fanton d’Andon asserts that the narrator has claimed identification with his roots while at the same time freeing himself from them. He supposedly becomes the “sauveur” (“savior”) of Africa.80 The novel itself, however, shows the situation to be significantly more complicated and its victories more understated. It is a story of partial, qualified freedom that never fully escapes its chains. Trauma is not overcome, but accepted. The narrator will continue to live as a division.

In any case, Effa proves himself a “series autobiographer.” Leigh Gilmore coined the term in her *The Limits of Autobiography*, in which she asserts that given the pacts of autobiography, one text per author should suffice. In this context, “writing another autobiography is more than slightly suspicious behavior.”\(^{81}\) Effa himself asserts that for someone from a traditional background such as his own, “Apprendre à dire ‘je’ n’est jamais acquis . . . on m’a appris à dire “nous,” “ils,” mais . . . jamais “je.” (“learning how to say “I” is never mastered . . . they taught me to say “us,” “they,” but . . . never “I.”).\(^{82}\) Therefore, the semi-autobiographical genre is an uncomfortable one for him. I also argue that the cases of both Bugul and Effa show serial autobiography (or serial semi-autobiography, as the case may be) to be not suspicious behavior, but evidence of the ongoing trauma of each author’s personal narrative. One other difference between the two authors’ situations lies in the fact that Bugul returned home and now lives in Dakar, Senegal. Effa, on the other hand, has a family in France and his comments detailing his need for distance in order to write about Africa suggest that he harbors no plans to relocate to Cameroon. This fact adds an additional layer of trauma to Effa’s case, even if he arguably remains in France by choice. While Bugul’s literary trauma revolves around her mother from one end of her narrative to the other, Effa’s evolves from his separation from his mother at age five to an unending mourning for a country whose “membership” or “reintegration” he will never fully gain. The struggle inherent to his cultural situation finds expression in the ideological contradictions of his texts in which the protagonists alternate between defending their home cultures’ practices and criticizing the same. In this way, *Nous, les enfants de la tradition* proves to be a double “reintegration petition.” The protagonist seeks both the acceptance of his home culture and reintegration into his French family. Collective history’s irruption in the text mirrors the narrator’s own identity-related struggles and highlights

---

\(^{81}\) Gilmore 96-97.  
\(^{82}\) *D’encre et d’exil 8 l’Afrique* 48.
the issues of representing the “self” vs. the “collective” for the postcolonial subject. Some solace comes from the narrator’s resolution to accept and inhabit this very “division” between two cultures with very different attitudes towards the individual and the collective. Effa says, “. . . . l’écriture n’est autre chose que la tentative de nouer quelque chose. Cette chose nous échappe sans cesse.” (“. . . writing is nothing but this attempt to establish something. This thing incessantly escapes us.”)\textsuperscript{83} What can the reader conclude, though, if the new identity that Effa hopes to give Africa and himself cannot, even in literary form, overcome its identity struggles? Herein lies the trauma of Effa’s case.

\textsuperscript{83} D’encre et d’exil 8 l’Afrique 19.
4. Sharing Trauma with Another? The Challenges of Writing (and Reading) the Rwandan Genocide

“J’ai vu ça de mes propres yeux. Est-ce que tu me crois, Cornelius? Il est important que tu me croies. Je n’invente rien, ce n’est pas nécessaire, pour une fois. Si tu préfères penser que j’ai imaginé ces horreurs, tu te sentiras l’esprit en repos et ce ne sera pas bien. Ces souffrances se perdront dans des paroles opaques et tout sera oublié jusqu’aux prochains massacres . . .”

(“I saw that with my own eyes. Do you believe me, Cornelius? It is important that you believe me. I’m not inventing anything, it isn’t necessary for once. If you prefer to think that I imagined these horrors, your mind will be at peace and it won’t be right. These sufferings will be lost in opaque words and everything will be forgotten until the next massacres . . .”) (Gérard in Boubacar Boris Diop’s Murambi ou le livre des ossements)

“ . . . quand on est en deuil, on ne s’égare pas dans des considérations historico-politiques . . .”

(“when one is in mourning, one doesn’t get caught up in historico-political considerations . . .”) (Yolande Mukagasana, N’aie pas peur de savoir)

The authors whom I have analyzed thus far in my study have demonstrated a greater preoccupation with their personal life experiences than with any collective traumatic event.

While the Trans-Atlantic slave trade makes a brief appearance in Effa’s Nous, les enfants de la tradition and Bugul makes sporadic references to colonial history, I argued that such events are peripheral, rather than central, to the said authors’ objectives. While retaining this focus on the particularity of any given author’s project, I will now focus on literary representations of a recent collective tragedy experienced in Eastern Africa. In 1994, Hutu military and thousands of Hutu civilians murdered over 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in the small African nation of Rwanda.¹ These massacres of Rwandans by other Rwandans occurred over the space of only 

¹ For a detailed history of complex background of the genocide, see Mahmood Mamdani’s When Victims Become Killers: colonialism, nativism and the genocide in Rwanda (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). Another helpful account of the genocide itself is Philip Gourevitch’s Nous avons le plaisir de vous
one hundred days. However, the texts of my study will show that subjects still experience and
process such collective trauma as the 1994 Rwandan genocide on a radically isolated,
individual level. Survivors’ initial reluctance to tell their stories reiterates this isolation.

The Rwandan government has chosen to promote justice and reconciliation in post-
genocide Rwanda through the institution of local courts called the gacacas. Critic Alexandre
Dauge-Roth explains the advantages and pitfalls of this judicial system. If a former killer repents
during the gacaca trials, he or she demonstrates this capitulation by taking surviving family
members to the exact spot where their loved one was killed. As a result of this confession, the
individual receives a reduced prison sentence. However, Dauge-Roth explains the additional
trauma that this process often provokes in victims, whose mourning process must hinge upon
whether or not their family’s murderers agree to confess. If a killer chooses to remain silent,
then the victim’s family might never know where their loved one’s remains lie. Therefore, the
family can never give the victim a proper burial, which represents a key part of the mourning
process. Furthermore, some survivors have been murdered in efforts to silence their convicting
testimonies. Such facts demonstrate the risk involved in sharing one’s testimony post-genocide,
and encourage new ways of considering what healing can and cannot come from telling one’s
story. Dauge-Roth calls for additional safe spaces in which survivors may share their stories, as
well as more means of helping survivors negotiate their trauma on a daily basis. I will examine
the ways in which literature does and does not provide one such space.

informer que, demain, nous serons tués avec nos familles (Paris: Poche, 2002), although Gourevitch fails
to address the issue of French responsibility in the genocide. For a seminal study on the challenges of
representing the genocide through literature and film, see Alexandre Dauge-Roth’s Writing and Filming
the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History (United

For more information of the challenges of the gacacas, see Dauge-Roth’s Writing and Filming the
Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda, as well as Françoise Digneffe and Jacques Fierens’ Justice et gacaca,
In this chapter, I will consider one autobiographical representation of the genocide, Yolande Mukagasana’s *N’aie pas peur de savoir* (1999). I will then analyze one related fictional work by Boubacar Boris Diop, entitled *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (first published in 2000). Mukagasana’s largely autobiographical account of the genocide proves especially pertinent because she is a registered nurse by profession, and reflects upon trauma and its relationship to witnessing in the midst of her story. Additionally, Diop cites Mukagasana’s *N’aie pas peur de savoir* as a key novel in communicating how “essentiel” (“essential”) it is that outsiders learn the specific details of the genocide and even its killers’ motivations. Mukagasana and Diop’s narratives offer new insights into the relationship between trauma and witnessing, as well as the neocolonial relationship between France and Rwanda. As Mukagasana’s quote mentions above, an individual who is in mourning does not typically bother with historical or political considerations. However, the lack of timely justice for countless survivors of the genocide and their families introduces a new “interminable mourning” dynamic into my trauma study. I will later discuss France’s polemical participation in the genocide, which adds another layer to the needed justice of post-genocide Rwanda. Mukagasana and Diop’s texts will demonstrate genocide survivors’ great difficulty in extricating themselves from the mourning process. It is for this very reason that Mukagasana decided to become a post-genocide activist in Europe in spite of the trauma of having lost her entire family during the genocide. Her choice indicates that when justice is not done, a mourner has no choice but to take historico-political considerations into account.

Both Mukagasana and Diop’s projects were a part of their involvement in the Fest’Africa initiative which gathered a group of well-known writers together to spend two months in the country, talk with survivors, and write fictional and non-fictional works about the genocide. The writers traveled to Rwanda in 1999 to undertake two months of research as a part of the Fest’Africa project entitled “Ecrire par devoir de mémoire” and led by Maimouna Coulibaly and
Nocky Djedanoum. Organizers chose a group of African writers from various countries in efforts to include more African intellectuals in a generalized reflection upon the events of 1994 and the years leading up to the genocide. These authors wished to break the silences of both survivors and African intellectuals regarding the tragedy. Their targeted audience was readers in France, Belgium and Canada. Lisa McNee has shown that the “openly fictional nature” of many of these Fest’Africa texts, coupled with the fact that these were “Africans responding to an African crisis,” instead of “Western intellectuals trying to ‘meet the people,’” highlights the importance of this “new encounter” within the genre. Writers dealt with the ethical challenges of their position by trying to use survivors’ words, rather than their own, as much as possible in their texts.

Mukagasana’s recent novel demonstrates the necessary biographical base upon which an author must arguably build his representation of another’s trauma in order to ethically represent the survivor’s suffering to the world. Additionally, Mukagasana’s testimonies are key in that she is one of the few notable survivors to have published their testimonies since the genocide. Diop’s time spent in Rwanda over the last twelve years and his extensive knowledge of Rwandan history and survivors’ testimonies greatly altered his artistic approach to his own representation of the Rwandan genocide. I will draw upon Mukagasana and Diop’s work in order to formulate an ethical approach to representing an unspeakably traumatic event in literary form, both as an outsider and as a victim. Furthermore, the well-known Cameroonian author

---


and critic Nathalie Etoke recently incorporated an analysis of Diop’s *Murambi* into her new theory of loss, mourning and survival within Africa and its diaspora. My consideration of Etoke’s theory of recovery from trauma will show an example of bridges and breakdowns between intellectuals of African origin concerning the genocide. The particularity of the trauma of the Rwandan genocide leads me to question whether or not sweeping theories of the trauma of the Atlantic slave trade, colonialism and neocolonialism such as Etoke’s are in fact a helpful way of interpreting trauma and understanding the issue of mourning in the texts of this study.

In *N’aie pas peur de savoir*, Mukagasana explains that Rwandans had been familiar with what she called an unofficial French military “occupation” of their country since 1990. Furthermore, France allegedly helped enable the genocide to take place through the training of Rwanda’s national guard, the FAR (Forces Armées Rwandaises), in the years leading up to the 1994 genocide, as well as the supplying of many of the arms used to carry out the massacres. The French government has by and large refused to acknowledge any participation in the genocide and certain individuals such as the infamous investigative magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguière have gone so far as to deny all French responsibility for the said events, even drifting towards a certain negationism of the genocide. The culmination of this counterassault occurred in November of 2006, when a French judge accused nine key members of the post-genocide FPR regime of participation in the genocide, leading Rwanda to cut off diplomatic ties with the Elysée. However, president Nicolas Sarkozy traveled to Rwanda three years later in efforts to renew diplomatic ties with the country. Journalists such as Stephen W. Smith claim that Rwandan and French diplomatic ties were healed thanks to this four-hour conciliatory visit.

However, the French president only offered vague condolences by apologizing for France’s “errors” and claimed that his country had failed to see the genocidal nature of the 1994 conflict in time.\textsuperscript{10} Therefore, the French government has yet to admit the magnitude of its involvement in the genocide.\textsuperscript{11}

Thus, if certain foreign writers’ recent propensities to write about the horrors of Rwanda’s genocide have been met with distrust by many locals, it is largely because of the lack of notable aid that the country received during the genocide itself, France’s failure to admit to its government’s involvement in the genocide and traditional Rwandan attitudes towards trauma. First of all, outside intervention during the genocide would have arguably saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Many Rwandans initially felt that such “tardy” interest in their country’s painful history as that demonstrated recently by journalists and writers must hide ulterior motives. Furthermore, what good could the victims gain from talking about their horrific experiences during the said tragedy with outsiders, when Rwandan proverbs discourage them from discussing matters of great pain? A common Rwandan proverb states that one’s tears flow through one’s belly.\textsuperscript{12} In other words, a person survives trauma due to his or her stoic inner strength. In this light, talking about one’s traumatic memories appears weak at best. One might argue that Rwandan logic suggests that talking about one’s painful experiences actually traumatizes the victim more than remaining silent.

Even so, survivors such as Mukagasana chose to tell their stories in order to increase international awareness of the genocide. Mukagasana achieved international acclaim with her first autobiographical novel, \textit{La mort ne veut pas de moi} (1997). She has also published a collection of survivor testimonies in collaboration with photographer Alain Kazinierakis entitled

\textsuperscript{11} Diop, \textit{Murambi} 261.
Les Blessures du Silence, and co-wrote a theatre production with Jacques Delcuvellerie entitled Rwanda 94. Mukagasana explains in the preface of N’aie pas peur de savoir that she chose to publish this sequel to La mort ne veut pas de moi because of the French public’s lack of interest in her first autobiography. While La mort ne veut pas de moi enjoyed international success elsewhere, she says, it hardly made a splash in France. Yet, Mukagasana argues that because of the French government’s participation in the genocide, French readers must pay attention to her story. This goal rings out from every page of N’aie pas peur de savoir. Mukagasana addresses a French reader ignorant of the events leading up to 1994 in Rwanda, and begins by criticizing France’s 1958 Constitution which entitles the country to embark upon its foreign policy, particularly in Africa, without informing France’s National Assembly. Had the Constitution of 1958 been different, Mukagasana argues, then she might not have lost all three of her children during the course of the genocide. Her current demands are simple: “vérité et justice” (“truth and justice”). Having received, as she puts it, countless death threats since her first novel’s publication, Mukagasana assures her readers that the only thing she fears is remaining silent. She begs her readers to simply listen to her story and then judge if Mitterand’s government is worthy of friendship with Rwanda. Admitting that she is neither an intellectual nor a politician, the survivor claims that the one thing she knows well is her own suffering. She does not even present herself as a writer, later telling the reader that a ghost writer (Patrick May) eventually took over the actual writing of her text after extensive interviews. The one motivation of Mukagasana’s project is to share the following with the reader: “. . . mes enfants sont morts et ce n’est pas sans cause.” (. . . my children are dead and it is not without cause.”).13

This introductory plea dramatically alters the reader/author relationship. Should the French reader continue reading, he or she will do so with the heavy responsibility of “judging” his or her country. Mukagasana’s preface implies that this judgment will find Mitterand’s former

13 Mukagasana 13-14.
government partially to blame for her children’s death, as well as that of every Rwandan victim. Thus, the reader’s discovery will presumably compel him or her to lobby the current French government for reparation of the Hexagon’s genocidal involvement. The reader can no longer, it seems, remain passive. Literature cannot escape a connection to the potential brutality of real life. Justice must be done, and the ethical reader/author pact outlined by Mukagasana implies a trade that must be respected: her story in exchange for the reader’s active involvement in her cause. A disengaged reading of the text is no longer possible. While more jaded critics might claim that Mukagasana’s preface aims simply to attract more readers with its market-savvy dramatic flourish, I argue that the bare facts of Mukagasana’s testimony contradict such hasty conclusions. Five years after her second novel’s publication, Mukagasana had yet to be paid for the novel. Furthermore, her children, husband and other family members did in fact perish in the genocide at the hands of the Interhamwe (the genocidal civilian army). Now exiled in Belgium, Mukagasana has received death threats warning her to keep silent. An international spokeswoman for her cause, Mukagasana’s experience during the genocide has been verified by countless sources. Yet Diop shares that:

"Le récit des malheurs de Yolande Mukagasana ne réussit que très rarement à tirer les uns et les autres de leur agréable torpeur. Si sa croisade contre l'oubli lui a valu quelques attaques haineuses, il lui a fallu bien plus souvent soutenir des regards discrètement ironiques ou agacés."15

("The story of Yolande Mukagasana’s misfortunes only rarely succeeds in pulling everyone out of their torpor. If her crusade against forgetting has earned her a few hateful attacks, she has much more often had to withstand discreetly ironic or annoyed looks.")

A large part of public opinion, it seems, remains unconvinced as to the necessity of Mukagasana’s enterprise. Thankfully, she is not alone in her endeavor.\textsuperscript{16}

The narrator makes French participation in the genocide abundantly clear from one end of her story to other. Mukagasana’s testimony opens the first day of the genocide, April 6th of 1994. She describes her corrupted country as one “plein de soldats français” (“full of French soldiers”) who have been occupying the country, in a certain way, for four years.\textsuperscript{17} She knows the genocide is coming, but hopes that the United Nations’ “Casques bleus” will stop the killings. She refuses, however, to call the French Embassy for help when the massacres begin, because to do so “serait donner [son] adresse” (“would be giving [her] address”) to the killers. In the course of the novel, Mukagasana moves from one hiding place to another and is separated from her husband and children who are subsequently murdered. She eventually manages to travel to safe rebel territory and creates a transitory home with her protector, Nadine, and a couple of orphaned children. Mukagasana begins working once again in a hospital where genocide victims are being treated. However, she eventually chooses solitary exile in Belgium in order to tell her story to the world and demand justice for her people’s massacre. While the narrator wishes to share her story with the reader, she makes it clear from the outset that her goal in this endeavor is not an alleviation of her own suffering, but solely bringing justice to Rwanda through France’s admitting their responsibility in the genocide. Here, Mukagasana does not seek personal healing, an evacuation of her story à la Bugul or even a better understanding of the world like Effa. Rather, reparation is her only objective.

Before the genocide, the narrator’s brother Nepo shares a prophecy with her:

Mukagasana will lose everyone close to her, and will survive alone because death does not

\textsuperscript{16} One notes that Diop’s analysis of Mukagasana’s \textit{Les Blessures du silence}, originally intended as a preface to the collection, was refused by the publisher due to its polemical depiction of French governmental participation in the genocide. Afterwards, the “Association internationale de recherche sur les crimes contre l’humanité et les génocides” chose to include the preface on its website.

\textsuperscript{17} Mukagasana 15.
want her.\textsuperscript{18} She witnesses the maiming of her own husband at a barrier in their neighborhood, and later learns that he died. Likewise separated from her own children, the narrator spends weeks of the genocide wondering if they are alive or dead. The lady who hides the narrator for a large part of the genocide, Nadine, tells Mukagasana that her children are dead, but then claims she is not sure after all when she sees the suicidal effect that the news has upon the narrator. In this way, the narrator remains in a state of constant anxiety veiled with a suspicion of the worst. She asks repeatedly, “Où sont mes enfants?” (“Where are my children?”). No one can give her a satisfactory answer. The narrator cannot compromise her safety by leaving her hiding place in a neighbor’s house to find her children, and must embrace this state of not knowing until she comes across her cousin later in the novel. In one particular passage, the narrator asks the same question nine times in the course of three pages of text.

“I think of my children. So, are they dead? . . . Where are my children? . . . I learn that my cousin from Kibungo was executed at the roadblock . . . Where are my children? . . . During the night, I am able to urinate a few drops. Where are my children? . . . one day I will write something. If I escape death. Where are my children? . . . My little bump has disappeared. Where are my children? . . . Strips of skin are falling off of my cheeks like dog’s ears. Where are my children? . . . Where are my children? . . . Where are my children?”

In these instances, the writer’s constant litany of questions regarding her children’s whereabouts speak not so much to those immediately around her at the time, but to the reader. Specifically, as she has stated, Mukagasana asks the French reader where her children are. Their absence in her daily life is indeed a proof of the genocide like no other. The narrator

\textsuperscript{18} Mukagasana 20-21.
\textsuperscript{19} Mukagasana 64-66.
simultaneously expresses her own traumatic worrying, and hounds the reader with her questions. The cyclical, traumatic structure of the text obliges the reader to partially “enter into” the narrator’s anxiety. If as some say the genocide never took place, then where have her children and her husband gone? Diop describes Mukagasana as

“... un peu la folle qui arrête des inconnus dans la rue pour leur répéter inlassablement : 'Moi, Yolande Mukagasana, j’ai perdu les miens dans des conditions abominables pendant le génocide, je sais que vous n’êtes pas au courant mais quoi que vous en pensiez, cela vous regarde, vous aussi!'”

(“kind of like the crazy woman who stops strangers on the street to tirelessly repeat to them: “I, Yolande Mukagasana, I lost my family in abominable conditions during the genocide, I know that you don’t know but whatever you think about it, it concerns you, you too.”)

The narrator eventually learns from her cousin that two of her children were decapitated and then thrown into a communal grave. Her youngest daughter, however, jumped into the pit alive, preferring suffocation to decapitation. Mukagasana’s questioning remains relevant. Her children have in fact been murdered and are gone forever. Can the French government, who denies all responsibility in the genocide, tell her where her children are? She later declares sarcastically, “Merci François Mitterand, merci Edouard Balladur, merci Alain Juppé, merci d’avoir permis à des tueurs d’exercer leur art sur mes enfants.” (Thank you François Mitterand, thank you Edouard Balladur, thank you Alain Juppé, thank you for allowing killers to exercise their art on my children.”).

By the time of France’s Operation Turquoise at the end of the genocide, French military has become synonymous with Interhamwe in some Tutsis’ minds. Mukagasana portrays France’s supposed rescue mission as nothing but an additional threat to Tutsi survivors.

Mukagasana’s own story blends with critiques of the international community. She describes a machete that a member of the Interhamwe (Hutu civilian killing squads) carries into

---

21 Mukagasana 161.
22 Mukagasana 181.
the house where she is hiding, brandishing it just feet from where the narrator crouches. The
machete is sharpened and “flambant neuve” (“brand new”), perhaps part of the weapon supply
“acheté tout récemment par le régime d’Habyarimana avec l’argent de la coopération française,
pour être distribué gratuitement à la population hutu.” (“recently bought by Habyarimana’s
regime with money from the French’s cooperation, to be freely distributed to the Hutu
population.”).23 The United Nations does not fare much better in the narrator’s critiques. After
her husband’s death, she thinks back upon their courting days and their interminable
discussions, saying that “Nous ne prenions finalement jamais de décision, un peu comme à
l’ONU.” (“We never ended up making a decision, kind of like the UN.”).24 After learning of her
children’s death, she explains that “Ce n’est pas l’ONU qui a tué mes enfants, mais c’est l’ONU
qui les a laissés mourir.” (“It’s not the UN who killed my children, but the UN let them die.”).25
During the genocide, a CNN crew arrives on the scene and Rwandans flock to the camera. The
narrator, on the other hand, is afraid and upset. How can she, as she puts it, be on “La télé des
Blancs?” or “La télé de ceux qui ont aidé au génocide?” (“White people’s television?” . . . “The
television of those who helped the genocide?”). She swears she will never do it and that it
would be a dishonor. When she shares her story one day, it will not be to “satisfaire la curiosité
des oisifs” (“satisfy idlers’ curiosity”) but to “pointer du doigt des assassins.” (“point the finger at
the assassins”).26 Her novel represents the pursuit of this endeavor.

In the course of the genocide, the narrator watches herself waste away to a mere
skeleton of her former self, but can do nothing to stop the process. She explains, “J’ai faim, et
je n’ai pas appétit. Je suis meurtrie de l’intérieur. Je suis le Rwanda.” (“I’m hungry, and I have

23 Mukagasana 38.
24 Mukagasana 44.
25 Mukagasana 98.
26 Mukagasana 137.
no appetite. I’m internally bruised. I’m Rwanda.”)

Crossing the city undercover at one point during the massacres, the narrator observes piles of cadavers including a woman who was raped and children whose arms were chopped off before they died as they struggled to protect themselves. A dog walks down the road pulling the skull of a victim and one of its pieces of hair. Abandoned and burning cars litter the streets. Mukagasana mourns, “O mon Rwanda! Mon Rwanda méconnaissable!” (“Oh my Rwanda! My unrecognizable Rwanda!”).

Love has disappeared from her country and it has become a “charnier.” (“mass grave.”). She experiences flashbacks of the Interhamwe chopping off her husband’s hand on a forced death march. She says that her life is destroyed.

Once the narrator, her cousin Spérandie, two orphan boys and Nadine have made it safely to FPR (rebel army) territory, Mukagasana begins to work again as a nurse among refugees. Here, she takes on an ironic tone even towards psychological theories of trauma and the very act of witnessing. A nurse by profession, she is particularly well-placed in her analysis of survivors’ situation. Another nurse makes her rounds in the camp, speaking with rape victims and other survivors. They all tell their “Longs récits dououreux” (“Long painful stories”) and cry. The nurse asks the narrator why she herself doesn’t share her story in this manner, and she replies that she has nothing to say because nothing has happened to her. Noting that the nurse has scribbled notes in her notebook, the narrator thinks sarcastically that she must have written “traumatisme psychologique non exprimé.” (unexpressed psychological trauma”). She explains that social nurses of this worker’s type are there in order to tell victims what they’re feeling. She feels that their profession is silly and will not encourage them.

---

27 Mukagasana 56.
28 Mukagasana 74.
29 Mukagasana 96.
30 Mukagasana 102-103.
31 Mukagasana 139.
Yet, the narrator recognizes the need for other victims to share their stories. All that they have to do is look at her and when their lips start to tremble, she knows that “ils ne peuvent plus taire ce qu’ils ont sur le coeur.” (“they can no longer silence what they have on their hearts.”). Yet while recognizing their need to share, the writer confides in the reader that she does not want to listen. A certain group of survivors come from Nyamata, one of the hugest mass graves of the genocide. Approximately 10,000 victims were killed on and around the grounds of the Nyamata Catholic church, thinking that the Interhamwe would respect tradition and not kill escapees having sought refuge in a house of worship. The narrator already knows their stories. The women were “violées, mutilées, meurtries” (“raped, mutilated, wounded”) and she no longer wants to hear about it. She cries as loud as she can, “Taisez-vous! Taisez-vous!” (“Be quiet! Be quiet!”). Her friends force her to stop yelling.\textsuperscript{32} The narrator’s transparency about the limits of her compassion for her fellow survivors adds an additional layer of authenticity to her autobiographical project and also questions the very act of witnessing. Who can stand to hear all of survivors’ horrifying stories? Mukagasana believes that these stories are only worth telling if their communication to the world brings justice to victims and survivors.

The reader discovers many other paradoxes in the narrator’s experience of the genocide. While Mukagasana refuses to hear other victims’ stories at certain points in the story, she elsewhere spends hours listening to victims’ and former killers’ testimonies and offering them comfort. Mukagasana performs this office once she has begun to work again as a nurse towards the end of the genocide. She decides that her most important job responsibility is not medicine, but lending a sympathetic ear to her patients. Such listening is, as she puts it, the only true post-genocide therapy.\textsuperscript{33} In the context of the hospital where she works, this listening appeases her suffering in a way that nothing else can. She soon realizes in the course of her

\textsuperscript{32} Mukagasana 131.
\textsuperscript{33} Mukagasana 253.
work that many of the Interhamwe were victims themselves, intimidated into genocidal participation by death threats to their own families. The narrator sits and listens to a young man named Apollinaire as he explains how he ended up allowing the murder of his Tutsi girlfriend during the genocide. Having already been forced to kill other Tutsis, Apollinaire recognizes a woman’s screams and looks up to see his girlfriend, Marie, being held by another Interhamwe member. The latter tries to force Apollinaire to murder Marie, but the boy mutilates the Interhamwe soldier’s leg and runs away. As he escapes, he hears Marie’s cry and witnesses her murder by the injured man. Telling his story in the hospital, Apollinaire tells Mukagasana, “J’ai tué un Tutsi. Et l’on a tué sous mes yeux mon amour tutsi.” (“I killed a Tutsi. And they killed my Tutsi love before my eyes.”). Mukagasana responds, “Tu n’es pas bourreau, Apollinaire. Tu es victime d’être bourreau.” (“You aren’t an executioner, Apollinaire. You’re a victim because of being an executioner.”)34 In vignettes such as these, Mukagasana aims like many of her fellow Rwandans to deconstruct readers’ perceptions of the “victim vs. bourreau” (“victim vs. executioner”) ethnic binary through which most foreigners interpret the genocide. Rather, she shows the motor of the genocide to be more complex. Interhamwe killers should in some cases be pitied along with victims. Indeed, it was members of the Interhamwe and their families who at times helped to hide Mukagasana during the genocide. She admits to the reader that she herself felt guilty for not feeling more grateful to these paradoxical saviors. The Rwandan events of 1994 are thus not just an interethnic massacre, but a complex situation with international actors who, like the Interhamwe, enabled the genocide to take place by their support. Yet while the novel does not deny Rwandans their agency in the carrying out of the genocide, N’aie pas peur de savoir chooses to focus more of the blame on the international community such as France, rather than on local actors.

34 Mukagasana 173.
Mukagasana incorporates various Hutu survivors’ stories into her novel, as well as other victims’ and her own. Ultimately, she says, these testimonies are all the same story. It’s always “une machette qui tombe sur un être humain.” ("a machete that falls on a human being").

During her time working in the hospital, she encounters a Hutu who confesses all of his murders and wants to be tried in court. He says he’s ashamed of what he’s done, but isn’t ashamed to admit it. He doesn’t care if the jury votes to punish him, for he deserves it. She pities him, feels a surprising love for him and thinks to herself that if only every assassin spoke like him, “Le Rwanda serait réconcilié.” (“Rwanda would be reconciled.”) Paradoxically, Mukagasana feels more connected to this man than to anyone else around her.

As the narrator approaches the end of the genocide, she often fears insanity because of what she has endured, but her work and her book project keep her sane. Still, her behavior often contradicts accepted social customs as she reacts to the madness of the genocide. When the hospital where she works is about to be sieged, she reacts by laughing hysterically without understanding why.

Even after learning of her children’s death, Mukagasana frequently feels that the entire genocide has been a bad dream and asks herself where her children are hiding. She loses herself in memories of happy times spent with her husband and children and only accepts their death when she discovers her daughter Nadine’s skirt at a neighbor’s home. Her daughter was wearing it the day she was murdered. Although she wishes to say goodbye to her children at the location where they died, she avoids visiting their grave for a long time without understanding her own reticence. She asks herself if she is a monster before finally finding the courage to make the trip. In other parts of the text, she alternately wishes to flee from everyone around her (at one point journeying across national borders to Burundi without

35 Mukagasana 188.
36 Mukagasana 228-229.
37 Mukagasana 177.
38 Mukagasana 220.
telling anyone where she is going) and desires to take large numbers of orphans under her care. Ultimately, she leaves the orphaned children in her care to friends and exiles herself to Belgium without taking anyone with her. Her three orphaned nieces, however, will eventually join her there when she obtains custody of them.

In the course of her story, Mukagasana also deconstructs the very notion of “the Tutsi genocide survivor/writer heroine” by sharing with the reader various exchanges in which survivors accuse her of causing their family members’ deaths. One woman looks at her sadly and tells her, “Yolande, mes enfants sont morts à cause de toi! Les Interhamwe les ont tués parce qu’ils ne te trouvaient pas.” (“Yolande, my children are dead because of you! The Interhamwe killed them because they couldn’t find you.”). Without excuse, Mukagasana lowers her eyes and silently curses the day she was born.\(^{39}\) She later asks herself repeatedly why she did not die while others were murdered instead. Why didn’t she die instead of her children? Why didn’t she die instead of those who were mistaken for her? Guilt overwhelms her in these moments.\(^{40}\) In sharing these encounters with the reader, Mukagasana overturns the traditional victim’s narrative by presenting herself as someone partially responsible for other victims’ deaths. She offers no excuse for herself at these junctures, but only communicates her guilt to the reader for having survived. She torments herself over and over again, saying that she should be ashamed to have outlived her children, that she’s a monster and that she hasn’t respected the memory of her deceased children.

Presenting her eventual exile to Belgium as a coward’s choice but one that she must take, Yolande eventually travels to Europe alone. In a long apology to her deceased children, the narrator declares herself an unworthy mother who has chosen to live in a country that knows almost nothing of their suffering. She will smile at people who were possibly accomplices in her

\(^{39}\) Mukagasana 134.
\(^{40}\) Mukagasana 173.
children’s deaths. Already, she feels guilty for responding to the smiles of those around her in Rwanda. She tells her family, “Ç’est moi qui vous ai tués” (“I’m the one who killed you”) and claims that with the needed information she could have potentially saved them.\textsuperscript{41} She promises, however, that witnessing to the horror of the genocide and seeking her children’s revenge will be her sole reason for living while she is gone. Mukagasana presents Belgium as the only place where she can write, an endeavor that will keep her tortured self from going insane.\textsuperscript{42} Once in Belgium, Mukagasana writes day after day and yet discovers that the only thing she knows how to do is to scream her pain and rage, “De page en page” (“From page to page”).\textsuperscript{43}

She decides that she cannot continue without the help of a ghost writer, and enlists the help of a friend’s acquaintance. This Frenchman listens to her story upon their first meeting, and then says that the French papers did nothing to communicate the real horror of the genocide. He asks Mukagasana forgiveness. The narrator tells the reader that it is the first time that a “Blanc” (“White person”) has ever asked her forgiveness. She wants to burst into tears because of her happiness. Her mission has begun.\textsuperscript{44} Patrick May will feverishly take page and after page of notes every time he meets with Mukagasana over the following weeks and months, sometimes calling her at 3 a.m. to make sure that he has a detail right. His enthusiasm touches Mukagasana greatly and encourages her in her project. Before and after La mort ne veut pas de moi’s publication, both Rwandans and foreigners harass Mukagasana, telling her she should be quiet and that her story exaggerates what really happened. However, other friends send Mukagasana documents detailing the true depth of France’s involvement in her country’s massacres. This proof negates current revisionist and negationist theories in

\textsuperscript{41} Mukagasana 254.
\textsuperscript{42} Mukagasana 242.
\textsuperscript{43} Mukagasana 264-265.
\textsuperscript{44} Mukagasana 270.
France and what Mukagasana details as bogus claims to the country’s innocence. Her friends’ help leads her to her next project: testifying about the French government’s guilt in encouraging the genocide. *N’aie pas peur de savoir* is the novel that results from this enterprise.

I will now turn to Boubacar Boris Diop’s recent commentaries on French participation in the genocide, as well as the second edition of his *Murambi, le livre des ossements* in order to assess an outsider’s literary representation of the genocide and the ethics of writing such a novel. One of the best known Senegalese writers of his generation, Diop has published many novels, screenplays, essays, political writings and articles, as he is also a journalist by profession. In *Murambi’s* 2011 edition, extensive interviews and the essay collections *L’Afrique au delà du miroir* (2007) and *Négrophobie* (2005) he clearly presents himself to readers as a writer determined to speak out against the atrocities of the genocide by every means possible. Yet he admits to his own former apathy towards the said events while they were taking place in 1994. I argue that such humble transparency with the reader and even, in Diop’s case, self-deprecating irony is the only ethical manner by which to take on the role of spokesperson for a survivor of such trauma as the Rwandan genocide. He published a second edition of *Murambi* in 2011, eleven years after the publication of the first edition. The new version of the literary work includes a lengthy postface detailing the genesis of the Fest’Africa project and his continued devotion to increasing public awareness of the Rwandan genocide. He also publicly identifies himself with activists such as Mukagasana in fighting for justice in post-genocide Rwanda. While Diop’s political essays use the 1994 genocide as a point of departure for

45 For example, Mukagasana closes her novel with a resume of a French parliamentary investigation led by Paul Quilès which concluded on December 15th of 1998 that Mitterand’s government had no idea of the reality of the genocide and therefore could not be found guilty of any participation in the said event. The report placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Rwandans, Belgians and the UN. See p. 308 of *N’aie pas peur de savoir.*
describing more generalized ills of neocolonial relationships between Sub-Saharan Africa and Europe, Diop’s literary portrayal of the Rwandan genocide in *Murambi* and related interviews offer the most comprehensive account of his thoughts on the subject.

Diop joins African intellectuals such as the Cameroonian writer Patrice Nganang in declaring that the trauma of the Rwandan genocide affects all African intellectuals and requires a new reading of “post-genocide” African literature. His contribution included a decision to begin writing in an indigenous African language, his native Wolof, rather than writing solely in French. He published his first Wolof novel, *Doomi golo*, in 2003. The choice to write in Wolof represented a personal effort to distance himself from France in the literary sphere because of France’s participation in the genocide. His 2011 preface to *Murambi* details French involvement in the 1994 Rwandan genocide and related frustration with France’s refusal to admit to participation which included violating a UN embargo by providing the FAR with weapons to carry out the genocide, training the said army and supporting the genocidal government in other ways. *Murambi*’s 2011 edition spells out this collaboration much more clearly than the first edition. Diop explains to the reader that while negationist and revisionist claims of the previous decade have been systematically debunked by the cold hard facts of the genocide, justice has yet to be done for Rwandans. France has yet to make reparations for president Mitterand’s government’s actions concerning the genocide. Yet, more and more of Diop’s readers write him to say thank you for opening their eyes to the events of the genocide. Diop claims that this fact proves that his literary project has had a modest amount of success.

Diop’s new preface communicates to the reader the distrust of most Rwandans when the foreign component of Fest’Africa writers, many of whom knew nothing of the genocide, arrived in Kigali. Rwandans wondered why a group would desire to learn about the genocide so long

---

46 For a comprehensive study of Patrice Nganang’s thoughts on the subject, see his *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine.*

47 Diop, *Murambi* 269.
after the event. Furthermore, how could they trust a project financed in part by a French foundation (la Fondation de France), even if the Rwandan government had also promoted it? He describes the mix of irritation and amusement with which Rwandans initially welcomed the writers to Kigali.\textsuperscript{48} However, survivors eventually came to believe in the authors’ sincerity and in literature’s important role in throwing the international community’s apathy in 1994 back in their faces. Many survivors soon began giving the authors advice, encouraging them to share exactly what had happened.\textsuperscript{49}

Additionally, Diop describes the extreme apathy of most other African intellectuals towards the genocide and the disdain with which critics regarded the Fest’Africa writers’ subsequent, tardy “expédition rwandaise.” (“Rwandan expedition”).\textsuperscript{50} Diop argues that, like he himself before his trip to Rwanda, many Africans viewed the genocide as yet another African massacre which had shamed them in front of the rest of the world. Such thinking ignored all specificity of the Rwandan genocide, as well as the neocolonial implication of many international actors such as France. Diop himself had no idea of France’s involvement in the genocide upon his arrival in Kigali.\textsuperscript{51} He mocks his own total preoccupation with the 1994 World Cup during the actual genocide. Africans throughout the continent often felt nothing but shame, Diop says, when viewing images of the genocide on the news. As a result, they turned their attention away from the massacres.\textsuperscript{52} If the rest of the world was largely indifferent to the Rwandan tragedy, Diop willingly places himself in their camp. With Murambi, he claims that the horror of victims’ testimonies that he heard quickly rid the Fest’Africa writers of any excessive concern with aesthetics. Within the first week of his stay in Kigali, he decided that his experience as a professional journalist would help him to write a novel of a bare-boned style that would not

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Diop, Murambi 235-236.}
\footnote{Diop, “Rencontre: Les Oiseaux Rares/Questions.” Email to Meg Mahon. 26 November 2011.}
\footnote{Diop, Murambi 238.}
\footnote{Diop, Murambi 245, 236.}
\footnote{Diop, Murambi 19-20.}
\end{footnotes}
betray the victims’ suffering. Fictional elements still provided an ethical distance by which writers indicated their awareness of their limited grasp of the horror of the genocide. Fiction also helped writers, as Dauge-Roth puts it, to demonstrate survivors’ humanity to readers who would otherwise see the suffering of the genocide as “unimaginable,” “frightening,” and outside the realm of comprehension.

*Murambi* is based largely upon the biographical stories that Diop heard while in Rwanda. He incorporated a large number of survivors’ testimonies in the form of fragmented and at times interwoven short stories. The often-disjointed narrative communicates, in Diop’s words, the absolute solitude of each victim or survivor. The narrators refer to France’s involvement in the genocide throughout the novel, as a backdrop to both victims’ and Interhamwe’s stories. Many of the latter refer to their “friends” in Paris who saved members of the Hutu regime from punishment during the previous massacres of 1992 and 1993, and will save them again. Diop divides his novel into four parts. From Part One to Part Four, the reader moves from the beginning of the genocide to post-genocide Rwanda, to the end of the genocide and finally back to the country post-genocide. While Diop incorporates many Rwandans’ stories into the text, these narratives continually return to the figure of Cornelius, a young exiled Rwandan who returns to the country after the genocide, and his family and friends. During the course of the novel, Cornelius discovers that his father did in fact survive the genocide, but that this man was also one of the masterminds of one of the most significant massacres of the entire genocide. His father Doctor Karekezi’s character is based upon the real life story of the massacre at the Ecole Technique of Murambi (hence, the name of Diop’s novel) where thousands of Rwandans fled for safety before being brutally murdered during the genocide. In *Murambi*, the revelation of

---

53 Diop, *Murambi* 238.
54 Dauge-Roth 112.
his father’s guilt helps Cornelius to understand why everyone looks at him so strangely and distrustfully in post-genocide Rwanda. In a recent interview, Diop explained that the fictional character of Cornelius is, in some sense, representative of every outsider who learns of the horrors of the Rwandan genocide years after the said event. Such readers can identify with Cornelius’s shame in not having known or cared about the massacres while they were taking place, his uneasy fascination with the barbaric details of the genocide and his discomfort in not knowing how to talk about the genocide with locals, or even if he should. Unfortunately, his friend Stan tells him, “. . . tu rencontreras peu de gens disposés à parler de ces événements.” (“. . . you will find few people inclined to talk about those events.”) Even when Stan tries to explain the genocide to the international community, he often finds himself unable to explain its cruelty in words that they can understand. Diop admits that Cornelius’ situation as an outsider is also that of every foreigner and especially writer who had no idea of the horror they have chosen to represent in literary form before traveling to Rwanda and spending time there. In this sense, Cornelius’ long absence from Rwanda leading up to and during the genocide was much more significant to the story than was his being of Rwandan origin.

In Part One of Murambi, the reader first encounters a local video store owner who observes preparations for the genocide, young Hutu Interhamwes who prepare for the killings, and Jessica Kamanzi, another main character of the novel and one of Cornelius’ closest childhood friends. Jessica acts as a spy for the rebel FPR army during the entire genocide, and will eventually tell Cornelius of his father’s involvement in the genocide. The hope and dynamism of her character represents a gleam of hope for an eventual new, better post-genocide Rwanda. Jessica understands the suffering of both victims around her as well as their

---

56 Diop, Murambi 62.
at times conscious-stricken killers, and devotes all of her energy towards a reconciled Rwanda after the genocide.

Part Two of Murambi offers striking examples of the manners by which survivors express their trauma, reflecting survivors’ stories during Diop’s visit to Kigali. Individuals such as Cornelius’s friend Stan choose silence, rarely even alluding to the events of the past months. He even tells Cornelius that he “déteste” (“detests”) talking about the genocide, and that he wants above all to forget. Yet it seems that forgetting becomes no easier with the passage of time. While others explained their stories down to the minutest detail in order to encourage the Fest’Africa writers to portray them accurately, some chose to remain silent, listen to the others and pretend that everything was fine. Diop eventually realized that this attitude indicated not a true reflection of the survivors’ healing, but “une immense désespoir.” (“an immense despair”). For those survivors who chose to talk, Diop learned to listen to their pauses, silences and their gestures even more so than their words. Each was, according to Diop, a critical means of communicating one’s testimony. Silences did not communicate a “lack” or a “failure” to transmit one’s story. Rather, they at times represented the most effective means of communicating one’s trauma to a listener. Diop often observed survivors who alternated between inexplicable laughter and tears while telling their stories, an experience that parallels that of Mukagasana who laughed uncontrollably when soldiers prepared to seize the hospital where she worked. In Murambi, certain characters’ reactions to the horrors of the genocide mirror Diop’s observations among survivors. Cornelius is surprised when a smile is his first reaction to learning of his father’s involvement in the Murambi school massacre. Another survivor, Gérard, sits in a bar and proclaims repeatedly, “J’ai bu du sang!” (“I drank blood!”), without even realizing that he is

58 Diop, Murambi 74.
doing so. Cornelius later learns that Gérard hid himself under cadavers during the Murambi massacre and had to spit out their blood in order to keep from drowning in it.\textsuperscript{60}

Those who are able to put every detail of their experience of the genocide into words in the course of \textit{Murambi} do not necessarily fare better than their counterparts. For example, a guard at the Ntarama church gives his testimony to a group of foreign visitors in a monotone voice and seems to feel intimidated by the visitors. Numbers (“. . . soixante-cinq mille . . . tués”) (“. . . sixty-five thousand . . . killed”) representing deaths in that commune can hardly relate the horror of the experience. The group of visitors feel overwhelmed and ask naive questions. A more striking testimony is that of Theresa Mukandori, portrayed as a friend of Jessica Kamanzi’s in \textit{Murambi} that the reader learns was killed in the church. Early in the novel, Theresa and Jessica gossip about friends and look forward to an upcoming wedding. However, a later scene in the novel finds Theresa’s corpse displayed in Ntarama, her head thrown back in an eternal grimace. Her torturers had left a stake jammed into her vagina.\textsuperscript{61} Not only a fictional character, Theresa Mukandori actually perished during the genocide in this way, and her remains could be seen at the church through 2005, after which she received a proper burial. Diop shares that the Rwandan government insisted upon the necessity of the world’s seeing what victims such as Mukandori suffered, which was why she was not buried sooner according to family wishes. In an effort to preserve her memory, many Fest’Africa authors chose to include Mukandori in their stories.\textsuperscript{62} This decision indicates the unique encounter between biography and fiction in the Fest’Africa project.

During a reading of \textit{Murambi} in Paris in 2011, Diop explained that an author cannot realistically put every single horrific detail of a survivor or victim’s story into a literary text. In

\textsuperscript{60} Diop, \textit{Murambi} 71-72.
\textsuperscript{61} Diop, \textit{Murambi} 97-99.

114
such cases, the reader will shut down and refuse to listen to the testimony. Nor would such a text be ethical, he argued, for an outsider to write. Here, fiction represents an ethical distance that the author takes from the survivor’s story in order to indicate his awareness that he can never fully “understand” the individual’s experience. As Cornelius puts it, everyone has their own idea of Rwanda in mind. The country has endless imaginary identities, perpetuated by myths of blood and fratricide.\(^63\) Even within Rwanda, killers’ motivations differed from one person to the next. Diop includes a chapter in Part Three in order to communicate this idea to the reader. The reader learns that a Hutu named Valérie Rumiya only cared about one thing during the genocide: ensuring that her neighbor, Rosa Karemera, had been murdered. Unfortunately for Valérie, Rosa continued to survive the carnage. In the novel, Rose cannot believe that Valérie’s genocide is simply to kill one person: her. She resolves to survive, if for no other reason than to see “la tête que fera Valérie Rumiya en me rencontrant dans le quartier.” (“the face that Valérie Rumiya will make when she meets me in the neighborhood.”).\(^64\) Such accounts blend humor with horror as Diop relates the reality of personal vendettas during the genocide.

In Part Four, Diop’s characters consider Rwanda’s future. If former oppressors want to be forgiven, they must ask for it. Even so, the process is never a given. Jessica shares one survivor’s story in this context. He or she could say, “Vous voulez que je pardonne, mais savez-vous que sur la colline de Nyanza, mes sept enfants ont été jetés vivants dans une fosse . . . Pensez aux quelques secondes où ces petits ont été étouffés par des masses d’excréments avant de mourir.” (“You want me to forgive, but do you know that on the hill of Nyanza, my seven children were thrown alive into a grave . . . Think of the few seconds when these little ones were suffocated by masses of excrements before dying.” How can such an individual

\(^{63}\) Diop, Murambi 92.

\(^{64}\) Diop, Murambi 128-129.
forgive? Jessica asks, “... que vaut un pardon sans justice?” (“... what’s forgiveness worth without justice?”). She tells the reader that only a fair trial will heal her people of its “traumatisme” (“trauma”). As for Cornelius, he realizes that survivors of his father’s massacre such as Gérard will never forgive him for what happened. Cornelius himself will never be able to understand sufferings that were not his own. In this way, his return to Rwanda becomes “presque un autre exil” (“almost another exile”). He feels he has become a child again in returning to a country which he left when he was young. Everything, it seems, must be learned again.

If, as Diop recently indicated, Cornelius represents every outsider who witnesses the horror of the genocide after the fact, then readers must realize through Murambi’s communication of trauma that while outsiders can “learn” facts of the genocide, they can never fully “understand” its suffering. This idea mirrors the premise of Mukagasana’s N’aie pas peur de savoir. Mukagasana’s title encourages her readers not to “understand,” but simply to come to “know” the bare facts of what happened. Such effort is all that she hopes for and it is, she believes, enough to encourage readers to do their part to bring justice to Rwanda. Cornelius’ grandfather Siméon, revered as a sage in the local community, tells his grandson that “tout le sang versé sur la terre du Rwanda doit obliger chacun à se ressaisir.” (all of the blood poured out onto Rwandan land must oblige each person to come to their senses). Diop adds that Siméon understands this to mean that Rwanda cannot heal for two or three generations at the least, but that healing will be possible when oppressors and victims have both agreed, after a necessary repentance on the part of the former oppressors, to move forward together. Critic Nasrin Qader shows that in the meantime, the “speech of survival” of Diop’s Murambi is “an

65 Diop, Murambi 144.
66 Diop, Murambi 193.
67 Diop, Murambi 220.
endless speech” that can speak of nothing more than the perpetual turning away from lost victims. No healing can occur in this context, and survivors remain in a state of interminable mourning.\(^6^9\)

However, Simeon’s allusion to an eventual, necessary reconciliation between victims and oppressors in Rwanda conflicts with the survival model that Etoke sets forth in her *Melancholia africana*. I argue that such issues make Rwanda’s inclusion into Etoke’s study, including her analysis of Diop’s *Murambi*, problematic. In my Introduction, I detailed the manner by which Etoke’s offers possibilities for more dynamic forms of survival for members of Africa and its diaspora. However, Etoke insists that victims of all tragedies connected to Africa and its diaspora must cease to wait for oppressors’ repentance for the aforementioned traumas of their history. Rather, members of the diasporic consciousness must chose to face their past on an *individual* level in order to properly mourn for it and move forward. If oppressors choose to repent, then they may move forward with members of the diasporic consciousness. If not, however, then they must be left behind. Survival in this sense becomes a domain where anything is possible for the diasporic consciousness, as nothing depends upon the oppressor’s expressing regret for his or her past actions. Forgiveness is helpful only in so far as it liberates the victim to move forward, with or without the oppressor. The individual comes to refuse the very term of “victim,” (so inherent to the diasporic consciousness’s history, as Etoke explains) and gains freedom in the process. Although history cannot entirely be forgotten, the pain of the past is no longer an immobilizing force. The victim moves on, irrespective of the other party’s decision. While Etoke admits in passing that justice is key to Rwanda’s case, she does not acknowledge the problematic inclusion of Rwanda into her victim/oppressor framework in detail.

Yet I have shown that authors such as Mukagasana write and survive only so that justice may be brought to genocide survivors in their war-torn country. Indeed, in a country where Rwandans brush elbows daily with the Rwandan murderers of their family and friends, former victims and oppressors live in a state of perpetual uneasiness that cannot continue without justice being done. Foreign “oppressors” who stood by while the genocide happened must recognize their fault and seek reparation through justice. Local oppressors must recognize their crimes or, in any case, be punished. Diop reminds readers that murders continue to this day in the country’s hills, as former killers seek to silence the incriminating testimonies of survivors in the local courts named the gacacas.70 Mukagasana joins Diop in insisting that Rwandans cannot continue to live together if justice is not done.71 Diop explains that “le rescapé ne peut pas se payer la luxe d’ignorer son bourreau au nom de je ne sais pas quelle souveraine liberté.” (“the survivor cannot allow himself the luxury of ignoring his oppressor in the name of some sovereign freedom”). During commemorative ceremonies each April, he says that survivors visit sites where loved ones died throughout Rwanda. During these ceremonies, scenes of collective hysteria are common.72 The ongoing trauma of the genocide is of such magnitude that one wonders if Rwandans themselves feel any connection to Etoke’s diasporic consciousness or melancholia africana. Rwandans have trouble carrying out the mourning process not only because of lack of justice and oppressors’ repentance, but because of their tortured memories of the genocide.73 Testimonies such as Mukagasana’s indicate the radical isolation of each survivor in his or her suffering, with no mention of historical trauma outside of that experienced within her own country.

Moreover, Diop shares that even today,

---

71 Mukagasana 243-244.
73 Diop, “Rencontre,” 30 September 2011.
“le génocide peut recommencer à tout moment . . . On est ici dans une histoire en train de se faire . . .”

(“the genocide can begin again at any time . . . Here we are in history that is being carried out as we speak . . .”)74

For this reason, according to Diop, this genocide’s immediacy places the issue of Rwandan survival in a radically different context than that of descendants of slavery and colonisation. In Rwanda, survival cannot continue for long without justice. Etoke’s “moving on” without the unrepentant oppressor cannot happen in this context. In this sense, scholars such as Basabose explains to what an incredible extent the suffering of Rwanda “gagne en acuité.” (“increases in intensity.”).75 I argue that the very contemporaneity of Rwanda’s case makes it all the more problematic for inclusion into Etoke’s study. Rwandans’ trauma lies not in an abstract symbol or in the history of their ancestors of centuries past. Rather, it lies in the corpses of loved ones that lie in their backyards and the hills of their country, as well as the ever-present threat of death for survivors. In their previously cited collection of genocide survivor testimonies, Totten and Ubald delineate further particularities of the 1994 genocide by citing the demonization of Tutsis via radio prior to the genocide, victims’ being killed by their neighbors and even, at times, their own family members, the uneasy cohabitation of survivors and perpetrators post-genocide and the new government’s struggles to bring about minimal conflict and eventual reconciliation.76

To further examine potential disconnects between Etoke’s study and the case of the Rwandan genocide, I will explore her interpretation of Diop’s Murambi. Etoke evokes Cornelius’s choice to return from exile in order to affront the horrors of the genocide. She highlights the unburied cadavers that Cornelius finds at sites such as that of the Murambi Technical School. These cadavers symbolize, as she puts it, a “prise de conscience efficace”

---

75 Basabose 71.
76 Totten and Ubald 194.
(“effective awareness”) of the genocide. According to Etoke, other survivors such as Gérard also negotiate her idea of loss, mourning and survival on a daily basis. Relating her idea to Jacques Derrida’s theory of survival, Etoke highlights the death/life opposition of the notion the triumph, in the end, of “la vie la plus intense possible” (“the most intense life possible”). In the space of a page, a Rwandan genocide memorial’s unburied cadavers, an exile’s return to the site and a single genocide survivor’s daily struggles to survive become melancholia africana. Her theory, as she says, “autorise une cohabitation entre la mémoire du génocide et l’apaisement de l’affliction attachée à cet événement tragique.” (“authorizes a cohabitation between genocide memory and appeasement from the affliction attached to this tragic event.”). Survivors must, like Cornelius, accept the past in order to move on. As Siméon says, the blood poured out during the genocide must obligé each person to pull themselves together.

On a literary level, Etoke also insists that Diop’s demonstration of the limits of language in the communication of trauma reflects the “agonie discursive” (“discursive agony”) of melancholia africana.

Speaking out against a “concurrence des mémoires” (“memories competition”) between one traumatic event and another, Etoke lobbies for increased efforts to “voir chez l’Autre sa propre douleur.” (“see in the Other one’s own pain.”). Such a universalized view of suffering eliminates competition that divides one supposed collectivity from another. However, I argue that her study demonstrates the danger of any individual’s assuming that another’s suffering can be understood or equated with his or her own pain. All trauma is not experienced to the same degree, nor of the same nature. An African or African American’s slave ancestry and experience of racism in contemporary suburban America can hardly represent “loss, mourning

---

77 Etoke 72-73.
78 Etoke 74.
79 Diop, Murambi 220.
80 Etoke 77.
81 Etoke 77.
and survival” in the same sense as a Rwandan’s seeing his or her family brutally murdered before his or her eyes in genocide-torn Rwanda in the 1990’s. This tendency in Etoke’s theory, however, mirrors a larger trend in trauma studies. Leys has shown that many literary critics such as Cathy Caruth argue for a “de Man-inspired version of the idea of the mimetic-contagious transmission of psychic suffering to others, even to later generations, with the result that trauma becomes unlocatable in any particular individual.” Leys argues that Caruth encourages a “collapse of distinctions” between different types of trauma, and a supposed intergenerational traumatic transmission that I argue reflects that of Etoke’s study. In the specific case of genocide, such critics display trauma as “something shared by victims and nonvictims alike” and a “pathos that can and must be appropriated by others.” I join Leys in insisting that victims and nonvictims cannot share trauma to this degree. In the same way, one cannot truly say that the reader is obliged, as Etoke puts it, to live the unlivable by reading a novel representing the Rwandan genocide.

The author also claims that the reader’s participation leads to a deconstruction of the victim/oppressor dichotomy as he or she is obliged to recognize him- or herself in the oppressor, in some sense. Thus, an exclusive alterity can no longer function, either in the literary context or the daily reality of post-genocide Rwanda. One can no longer speak of strict good versus evil. Deconstructing the victim/oppressor dichotomy represents one of the main aims of Etoke’s study, and yet it in the case of Rwanda her discourse reaches its limits. Empathy can only take one so far in understanding and participating in the experience of the Other’s trauma. Even after having spent months with survivors in Rwanda, one writer of the Fest’Africa project admitted that authors found that one can only rarely truly share “le malheur des autres.” ("other’s

---

82 Leys 17, 305.
misfortune.”). Proximity with the genocide’s trauma made writers even more aware of the distance between their position and that of a survivor. In a recent interview, Diop shared that the 1994 genocide was a global historical event that implies every human being in some sense, and yet while Rwandans are appreciative of theories of “la compassion universelle” (“universal compassion”) such as Etoke’s, this empathy for their plight “les dépossède, pour ainsi dire, de leurs morts.” (“dispossesses them, so to speak, of their dead”).

Diop explains potential disconnects between survivors’ and outsiders’ interpretations of the genocide in the following terms. Foreigners, including himself, often fail to realize that when a Rwandan and a foreigner talk about the 1994 genocide, they are almost never speaking of the same event. As Mukagasana’s N’aie pas peur de savoir accurately demonstrated, each survivor’s “genocide” revolves around the specific dates when loved ones were murdered and the physical locations of their corpses if they are known. Still, outsiders’ universalizing discourses about the genocide tend to speak of generalized suffering, rather than such specificity. Many intellectuals demonstrate comparative tendencies, at the least, when speaking of the genocide. Filmmaker Samba Félix N’Diaye’s documentary of the Fest’Africa initiative, entitled Rwanda, pour mémoire, opens with scenes of Rwanda while “Strange Fruit” plays in the background. N’Diaye likewise ends his documentary with “Mississippi Goddamm,” another song connected to the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. Yet in these cases, connections between the Rwandan genocide and the Civil Rights Movement remain undefined, and the two songs in

---

84 Rwanda pour mémoire.
86 Rwanda pour mémoire. “Strange Fruit” was originally a poem written in 1937 by Abel Meeropol (pseudonym Lewis Allan) and was first performed as a song by Billie Holliday in 1939 in New York City. It speaks of an African-American (i.e. slave descendant) who hangs from a tree in the south of the United States, after having been lynched. These lynchings occurred in the U.S. from the abolition of slavery, into the civil rights movement. “Strange fruit” has become synonymous with lynching as a result of this song that some view as one of the earliest acts of the Civil Rights Movement.
87 American singer and songwriter Nina Simone wrote and performed this song in a series of concerts in 1964 as a response to violence against African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement.
question probably go unnoticed by many spectators. In this way, N'Diaye proves much more cautious than Etoke in comparing the trauma of representations of the genocide to that of other parts of Africa and its diaspora. I argue that these subtle allusions evoke a more varied diasporic consciousness than Etoke because N'Diaye does not qualify connections between the Civil Rights Movement and the genocide. One site of memory does not attempt to interpret another site’s trauma. Therefore, the diasporic connection related to trauma remains fluid and infinitely less problematic.

Etoke declares in the closing pages of her study, “Je voudrais dire aux Africains et aux Afrodescendants qu’à plusieurs égards, nos vies ne sont pas faciles.” (“I would like to say to Africans and Afro-descendants that, in many respects, our lives are not easy.”) (emphasis mine). In these lines, largely disparate traumas become commonly shared by all. Racism in contemporary America, memory of the slave trade and other myriad experiences blend with the trauma of contemporary war and genocide into one monolithic suffering, presumably experienced by all to the same degree. Isabelle Favre rightly speaks of the “vie d’auteur” (“author’s life”) in this regard, stating that the motivations of a writer “ayant physiquement traversé un génocide seront d’un ordre très différent de celles qui animent un auteur venu de l’extérieur.” (“having physically gone through a genocide will be of a very different order than those of an outside author”). Such a fact is particularly true, I argue, for authors having spent no time with survivors in a research context, as did Fest’Africa writers from outside of Rwanda. In N’Diaye’s documentary, writers declare that once one has even visited memorial sites post-genocide, he or she “ne peut plus être comme avant.” (“can no longer be as [he or she was] before.”). Diop later explains that one must understand that a genocide “est un événement qui ne correspond à rien de connu et de concevable . . .” (“is an event that corresponds to nothing

---

88 Etoke 107.
89 Favre 112.
I argue that generalizing discourses of trauma and survival such as Etoke’s unwittingly enter into a homogenizing logic in their well-meaning attempts to lessen the distance between traumas experienced by different members of Africa and its diaspora. Such an empathetic “jump” runs the risk of denying the particularity and often, the magnitude of the Other’s trauma and unwittingly silencing survivors themselves by imposing interpretations upon their stories of suffering.

Furthermore, my analysis of Mukagasana’s *N’aie pas peur de savoir* demonstrated that a Rwandan survivor such as Mukagasana is interested not so much in a universal empathy but rather in a survivor/reader relationship that will spur the foreign reader to action, lobbying for justice in post-genocide Rwanda. In this sense, empathy means nothing without reparative action. Diop himself is quick to declare that no African reader or critic is exempt from their responsibility in the events of 1994. While Etoke focuses on each member of the conscience diasporique’s responsibility in moving forward him- or herself by taking responsible action for his or her own life, Mukagasana, Diop and indeed, each writer in the Fest’Africa initiative participated in their literary projects in order to push the larger French-speaking world into responsible action on behalf of Rwandans. Their declared focus on Rwanda’s case in its particularity aimed to fight for justice and to spread awareness in order to avoid further bloodshed in Rwanda and other parts of the continent. They also wished, as Basabose has shown, to restore the dignity of humanity that the genocide tried to take away from Rwandans’ loved ones’ memory. Finally, theirs was a “travail du deuil” (“work of mourning”) to lighten Rwandan survivors’ memories, rather than to enter into any mourning project involving all of

---

90 *Rwanda pour mémoire.*

91 Fiona McLaughlin notes that a large part of the “fascination with genocide” lies in the fact that one population’s trauma could be reproduced anywhere in the world. See her *Murambi: The Book of Bones* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP; 2006) 203.
Africa and its diaspora. As Koulis Lamko put it, “Il faut que les Rwandais enterrent leurs morts.” (“Rwandans must [be able to] bury their dead.”). In this sense, the Fest’Africa project’s goals were markedly different from those of Etoke’s *melancholia africana*.

Etoke’s otherwise strong, thought-provoking study of the effects of traumatic history within Sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora would do well to consider Rwanda’s particularity more fully. Such sensitivity would demonstrate a respect of the individual’s own specific traumatic history, an idea that she elsewhere espouses. Totten and Ubaldo’s collection of survivors’ testimonies reiterate that:

“... no one can sense the abject fear, the chaos created by jeering and callous killers, the unfathomable sorrow of seeing loved ones brutalized and murdered, the stench of rotting bodies, the horror of being hunted down, or being brutally beaten and slashed and left for dead.”

Indeed, given the radical isolation that many Rwandan survivors expressed in interviews with Diop, Totten and Ubaldo, one sees the issues with even speaking of a *Rwandan* post-genocide consciousness.

I argue that Diop demonstrates that the most ethical approach to representing the Rwandan genocide, or theorizing it as an outsider, must begin with a simple “Pardonnez-moi.” (“Forgive me.”). Such humility recognizes most of the outside world’s failure to intervene during the genocide, and represents the only stance from which true dialogue can subsequently take place. In a recent question and answer session on *Murambi* in Paris, Diop claimed that a desire to ask forgiveness still overcomes him as he reads passages of the novel to readers. He wonders, “En... nommant [le génocide], est-ce qu’on passe de côté?” (“In... naming [the genocide], do we miss the mark?”). In this case, literature is, as Qader puts it, “disempowered

---

92 Semujanga 101.
93 Rwanda pour mémoire.
94 Totten and Ubaldo 22.
95 McLaughlin 204.
96 Diop, “Rencontre” 30 September 2011.
but necessary. Diop himself hopes above all to have done “un peu de bien” (“a little good”) in writing Murambi, rather than moving mountains, as he puts it. His greatest desire was to avoid betraying the suffering of genocide survivors. In Etoke’s case, she rightly disproves Pape Ndiaye’s idea of an identity that all diasporic community members in France might adhere to. However, just as there is no cohesive black community in France, there may be no conscience diasporique or melancholia africana that proves so all-inclusive. The trauma of Rwandan genocide survivors and related literature prove this fact.

97 Qader 36.
98 Diop, Murambi 269, 271.
5. “Eating Literature”: Effa's *Voici le Dernier Jour du Monde*

“Je ne savais rien des misères de Bakassi et de l'Afrique. Pourtant, j'allais écrire.”

(“I knew nothing of Bakassi and Africa’s miseries. Nevertheless, I was going to write.”).

(Narrator/Author, *Voici le dernier jour du monde*)

In Chapter Three, I examined a number of Effa’s largely autobiographical novels and the ways in which his narratives dealt with the trauma of early parental separation and the author’s subsequent lifelong bicultural identity issues. In this chapter, I turn to one of Effa’s recent less-known works that questions the very categories of autobiography, biography and fiction, as well as each genre’s value to Effa’s literary projects. Effa’s *Voici le dernier jour du monde* (2005) offers a philosophy that dialogues with and ultimately contradicts theories of another very well-known contemporary Cameroonian author and critic, Patrice Nganang. Just as Nganang’s *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine* (2007) claims that African authors cannot write after the Rwandan genocide of 1994 without using the tragedy as the baseline meditation for their projects, the narrator/author of Effa’s *Voici le dernier jour du monde* reflects upon the Rwandan genocide, even more recent international events and their impact on Africa. In addition to his consideration of Rwanda, Effa’s anonymous narrator analyzes the bombing of the World Trade Center in 2001, the United States’ subsequent invasion of Iraq, subsequent uprisings around the world and these events’ relationships to contemporary African societies in order to evaluate his home continent’s position in world affairs and its future. Yet, while Nganang has become well-known as an activist for his native Cameroon through literature, Effa’s direct engagement with politics in *Voici le dernier jour du monde* represents a departure
from his usual style. Even so, his hallmark self-analysis and bitingly self-deprecating tone still permeate the text, reflecting both his own writing style and the disillusionment of post-Independences Africa. *Voici le dernier jour du monde* offers layer upon layer of irony-laced commentaries on Effa’s position as a writer, the role of violence in literature and the media and Africa’s place in the world in light of international political events. These issues interweave with Effa’s habitual reflections upon his exile to offer the reader new insights about Effa’s relationship with his home country and continent. The trauma of Effa’s narrator’s position, combined with the trauma expressed by those around him, build up progressively to the point where everything explodes in the novel’s dénouement. Thus, I will show that unlike Nganang’s idea of a new preemptive African literature, the narrative of *Voici le dernier jour du monde* ultimately self-destructs due to trauma. By this strategy, Effa questions the very role of literature in relation to contemporary African societies.

Before delving into Effa’s text, I will highlight the main tenets of Nganang’s *Manifeste*. Nganang explains that “tragedy” is the main theme of what he calls post-genocide writing, or any novel written by an author of African origin since the Rwandan genocide of 1994. These novels offer themes of disillusionment, irony and ultimate self-destruction. African intellectuals, including writers, remained largely silent during the 1994 genocide. Therefore, Nganang claims that their subsequent novels can only respond to one question: “Vous étiez où?” (“Where were you?”). Post-genocide literature, as it currently stands, can only present writers’ horror at the tragedies of their home Continent through a telos of violence, tragically satiric humor and the ultimate acceptance of death. As this type of narrative will eventually self-destruct, the conclusion of Nganang’s *Manifeste* calls for the dawn of a new sort of writing that the writer

---

1 Vounda Etoa, Personal Interview. For more information, see Vounda’s recently published anthology of contemporary Cameroonian literature: *Cameroun: Nouveau paysage littéraire (New Literary Landscape): (1990-2008)* (Yaoundé: Editions Clé, 2009).

2 Nganang 48.
coins “l’écriture préemptive.” (“preemptive writing”). To produce this new style of novel that will ultimately anticipate African tragedies before they occur, authors must be in tune with the streets of Africa like never before. As he puts it, “la préemption nécessite une conscience perpétuellement en éveil . . . pour donc, ici et maintenant, suspendre l’avènement de la barbarie.”3 (“preemption requires a perpetually awake consciousness . . . in order to, here and now, suspend the advent of barbarity.”).

One problematic aspect of his model is that Nganang avoids the issue of African readership. While he acknowledges that current African writers still find few readers at home, he does not suggest solutions for this readership problem that could enable his new “preemptive literature” to reach enough African readers to successfully anticipate and avoid further tragedies on the Continent. His approach remains that of an optimistic visionary. On the other hand, I will show that while Effa’s Voici le dernier jour du monde parallels fellow Cameroonian writer Nganang’s idea of post-genocide literature in notable ways, the novel’s view of the abilities of literature to incite change proves infinitely more pessimistic and limited than Nganang’s model.

Like Effa’s other texts that I visited in Chapter Three of my study, Voici le dernier jour du monde begins with a semi-autobiographical narrator. He returns home to Bakassi after a life of exile in France. This African country shares some similarities with Effa’s native Cameroon. Humorously, the narrator/author has chosen to return home as a last resort in hopes of saving his failing writing career. He also wishes to finally rediscover this home country that he has avoided for so long. In a psychoanalytical vein, the narrator wonders why he has always repressed the “enfant noir” (“black child”) that he was.4 Describing himself once again as a coconut (black on the outside, white on the inside), the narrator spends the entire first chapter of the novel pondering his bicultural heritage. The only Africa he knows involves fables of

3 Nganang 296.
interethnic massacres such as the Rwandan genocide, other armed conflicts, AIDS, the
devaluation of the Central African CFA franc, generalized corruption and the disinterest that the
rest of the world harbors towards Africa. The Africa he knows is a fable. So too, is France. As
he puts it, “Une fable, l’Afrique. Une fable, la France. Une fable, la patrie. Une fable, le retour .
.” (“A fable, Africa. A fable, France. A fable, the home country. A fable, the return . . .”).\(^5\) He
returns to Bakassi on a one-way ticket, pen in hand. The novel that results from this trip will
hopefully aid him in resolving his bicultural identity issues and enable him to achieve some
measure of literary success. In this way, the novel begins with Effa’s trademark
autobiographical style and lays out a project for a sort of “travel journal” that the narrator will
share with the reader in the course of the novel. He peppers his text with mythical references,
as well as African and French literary allusions. This intertextuality reinforces the theme of the
“fable” set out at the beginning of the novel and marks his way as he navigates through what
proves to be a traumatic return to his home country.

However, the narrator soon decides to chronicle not his own life, but that of Fabien. The
latter is another exile that, unlike the narrator, has relocated permanently to his native Bakassi
after completing prestigious literary studies in the United States. The narrator enters into the
biographical portion of the text as he describes Fabien’s attempts to improve the curriculum of
Bakassi’s best university (Hampaté-Bâ) and to encourage its professors to cast off their laziness
and apathy. However, his efforts are met with opposition from every side. The university fires
Fabien, and the government then arrests him for a supposed threat to the president’s welfare.
In prison, the guard calls Fabien a “sale intellectuel” (“dirty intellectual”) and throws him a copy
of Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* when he is hungry. At his wit’s end, Fabien begins to eat the
novel, page by page. Literature has no more value in his society. The narrator cries, “Pourquoi

\(^5\) Effa, *Voici* 10.
la littérature ne pouvait-elle rien pour lui, l’Africain, au seul moment où il avait besoin d’être soutenu?" ("Why could literature do nothing for him, the African, at the only moment where he needed to be supported?"). Fabien’s girlfriend is also mysteriously murdered, and eventually Fabien himself will die after having been imprisoned and tortured. In this way, the narrator tells us that anyone who tries to oppose the overwhelming mediocrity of Bakassi will ultimately lose the battle. Such characters find themselves accused of bogus crimes, hunted down, broken into traumatized shells of their former selves and eventually murdered.

In the closing pages of the novel, Fabien has died and the narrator/author closes his story with an all-out confession. He admits to killing Fabien’s girlfriend Rosie, Fabien himself and a Frenchman named André M. who had naively hoped to put an end to the prostitution of Bakassi’s youth. The narrator admits that he felt jealous of the Frenchman’s belief that he could bring about positive change by transforming Bakassi’s morals. André M. possessed an agency that the narrator could not acquire. Yet, the narrator eventually reveals that the Frenchman also practiced various forms of corruption among the locals. In this way, critic Kasereka Kavwahirehi shows that Effa demystifies globalization and a certain “savior”-like reputation that France allegedly possesses in certain circles in relation to Africa. The narrator murders the Frenchman with a machete, as he did Rosie. Thus ends the novel, with a symbolic reference to the Rwandan genocide. The narrator/author has fallen into the violence that he formerly feared and criticized in those around him in his home country. He then precedes to kill himself in the novel’s final chapter, in an effort to achieve true literary fame. He will live on in his novel. He claims that the violence of his novel, as well as his own death, will ensure his greatness. Happy above all to finally be taking concrete action, the author exults, “Je meurs, mais je tranche.” ("I’m dying, but I’m slitting [i.e., my wrists],” or “coming to a decision.”). This play on words with

6 Effa, Voici 48-49.
the verb “trancher” leaves the reader with a narrator/author who has paradoxically achieved greatness in his own mind by falling into the same depraved action as that of the world around him.

Throughout the novel, the narrator offers descriptions of a traumatized Bakassi whose people try to forget their misery by losing themselves in drugs and sex. The narrator expresses a desire to go out on the street and mingle with them, and yet he fears to leave the safety of his own room in order to do so. The region has lost all sense of a moral compass, and female prostitutes roam the streets in the nude. Furthermore, a new sort of hallucinogenic drug, “khat,” has become extremely popular. Many inhabitants of Bakassi work in the diamond mines of the Nimba mountains, enduring miserable conditions. Chinese and American foreign presences in Bakassi exploit the local miners horribly in a situation which the narrator describes as akin to the miners’ misery in Zola’s *Germinal*. Using khat, however, keeps the workers docile. They come to actually *desire* to work in the mines, where their drug-induced trips lead the men to hallucinate mirages of beautiful women and sexual fantasies with them. Prostitutes speak of the miners in a legendary way. One such prostitute displays physiological signs of trauma as she fails to find words to describe her experiences in the mines. Instead, she takes off her clothes and begins to roll around on the floor, chanting “Mais ça va aller . . . ça va aller.” (“But it’s going to be fine, it’s going to be fine.”). This popular vernacular expression pops up throughout *Voici le dernier jour du monde* and its every appearance lessens its credibility. Eventually, the saying loses all of the hope that it promises.

Representations of the collective in the novel alternate between mining scenes in Bakassi and the narrator/author’s experiences of international events through television stations such as TV5 and the local radio, *Gao Info*. The narrator’s musings center around the September 11th bombing of the World Trade Center, which he says surprised everyone but

---

8 Effa, *Voici* 75.
Africans. The event gave them hope that world superpowers could be thwarted. As a result, the narrator claims that every African waits for his or her chance to faire l’événement, or to make his or her breakthrough. He watches television along with other locals in Bakassi, witnessing America’s subsequent invasion of Iraq. Bakassi locals watch with him as GI soldiers’ take over an Iraqi family’s home for their headquarters. Humorously, the narrator relates that the only weapons of mass destruction that soldiers end up finding in Iraq are “un fusil à plomb” (“pellet gun”). The narrator highlights the World Trade Center bombing and subsequent revolts all around the world as events even more noteworthy than the Rwandan genocide in terms of their worldwide implications. While Rwanda was a story of Africans killing Africans, Effa’s narrator explains, September 11th showed the Occident that they were at risk as well. What results from this realization will be, as he puts it, “terrible.” In Bakassi, the resulting revolts lead to all-out civil war, and the narrator and Fabien must eventually flee the region.

Even the history surrounding the name of Bakassi, where most of the novel’s events play out, reflects violent instability. In recent politics, Nigerians and Cameroonians have disputed the Bakassi peninsula, located as it is between their two countries. Recently, the territory came under Cameroonian ownership, although disputes continued long after this decision. Therefore, even the name of Bakassi conveys inherent conflict. The novel’s world is in constant upheaval, and disputing parties contest all physical space and resources.

This insecurity mirrors the narrator/author’s own psyche, torn as it is between French and Cameroonian cultures. While the novel revolves around the idea of “tragedy” so central to Nganang’s idea of a post-genocide African novel, a closer look proves that the African and worldwide conflicts in the text reflect, above all, the narrator’s own tortured mental state. As

---

9 Effa, Voici 171.
10 Effa, Voici 105.
Chadian writer and critic Nimrod recently put it, Africa doesn’t really implode in the course of *Voici le dernier jour du monde*. Rather, Effa’s narrator manifests the “sordide machination d’écrivain en mal de reconnaissance.” (“sordid engineering of a poorly-acknowledged writer.”).\(^{12}\) Even though the narrator has planned to write a story about Fabien and the African continent, his stories inevitably become his own. He finds himself in an “interminable tête-à-tête avec moi-même.”\(^{13}\) (interminable tête-à-tête with himself”). When he gazes upon an old photo of L.S. Senghor, the “père de l’unité sénégalaise,” (“father of Senegalese unity”), in the local paper *Gao Infos*, he instead sees a king who was not able to die in his own land, who died exiled “rejeté par les étrangers et ignoré par les siens.”\(^{14}\) (“rejected by foreigners and ignored by his own loved ones”). The narrator/author’s own fears as a subject caught between two cultures inevitably resurface in the text. Held in limbo between two fables (that of Bakassi and that of France), he exists in absence. While France often perplexes and alienates him, his return to Bakassi shows him that he doesn’t quite love his home country as he thought he did, either. He watches other Africans’ tragic attempts to escape to the “eldorado” of Europe, only to discover that this promise is a fable as well.\(^{15}\) Ultimately a radically isolated individual stuck in a sort of cultural no man’s land, the narrator tells himself that no matter where he goes or what he writes, he will be alone.

He warns himself that “le cri que tu pousses ne réveillera personne, pas même toi.”\(^{16}\) (“the shout that you cry out will not awaken anyone, not even you.”). In these lines, Effa cites one of his own novels, *Le cri que tu pousses ne réveillera personne* (2000) and thus inserts himself into the myriad literary references of the text. In this way, the narrator/author’s


\(^{13}\) Effa, *Voici* 191.

\(^{14}\) Effa, *Voici* 193.

\(^{15}\) Effa, *Voici* 197.

\(^{16}\) Effa, *Voici* 58.
movement towards a posthumous fame that cannot be found in the present begins well before
the character's suicide. The writer begins to transform himself into history even before the text's
apocalypse begins. His home and host cultures prove fables for him, and the madness of the
world forces him into a literature that cannot save him either. His narrative is, ultimately,
doomed.

Although he tries to retreat from the world around him, the narrator finds that he
cannot escape the trauma of Bakassi locals and their murderous madness since September 11th
through writing. He tells the reader, “Écriture comme salut. On ne se sauve pas par l’écriture.
On ne s’échappe pas.”17 (“Writing as salvation. One can’t save oneself by writing. One cannot
escape.”). Rather, he too self-destructs at the novel’s end, mirroring all of Bakassi and, in a
larger sense, the African continent itself. He tells the reader that his novel is not just the story
of Fabien, but that of the entire African continent. This continent, then, has died as well.
Looking around him at a dying Bakassi, the narrator thinks smugly to himself, “Voilà à quoi j’ai
echappé.”18 (“There’s what I escaped from,” i.e. by living in France). Yet he himself will perish in
the course of the story. In this sense, Effa’s novel provides an excellent example of what
Nganang claims that all contemporary African literature written thus far must be in light of the
1994 Rwandan genocide: self-destructive.19

A radical isolation is also part and parcel of the trauma experienced by other members of
Bakassi. In Voici le dernier jour du monde, radio and television broadcast the people’s suffering
for all to see, and yet no one intervenes. The world is more fascinated by Bush, Kadhafi and
Saddam Hussein than the mining deaths in Bakassi. The narrator laments that the outside

17 Effa, Voici 189.
18 Effa, Voici 113.
19 Nganang 24.
world is guilty of “non-assistance à l’humanité en danger,”\textsuperscript{20} (non-assistance to humanity in danger”), and repeats the expression over and over again as he contemplates Africans’ hopeless situation. Yet Africans themselves are not exempt from this apathy. The narrator sits with Bakassi locals and watches images of the Iraqi war on various televisions even as a child soldier hits one of the screens with his kalachnikov. The women surrounding the narrator begin to cry, still watching the images of Iraqis on other screens. Yet the narrator wonders ironically if they’re crying because of pity for Iraqis, or because the child soldier just destroyed one of their television screens.

Here, Effa questions the very possibility of empathy in any kind of spectator, be it one of literature, television, radio or another medium. Can any given spectator’s identification with another’s suffering be genuine? Massacres and embassy bombings continue in Iraq, and yet newspapers’ attention turns to Michael Jackson’s accusation of pedophilia in the United States. This paradox mirrors Diop’s portrayal of a world riveted by the World Cup during the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Effa’s narrator explains that everyone chooses to avoid the present by identifying with someone far removed from local torture and violence. The narrator depicts Michael Jackson as an especially pertinent source of identification for Africans, as a formerly black man who now is neither black nor white, but an “être blessé . . . qui ne découvrira jamais qui il est.” (“a wounded being . . . who will never discover who he is.”). In his opinion, Jackson represents the perfect model for an Africa whose problems come in part from its efforts to follow those around it. Their torment lies in being both “la plaie et le couteau.”\textsuperscript{21} (“the wound and the knife.”).

The narrator believes that he has pinpointed his home continent’s problem. Above all, they have erred in trying to imitate those around them. “Le crime est d’avoir cru,” he says,

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{20} Effa, \textit{Voici} 198. \\
\textsuperscript{21} Effa, \textit{Voici} 177.
\end{flushright}
“pouvoir se rapprocher des autres en faisant comme eux.” (“The crime is to have believed they could become more like others by doing as they do.”). They have given in to a fascination with a modernity that they can never have. Thus, every being that he crosses on the streets of Bakassi is “cette ruine, ce tombeau.”22 (“this ruin, this tomb”). These musings lead the narrator to realize that his return to his home country has proven nothing more than a return to absence. His writing will do nothing to change the course of events. He has come to discover Africa’s real truth, which is “la mort”23 (“death”).

The people of Bakassi exhibit trauma by physiological symptoms such as wandering the streets naked, abusing drugs such as khat, and taking up arms and killing each other after September 11th. Just outside the mines, women, elderly men and children wander around, “sécués de cris et de sanglots. Ils balbutiaient, ils avaient de grands frissons et des gestes de fous, écartant un cauchemar abominable.”24 (“shaken by screams and sobbing. They babbled, they shuddered violently and made the gestures of mad people, pushing away an abominable nightmare.”). Eventually, a sort of plague takes over the country, and people begin dying like flies. The first symptoms are a runny nose, sweating, nausea and migraines. Then come shuddering, spasms, respiratory difficulties, muscle fatigue and ultimately, paralysis. Death comes as a “délivrance,”25 (“deliverance”), according to the narrator.

However, the narrator’s trauma often plays out by his cyclical doubts as to his ability to accurately perceive Bakassi. In some sense, the reader cannot critique the narrator/author for his presentation of Bakassi, since the narrator has already admitted that he himself questions his ability to understand his home region. This device requests the same “lecture chiasmatique” (“chiasmatic reading”) of exiled African authors’ texts as that proposed by Nganang in his

22 Effa, Voici 108.
23 Effa, Voici 131.
24 Effa, Voici 78.
25 Effa, Voici 123.
Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine. Nganang explains that many of what he refers to as Occidental critics fall into the trap of expecting exiled authors to represent their home country and Continent in the same way as an author who has never left home. An exiled author, however, cannot have his or her finger on the pulse of everyday life at home, as can a writer based on the Continent. Nganang asks readers to realize that, as Togolese writer Kossi Effoui has said, “L’Afrique n’existe pas.” (“Africa doesn’t exist.”). Readers mustn’t miss, Nganang reiterates, the ironic underpinnings of this statement for an exiled writer. Critics have long failed to consider “la fondamentale mise à l’écart de l’écrivain des rues de son pays qu’il chante” (“the fundamental separation of the writer from the streets of his country that he sings about”).

Indeed, the narrator never really succeeds in getting out of his own mind to engage with Bakassi. The reader does not witness a single scene where the narrator actually commits a violent crime. In this way, the narrator’s expressed trauma remains purely psychological. This fact separates him on yet another level from Bakassi locals who exhibit various physiological symptoms of trauma. The narrator witnesses their symptoms, but cannot know what they are thinking. He on the other hand, shares many of his thoughts with the reader, telling him or her that he must be honest with his readers, up to a certain point. Yet for all of his ruses, he cannot succeed in acting, in any way, shape or form. He must live on as a radically isolated, literary figure, rather than the man of action that he aspires to be. He remains trapped within his own head.

Thus, one of the central themes of Voici le dernier jour du monde related to the narrator’s personal trauma is the idea of knowability. The narrator returns home to Bakassi in order to discover a truth he has searched for his entire life. Yet after arriving he declares, “Me

26 Nganang 14-15, 75.
voici à Bakassi, mais comme Bakassi était loin! 

(“Here I am in Bakassi, but Bakassi is so far away!”). He elsewhere confides in the reader that although he knows “rien” (“nothing”) of Bakassi and, in a larger sense, Africa’s suffering, he is going to write. 

The long-exiled narrator of *Voici le dernier jour du monde* frequently expresses shame related to his profession, and hides his pen and paper whenever anyone catches him writing. How, he wonders, can he take advantage of Bakassi’s suffering by using it as fodder for the novel that will make him famous? Ashamed, he wonders about his own role, musing “Salaud? Ecrivain? J’hésite . . .” (“Scum? Writer? I hesitate . . .”). Whenever a local identifies him as a writer, he denies it or tries to hide himself. At one point, he wonders if all of his literary training in France is keeping him from seeing the reality of the world around him in Bakassi. In keeping with the frequent religious vocabulary of the apocalyptic text, Effa quotes the Gospels by describing his literary background as a “taie” (“plank” or “tare”) in his eye that keeps him from accurately perceiving Bakassi. 

This biblical reference suggests an anguish in appearing to “criticize” Africa as if he himself were not aware of his own faults. He wonders if his perception of Africa will ever be untainted by his own subjectivity.

When the narrator/author isn’t questioning his ability to accurately perceive the world around him, he is doubting his ability to incite societal change as a writer. First of all, he confesses his previous novels’ lack of literary success in France at various junctures in the story. The story of Fabien is still, somehow, the story of his novels’ lack of popularity. Even his novels’ reception failed to mark the world around him. Effa’s narrator despairs of the ultimate

---

27 Effa, *Voici* 64.
28 Effa, *Voici* 52.
29 Effa, *Voici* 179.
30 Effa, *Voici* 64. See Matthew 7:4-5. The New International Version reads, “Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.”
hope of Nganang’s study: anticipating and avoiding African tragedies through literature. Halfway through the novel, he wonders “Que peut faire un écrivain, excepté raconter des histoires? Est-il raisonnable qu’un écrivain espère inciter à un changement des coeurs?” (“What can a writer do, other than telling stories? Is it reasonable for a writer to hope to incite a change in [people’s] hearts?”).

As he tears apart his own newly violent writing style, the narrator also criticizes his fellow authors’ styles in communicating the horrors of Africa to the world. For fear of not going far enough in their descriptions, the macabre quality of their novels reaches excessive heights as they “ouvrent des cerceuils et comptent les cadavres.” (“open coffins and count cadavers.”). He himself worries that he will never be more than an “écrivain inconsolé pis, un détrousseur de cadavres encore chauds . . .” (“inconsolable writer-worse, a robber of cadavers that are still warm . . .”). Viewing his own notes, the narrator exclaims that his story seems like it stepped straight out of a thriller or science-fiction novel. This literary self-disgust rises to the forefront of the story just as post-September 11th violence increases in Bakassi and other parts of the world.

Here, all things macabre overpower the text. Child soldiers roam the streets shooting innocent bystanders. Taxi drivers decapitate victims in their cars, and sell their sexual organs on the streets. This type of violence has become Bakassi’s vengeance on wealthier countries, and the narrator tells the reader that locals seek “le suicide et l’apocalypse” (“suicide and the apocalypse.”). Such violence is the only way by which the poor feel that the outside world will hear them. The narrator tells the reader that they hope to exorcise illness and poverty by their

---

31 Effa, Voici 79.
32 Effa, Voici 110.
33 Effa, Voici 202.
34 Effa, Voici 104.
violence. Yet “Ils n’exorcisent rien . . .”\textsuperscript{35} (“they aren’t exorcising anything . . .”) He describes corpses to the reader in chilling detail. Fabien’s partner Rosie is found with her throat slit. Blood pours out onto the carpet under her head, and her eyes remain “révulsés d’horreur.”\textsuperscript{36} (“contorted with horror”). The narrator/writer wishes to blot this murder out of his memory, and yet the reader learns at the end of the novel that the narrator himself killed Rosie with a machete. It can’t be real. The narrator wonders if he has he invented these details.

Not knowing what else to do, he begins to laugh. This choice mirrors the displaced, despairing laugh that came forth in the narratives of Rwandan genocide survivors in Chapter Four. Incomprehensible violence leads to illogical physical responses in Effa’s text as well. Psychological trauma manifests itself in unexpected physical ways. In the same way, Nganang highlights the “rire tragique” (“tragic laugh”) as a satirical device used in post-genocide literature to signal the end of tragedy, and the end of literature itself. Yet the narrator’s posthumous literary fame as a deceased writer-assassin results in an escape from the ongoing tragedy of Bakassi and the larger world. The outside world will self-destruct eventually. In Effa’s model, only literature may continue. Yet the literature that survives is sterile and possesses no ability to impact the outside world. Effa’s literature ultimately stands in diametric opposition to Nganang’s preemptive writing. It disproves the very possibility of Nganang’s model.

In \textit{Voici le dernier jour du monde}, Effa displays a combination of the exile’s guilt that he displayed in Chapter Three of my study, as well as a new guilt that springs from representing the violence of Africa. I have mentioned that many junctures in the text find the narrator avoiding the eyes of locals who eye him curiously as he writes about their misfortunes. He expresses guilt, as well, for recording Fabien’s story and for wishing that his friend would live a bit longer. His wish was not for Fabien’s own sake, but so that the narrator will be able to finish

\textsuperscript{35} Effa, \textit{Voici} 137.
\textsuperscript{36} Effa, \textit{Voici} 94.
writing his story. Aside from his actual murders, I argue that the narrator/author suggests that the simple act of chronicling the characters’ downfalls represents a betrayal akin to murder. Even as he writes, he intimates that the characters’ honor would have been better preserved if no one had witnessed their violent deaths. Yet, he continues to tell their stories. The psychological trauma of this exiled writer’s guilt manifests itself physically in the writer-assassin’s eventual confession.

Despite the novel’s suicidal ending, critics in Cameroon such as Ateufack Dongmo Rodrigue Marcel insist that “D’un point de vue psychoanalytique, le texte apparait en effet comme le ‘talking cure’ (la cure par la parole) d’un névrosé, d’un psychopathe” (“From a psychoanalytical point of view, the text effectively appears as the ‘talking cure’ of a neurotic, a psychopath”) because the narrator chooses to tell the reader about his crimes. However, the very fact that the narrator/author commits suicide just after ending his confession disallows the idea of a “talking cure” in Freud’s sense of the term. Additionally, I showed in my Introduction that Freud’s idea of the “taking cure” explicitly involves both a talking subject and a listener. In Freud’s model, the listener is the psychoanalyst himself, who helps the patient to verbalize and thus, exorcise his or her trauma. In Effa’s novel, however, the reader who witnesses the narrator’s confession can offer no input regarding the narrator’s story. In fact, I argue that Effa’s narrator effectively adopts the roles of both “patient” and “analyst” in Freud’s “talking cure” framework by designating suicide as the only escape from his tortured subjectivity. Ironically, the “cure” that he offers himself comes, paradoxically, through death. No healing can be found. Critics such as Judith Roof and Deborah Wilson have long criticized the “implicit agenda” involved in Freud’s idea of the talking cure, as it implies an ignorant subject and a

knowledgeable analyst who arguably imposes his interpretation of the subject’s situation upon him or her in order to help the subject to find healing. In a similar fashion, Effa’s narrator also rejects the idea of a reader/doctor who could understand the narrator/patient’s plight enough to offer help in constructing his or her trauma narrative. In this sense, the narrator’s suicide represents an extreme form of self-sufficiency. The narrator chooses his own solution, death, and posthumous literary fame in a model that negates any actor besides the narrator himself.

Another Cameroonian critic, Ngetcham, explains Effa’s narrator/author’s trajectory in the text as a move from engagement to a self-preservation instinct. The character supposedly finds respite from his identity issues in literature. Furthermore, Ngetcham claims that the narrator effectively doubles himself into the character of Fabien, which allows him to permanently “live” in Africa on some level, while retaining the French part of his identity. However, I have shown that the narrator finds no refuge in telling Fabien’s story, nor does he take on Fabien’s identity. His retreat into writing leads to Fabien’s murder, as well as his own. I insist on highlighting Effa’s chosen split personality as that of a “patient” and “analyst” at the novel’s dénouement, rather than a “narrator” and “Fabien” duality. The narrator’s chosen stance proves that self-preservation is impossible for the narrator. He ultimately preserves not his life, but his literary reputation. Nothing else survives.

In Voici le dernier jour du monde, the narrator’s story undergoes successive transitions from autobiography, to biography, to semi-autobiography. The narrator’s confession at the novel’s end suggests that he has achieved “true” autobiography by being completely honest with the reader about his actions. The novel winds up presenting the reader with a supposed “real” autobiography of the narrator, rather than the originally planned autobiography of Effa. Yet this

narrator’s preoccupations still closely mirror those expressed by Effa himself throughout his autobiographical oeuvre. In this way, Effa shows that autobiography in some form proves inevitable. However, this progression is a violent movement. Autobiography can only lead to literary fame, the narrator argues, if literary crime is involved. The writer must count warm cadavers throughout the novel, and ultimately cause more deaths himself. The narrator repeatedly assures the reader that he only committed the murders in order to “devenir célèbre.” (“become famous.”). Disgustedly, he chastises himself, saying that he has surpassed even violence itself. “Tu as fait cela pour que l’on parle de toi!” (“You did this so that people would talk about you!”) he declares in horror. He simultaneously justifies himself to the reader in the last pages of the book, saying, “Je ne pouvais plus écrire sans être lu.” (“I could no longer write without being read.”). Having given in to the last temptation, as he calls it, he claims that he must die for the crimes he has committed. His suicide proves the only way to end his trauma, or “torment” (“torment”) as he calls it.\(^{40}\) The madness of the present allows no other means of deliverance.

The final underlying implication of Effa’s dénouement concerns its implications about current literary markets. The narrator’s decision to kill off his characters in order to achieve literary fame suggests that blood and guts will attract more readers. In fact, all media in the text (television, newspapers, radio, etc.) also attracts the public’s attention through violence. Thus, Effa’s novel offers the reader a deeply pessimistic view of Africa’s position in the world, as well as the role of contemporary African writers. The author cannot remain untainted by the violence around him, but must give in to it, propagate it and then die at his own hands. Although the narrator cannot truly escape involvement with Bakassi and its problems, his engagement proves powerless and leads to the destruction of the narrator, Fabien, various other characters, the African continent and any hope for positive change through literature. Therefore, Effa’s strategy

questions the potential of literature and denies the possibility of preemptive writing such as
Nganang's. "Men of action" such as Fabien do exist in Bakassi. However, they cannot survive.
The narrator's own literary fame can only come about through the violent murders of his text, a
fact that clearly delineates certain challenges faced by contemporary African writers in current
literary markets.
Epilogue

The authors of this study offer texts whose protagonists’ multicultural identities encounter misunderstanding at home and abroad. Effa’s *Voici le dernier jour du monde* demonstrates the ways in which French readers’ expectations can increase the tensions of the author’s position. For Zaaria and especially for Bugul, this strain also includes living with many home readers’ incomprehension of their experiences and their need to mourn the past. Furthermore, Mukagasana and Diop’s narratives of Rwandan genocide survivors offer stories in which guilty parties have yet to repent of their actions during the genocide. Traumatic symptoms irrupt in Mukagasana’s narrative as a symptom of this impasse, calling French readers to action. In such a case, writing can afford little to no comfort if it does not lead to justice. I argue that such literary displays of trauma succeed in the authors’ primary objective of communicating personal pain to the reader. This goal is one that Zaaria, Bugul, Effa and Mukagasana achieve in spite of many critics’ arguments against autobiography as a genre.

I have also outlined the limits of certain theories of collective mourning and survival concerning Africa and its diaspora. My study has shown that while collective memory plays a fundamental role in authors’ lives, each individual experiences trauma on a radically individual level. While I take into account the ways in which Nganang and Etoke suggest that literature can lead to more dynamic forms of survival, my analysis of the works of Zaaria, Bugul, Effa and Mukagasana has shown that these authors are ultimately pessimistic as to the ability of literature to lead to healing. In the case of literature by authors such as Bugul, I argue that the negative reception of one’s trauma narrative by certain readers can *compound* the initial trauma, rather than leading to healing. Authors become even more isolated, rather than finding the communal reintegration that many sociologists and psychologists of my study argued was so fundamental to healing from trauma. In this type of situation, I suggest that authors such as
Bugul sporadically claim to have fictionalized significant parts of their stories as a means of protecting themselves from the reader's potentially invasive, critical gaze.

While these authors’ literary projects and commentaries demonstrate a keen awareness of the limits of literature, a compelling project would be to examine the ways that authors are stepping outside the confines of literature in order to seek healing and societal transformation. For example, I have shown that Effa considered the priesthood before becoming a philosophy professor and writer. He also exhibits a keen interest in the field of psychology in his novels and demonstrates extensive knowledge of the Hebraic language and Jewish customs in his interviews. Next, Zaaria indicated in a personal interview that she seeks answers and personal healing through Senegalese forms of Islam. She has also expressed a recent interest in stories involving Jesus Christ and one of his followers, Mary Magdalene. Religion remains central in Zaaria’s personal quest for healing and enlightenment, and she plans for her future writing projects to mirror her own journey.¹ Bugul’s quest parallels Zaaria’s in its involvement in Islam as addressed in her *Riwan ou le chemin de sable*. In recent interviews Bugul described herself as a dedicated teacher of the Coran, and has also expressed an interest in the life stories of Jesus and Mary Magdalene. However, her current literary project’s interest in “l'enfermement” (“imprisonment”) and ways of transcending the same are consistent with her trademark tendency to “deconstruct” all forms of collective identity, religious or otherwise.² Bugul’s recent interviews often revolve around the topics of God and communal bridges and breakdowns. Finally, Mukagasana’s quest for justice and revenge against genocide perpetrators extends well beyond the confines of literature and helps her to survive through honoring her family’s memory. Diop has joined Mukagasana in stepping outside the field of literature to become a spokesperson for post-genocide Rwanda. Further examination of the ways in which authors

¹ Zaaria, Personal Interview.  
² Bugul, Personal Interview.
continue their quests in these ways will offer a more complete picture of the manifold strategies by which postcolonial authors are dealing with individual and communal suffering.

More and more African critics are also incorporating their own “real world” experiences into their texts as a way of acknowledging, and even *celebrating*, their subjectivity in their analyses. Further study of this phenomenon is also necessary in order to examine the ways in which critics’ personal trajectories are proving increasingly relevant as they engage in theoretical projects concerning their home continent. Their references to their own time spent in Africa often serve to reinforce their legitimacy in engaging in critical discourses about a Sub-Saharan Africa where, more often than not, they no longer live.

Many authors referenced in my study exhibit this trend. For example, Diop (who now lives in Tunisia) recently included a length postface in a second edition of his novel *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2011, first published in 2000). In the epilogue, he relates the difficulties of encountering Rwandan genocide survivors as a Senegalese writer and journalist, and then goes on to explain how friendship and trust were eventually established. This autobiographical tool counteracts the reader’s potential doubt as to Diop’s ability to identify with survivors’ stories as an outsider. Next, in his *Sortir de la grande nuit: Essai sur l’Afrique colonisée* (2010),

Cameroonian critic Achille Mbembe discusses his childhood in Cameroon in order to present a more detailed, relevant picture of the despair that he says now grips the disillusioned post-Independences Africa of which he writes.

Fellow Cameroonian exile Nganang centers his call for a new, “preemptive” African literature around popular sayings from the streets of Cameroon in *Manifeste d’une nouvelle littérature africaine* (2007). Each saying provides the title for a chapter of Nganang’s book. He also discusses Cameroonian historical events as a specific example of other socio-political

---

mutations in Africa at the time of the Rwandan genocide. He admits to his subjectivity and in some sense, ineptness in producing novels that “mirror” some supposed African reality since he, like many authors and critics, has lived away from the Continent for decades. However, Nganang refers to his time spent both within and without the Continent in order to call readers’ attention to the possibilities of fiction to communicate deep truths about African society in a less “literal” sense than what many readers currently expect from exiled authors.

Mirroring Nganang’s approach a few years later, fellow Cameroonian Nathalie Etoke uses another popular Cameroonian saying, “On va faire comment?” (“What are we going to do?”) to provide a key example of current Cameroonian attitudes toward possibilities (or the perceived lack thereof) in contemporary Cameroonian society in her *Melancholia africana*. She also fully embraces her subjectivity in the novel’s introduction by discussing her childhood in Cameroon, her studies in France and her academic career in the United States. Etoke too celebrates her background as a means of justifying, rather than discrediting, her discourse. Here, particularity triumphs over any idea of universality or any supposed “objectivity” that a critic could possess. While she elsewhere attempts empathetic cross-cultural and trans-traumatic leaps which I argue that a critic should not make, Etoke’s theory of *melancholia africana* remains its most compelling in light of her own experiences and firsthand observations in Cameroon, France and the United States.

Thus, I argue that African critics and authors alike are presenting readers with narratives whose personal tone reinforces the communication of the suffering of their own lives, others’ pain and the means of finding hope for a better future. Trauma studies continue to represent one possible framework for understanding these stories of personal and collective tragedy. In the case of Sub-Saharan African literature, the idea of “trauma” proves most relevant when referring to the ways in which the unacknowledged collective and individual past erupts in the present. Therefore, further study of the ways in which Sub-Saharan African authors express
and deal with such cyclical suffering will potentially lead not only to newer, more dynamic forms of individual survival but to greater understanding of the haunting collective history between France and her ex-colonies.
Works Cited


---. Personal Interview. 21 July 2011.


---. Email Interview. 26 November 2011.


---. Personal Interview. 19 August 2011.


Fall, Mame Bineta. Personal Interview. 6 July 2011.


Guèye, Cheikh A. Tidiane. Personal Interview. 29 June 2011.

Herman, Judith Lewis. Trauma and recovery: from domestic abuse to political terror. 3rd ed. London: Pandora, 2001.


Mbaye, Serigne Mor. Personal Interview. 21 July 2011.


Pryen, Denis. Personal Interview. 22 September 2011.


---. Personal Interview. 13 August 2011.


---. Personal Interview. 23 August, 2011.


---. Personal Interview. 19 June 2011.
Biography

Margaret Ellen Mahon was born on May 27, 1980 in St. Louis, Missouri. She received her B.A. in English with a minor in Religion and Literature from the University of Notre Dame in 2003. In 2006, she earned a Master’s in French Language and Literature from Middlebury College through their Master’s program in Paris, France. Middlebury College awarded Mahon the Frieda Derdeyn Bambas Prize in Literature. Mahon received her PhD in Romance Studies through Duke University in 2012. During the completion of her doctorate at Duke University, she obtained Pre-dissertation and Dissertation Research Travel Awards through the Graduate School. She was also selected for a year-long exchange with the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Paris, France (rue d’Ulm). Finally, Mahon completed her dissertation research through a year-long Fulbright-Hays fellowship in Dakar, Senegal; as well as Douala and Yaoundé, Cameroon.