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Sharing the Burden of Stories from the Tutsi Genocide

Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire

Anna-Marie de Beer

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Foreword

The genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, like the Jewish Holocaust before it, has attracted a rich body of scholarship that is almost unprecedented on the African continent. Anna-Marie de Beer's new book is part of this incredible scholarly gaze that continues to be directed at this despicable act of human cruelty that engulfed this small nation in Africa as the world watched in silence. Perhaps this explains, at least in part, why the genocide has compelled so much intellectual attention—a shared guilt from those who remained silent in the face of tyranny. The intellectual and scholarly output referred to here has been largely sociological in approach, often seeking to offer some explanatory authority on how Rwanda arrived at this ghastly human tragedy—its underlying causes—and, indeed, its implications for social cohesion and national unity, now and in the future. Anna-Marie de Beer's book, while signaling the desire to grasp all these, is very different. By choosing to focus for the large part on literary creations, testimonies, and stories about the genocide, it is decidedly about the voyage into our human subjectivities in order to surface those insights that only narrative can offer. It is about how literature opens a window through which trauma, associated with genocide such as this one, can be seen and reduced to its essence. The fundamental question that this book seeks to ask is how fiction offers a discursive space for listening and witnessing trauma, especially mass trauma that invites a multiplicity of voices to take part in the dialogue. The most critical point that the book makes is that fiction opens up many paths for re-historicizing trauma as a way of working through it by, for example, establishing shared memories and re-examining shared histories, generating contestation, and creating a

plurality of voices and perspectives. Without distancing herself from her work, de Beer draws attention to how art and the intellectual interlocutor offer precisely this possibility of plural and mediated perspective. In this sense, the writer/intellectual creates the space for speaking with and to others as opposed to speaking for others, and as a result avoiding the risk of committing what Gayatri Spivak equates with epistemic violence against the voiceless. The act of writing and the implied act of reading and listening is part of that process of working out the historical trauma. And yet the ultimate value of this book is how de Beer draws our attention to how the texts, by drawing on local cultural resources or indigenous resource base, forge a novelistic discourse of restoration, of healing, and working through trauma. The book lingers on the primacy of communal ethos, framed here through the use of Ubuntu and a form of Afropolitanism which valorizes oral testimonies, local healing modes, the presence of the invisible—the living dead—and mourning traditions, all of which aid and facilitate the sharing of the burden of trauma. Indeed the sharp intersection between life stories, history, and literature that the book surfaces can only point to its multifocal approach, and the act of writing, of translating experience into words, which enables the process of mourning and posits literary texts as vehicles for symbolic reparation, restitution, and restoration. What de Beer's book allows us to do is to grasp art's ability to re-symbolize trauma in order to work through it and in the process offer paths of healing, way beyond the reinstatement of trauma and its ramifications that a range of sociological scholarship on the Rwandan genocide has tended to do. Because narrative through its tropes of journey, travel, and listening aid the amplification of voices, it is also transformative. Again, because narratives studied here avoid the installation of monuments and instead point to traces of traumatic memories, the book is able to use this to complicate our reading of post-genocide realities as complex and layered, as defying monolithic narrative and closure, and therefore sees healing as a multidimensional process that requires constant renewal. The book invites us to be witnesses and to keep alive the difficult history of the genocide against the Tutsi, eked deeply in public memory, and to share the immense burden of pain that the narratives studied here open up. Finally, the text is written in an easy style, both accessible and reader-friendly, and strikingly free of the usual academic jargons that tend to bedevil similar studies. It is a book for all of us that are interested in the human subjectivities that accompany mass trauma, while equally relevant for undergraduates, graduates, and senior faculty alike.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Leaning on the Shoulder of Another

I grew up in Rhodesia, during the Bush War. My father's cousin and his wife were among the first ambush victims. At the time I was seven. I did not understand about colonialism, liberation wars, or the people's *Chimurenga*,[1] neither the first one nor the second. I only saw the grief on my father's face when he told me of the death of his beloved cousin.

I would eventually come to see that history and war are more complex than I had thought. In the end, it was literature that helped open my eyes. This has become increasingly important to me: how and what can literature teach us about different people's perspectives, experiences, and pain? How did reading books such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* and NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* make me revise what I thought of a period, a people, and a place?

Years later, when I was already living in South Africa, a colleague pushed a slim volume into my hands and wistfully remarked how lucky I was to be able to read French. She had done me an enormous favor; it was Véronique Tadjo's account of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and it started me off on a journey that I am still on. That journey has led to this book, in which I am reflecting, not about literature and the Zimbabwean Liberation War, but about literature and the genocide in Rwanda.

I subsequently discovered that Tadjo's book was one of several texts by authors, from across the continent, who had set off on their particular journeys to Rwanda, bravely attempting to see in their own ways what literature could do in the face of the collective and unimaginable trauma

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that we call genocide. Genocide is about dehumanization. Literature can be about rehumanization.

At a conference in 2014, I had the privilege of meeting Berthe Kayitesi.[2] She evoked the delicate relationship between survivors and those who listen to their stories, foregrounding the value of 'learning *with* survivors' as opposed to 'learning *from* them'. She spoke of the 'reconstruction' of a survivor, made possible by 'the presence of the other who is not a survivor', another who has what she qualified as a 'safe mind'.[3] Similarly, in his testimony Révérien Rurangwa doubts whether it would ever be possible to pick oneself up again without accepting the outstretched hand of a friend and leaning on the shoulder of another (2006: 95).[4] This focus on mutual responsibility is reminiscent of a comment made by Nocky Djedanoum on sharing the burden of mourning: '[P]erhaps it comes to us naturally, this modesty that requires of us to lean on the shoulder of another, one who reaches out a hand and wipes away our tears to ease our pain?' (2000: 11; my translation).[5] The crucial presence of another who listens appropriately to trauma has been widely debated and theorized[6] and the comments made by Kayitesi, Rurangwa, and Djedanoum indeed echo the assertion that the activity of witnessing necessitates 'the intimate and total presence of an other—in the position of one who hears' (Felman and Laub 1992: 70–1).

Genocide is not only a form of extreme trauma that requires of us to listen to and narrate its stories; it is also mass trauma and the sheer scale of it demands a shared effort of representation. It asks that we invite as many voices as possible to participate in the dialogue, including those of the people who experienced it (victim, perpetrator, and bystander) and those of the people who listen to and read these stories.

Many researchers[7] emphasize the importance of creating multivocal stories in order to narrate collective trauma affecting whole communities. They accentuate the importance of establishing a shared memory and re-examining and reinterpreting our histories together. Such a negotiation may provide us with ways to create space for the 'contesting representations cobbled together from the often fragmented and clashing memories of survivors, perpetrators, witnesses and bystanders' (Hinton and O'Neill 2009: 1). It could lead to a less 'monolithic' and more 'complex and differentiated' view of the society as well as a 'plurality' of perspectives on the origins and consequences of the genocide (Staub 2006: 877). This daunting process can hardly be envisaged without the mediating role of both art and the 'intellectual witness' (Hartman 1998: 37–40).[8]

At times, traumatized communities are not yet ready to tell their own stories, and others step up to help shoulder this heavy burden. The practice of speaking for another undoubtedly poses its own set of potential dilemmas including the danger of appropriating another's story (James Dawes 2009: 396). When speaking on behalf of another, an inclusive approach where everyone's account within the community is taken into account is essential because 'no embodied speaker can produce more than a partial account' (Alcoff 1991: 20). Such shared encounters may provide ways of complicating existing dominant and univocal narratives, allowing communities to problematize categorizations and harmful collective associations.

Reflecting on the value of engaging in a participatory mode in dealing with trauma that affects whole communities leads me to the notion of '*récit dialogué*',[9] a term which refers to the creation of a shared narrative which is in fact woven together from parts of different individual stories (Gallimore 2009: 15–22). In this book, I set out to explore ways in which narratives of genocide perform such a *récit dialogué*, thus transforming the undertaking into a collective effort. I consider the written memory of this event and its heritage by accentuating the plurality of narrative voices and modes of storytelling that have emerged, informed by the premise that trauma on such a large scale requires not only multivocal representation but also multiple forms of listening. Such an approach seems to be necessary for restoration in a context where extensive trauma has taken place.

When I first became interested in reading genocide accounts, I assumed that it would be essential to place the texts in well-defined categories—testimonies versus fictional texts, secondary witness versus eyewitness accounts, and direct victims versus 'absent'[10] or 'intellectual' witnesses—forgetting, however, that it was just such categorization, binaries, and absolutes that had been so detrimental in the history of the Rwandan people. Certainly, in the aftermath of genocide, many of these boundaries are blurred and it seems to be more meaningful to situate these texts on a fluid continuum (Kerstens 2006). Berthe Kayitesi had already taught me, in her soft-spoken manner, that when dealing with genocide stories, one should never hierarchize people's suffering, but rather provide a space to listen to them all.[11] The question I discovered was not so much who has the right to tell the story, although this is an interesting question, but how it can be told so that it invites dialogue, creates a multivoiced narrative, allows us to listen to the trauma of genocide, and involves the reader.[12]

Such a mode of joint, inclusive narrative becomes particularly interesting when explored through the lens of the African philosophical system of *ubuntu*; this is therefore a pivotal pillar of my reading of the genocide stories dealt with in this book. In my discussion of these texts, I place strong emphasis on the Afropolitan cultural frame in which they were conceived and written. Instead of using European tropes, the focus is on an African conflict written about by writers from African origin, enabling a more situated study in which it becomes possible to draw out the ideas of *ubuntu*, oral testimonies, local healing, the presence of the invisible, and mourning traditions. However, although I refer to realities, culture, real places, and people, this book lays no claim to being an anthropological study.[13] Instead, it is about discovering how literature opens our eyes and minds to what is not at first obvious, material and visible. I look at how literature, as presented through an Afropolitan frame, contributes to a deeper understanding of the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. Throughout, my interest remains in the role of literature and its ability to help share in the burden of testimony. Literature can urge us to move beyond the parochial in order to situate the experience of genocide within the universal.

One of the fundamental moments in the ongoing process of representing the genocide was the landmark literary project '*Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire*' (generally translated as 'Rwanda: Writing by Duty of Memory'), which included Véronique Tadjo's book that had so moved me. Initiated in 1998 by a group of largely outsider, intellectual, or absent witnesses, the project undertook to write the stories[14] of and about those who had experienced the trauma first-hand. This book focuses on this project and, although each contribution articulates it in a unique way, the project explores how writing, which is also a metaphor for traveling, may lead to different ways of listening and involving the reader. I read about the genocide of the Tutsi in these written narratives before ever setting foot in the country. And yet, years later, they would shape the way in which I listened to testimonies and the questions I asked myself about the country. Now that I have listened to many other stories, they have in turn started to shape the way I read these literary configurations. It is this constant interaction between life stories, history, and literature that I find so inspiring.

This book endeavors to accentuate the contribution of this literary initiative to the existing body of literature by focusing, firstly, on its polyphonic, dialogical nature and, secondly, on the African cultural perspective

that it provides.[15] It looks at each of the nine texts that are commonly viewed as part of the project.[16] One of the challenges of analyzing a project such as this one in its entirety is indeed the diversity of genres and forms that it offers: from highly poetic and imaginative works of fiction to others that more closely resemble argumentative essays or eyewitness testimonies. These different genres have their own internal structures and logic, making it difficult to know which criteria to apply when evaluating or appreciating the texts produced for the project. One way of doing so could be to consider the collective objectives associated with the project, such as creating public awareness, or attempting to 'resurrect' the victims in imaginative and respectful ways, or else, sharing the pain and the process of mourning, exorcising the horror of genocide through writing, contributing to the preservation of communal memory, and so forth.

Of course, it remains a delicate exercise comparing the literary, and at times fictionalized, representations of experienced and renowned writers such as Véronique Tadjo and Boubacar Boris Diop, who had not personally experienced the genocide, to the work of a genocide survivor such as Kayimahe, who was not a writer by profession and had not published much before engaging in the project. However, my point in including all the works produced for the project in this comparative analysis is not to measure their worth or impact in the literary world, but rather to remain true to the principle that representing genocide should be a multivocal, multilayered enterprise and to acknowledge that works such as these contribute immensely to the heterogeneous nature of the project.

In Chap. 2, I set the scene for the ways in which I read the nine texts. Here, I reflect on the interrelated notions of community trauma, listening and intellectual witnessing, and how the project is situated in terms of these concepts. As many of these tenets are framed within Western definitions of trauma esthetics, I move on to speak to the African frameworks and lenses that constitute a strong presence in the project, and which I believe have been underemphasized thus far in studies on the project.

Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 analyze each of the texts from the perspectives outlined in Chap. 2. In Chap. 3, through my reading of Koulsy Lamko and Véronique Tadjo's texts, I dwell on the Afropolitan frame in which the writers (wittingly, unwittingly, or perhaps instinctively) clothed their stories, and I introduce the trope of transformative travel. Chapter 4 explores the literary representation of some of the societal conditions which led to the genocide: fear of the Other, dehumanization, propaganda, and the culture of submission to authority, as depicted in Abdourahman Waberi's

and Boubacar Boris Diop's texts. In Chap. 5, I look at the consequences and aftermath of genocide, through the portrayal, proposed by Monique Ilboudo and Tierno Monénembo, of the worlds of those living dead who inhabit post-genocide Rwanda. Chapter 6 is a reflection on the heterogeneous subject and authorial positions, as well as on the ubiquitous traces of exile and diasporic living which plague the African continent, as embodied in the work of Nocky Djedanoum, Vénuste Kayimahe, and Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa.

Although I have chosen, in each chapter, a specific overarching frame to discuss the texts, these frames are often present in other texts from the project. Therefore, where relevant or useful, I do include selected examples from other texts. In my conclusion, I narrow my focus to a number of themes that surface strongly throughout the project; here I no longer work with isolated texts, but read the project as a whole.

I situate my approach to this project within the broader framework of attempts to decolonize trauma theory and hope that it demonstrates what Irene Visser calls an 'openness to non-Western belief systems and their rituals and ceremonies in the engagement with trauma' and an engagement with 'culturally specific spiritual and religious perspectives' (2015: 250, 259). Informed by Jeffrey C. Alexander's approach to collective trauma, Visser notes that literature plays an important role in the process of verbalizing and giving 'narrative shape and meaning' to the harmful consequences of colonialism which have impacted negatively on the collective identity of certain societies (ibid.: 258).

In that sense, my reading of the project engages with the increasing academic interest in the troubling relationship between Euro-American conceptualized trauma theory and literature on violence in postcolonial contexts. The origins of the mass trauma which is the subject of this project are indeed 'historical and political', making it a useful example to explore the concerns and aims of the current drive to decolonize trauma theory (ibid.: 251). As Visser points out (drawing from Michael Rothberg's work), the Western model with its focus on single traumatic events that are already in the past does not 'account for the sustained and long processes of the trauma of colonialism' which is often collective rather than individual and chronic rather than of a passing nature (ibid.: 252). This is why this approach has effectively been 'discarded' in terms of current postcolonial scholarship, which favors a focus on historical, societal, and 'cultural specificity' and engages with 'concrete' historical facts (ibid.: 253–4). It would be meaningful then to see how the project deals creatively with issues of collective trauma, ongoing trauma, cultural forms of mourning,

the 'complexity of the entanglement of complicity, agency and guilt' (ibid.: 258) in the colonial process, as well as the aftermath of trauma; do they envisage possibilities of healing, 'renewed social inclusion', 'social activism, recuperation and psychic resilience' in their texts, or does the focus remain on the 'crippling' effects of trauma such as victimization, inaction, and weakness? (ibid.: 254, 263).

This project has been analyzed by various critics, to whom I refer throughout. They have, for the most part, dedicated their comments to a smaller selection of writers from the project. Few have discussed the project in its entirety or focused on what the project offers when read as a multivocal project, written within an Afropolitan frame. This entry point is, I believe, the crux of my contribution to the existing debate.

Notes

1. A Shona word which refers to the armed uprising against the colonialists in Zimbabwe.
2. Dr. Kayitesi was a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda, where, at the age of 16, she lost both her parents. In 2009, she published her testimony, *Demain ma vie—enfants chefs de famille dans le Rwanda d'après*. She died of a brain hemorrhage at age 37 on 23 June 2015.
3. From a conference paper read by Berthe Kayitesi, entitled 'Testimonies, Trauma and Resilience: Learning and Coping with Survivors from the Genocide against the Tutsi of Rwanda', at the conference Rwanda 20 Years After: Memory, Justice and Recovery in the Shadow of Genocide, held 28–30 March 2014, at Weber State University, Utah.
4. « Peut-on se relever seul, sans saisir la main tendue, s'appuyer sur une épaule amie ? Je ne le crois pas » (Rurangwa 2006: 95).
5. « Peut-être que c'est dans le naturel de l'homme, cette pudeur qui veut que l'on s'appuie sur les épaules de l'autre, que l'autre nous donne la main et nous essuie les larmes pour nous soulager de notre blessure ? » (Djedanoum 2000: 11).
6. Consult, for example, Bal et al. (1999: 10), Dauge-Roth (2009: 168), Felman and Laub (1992: 71), LaCapra (2001: 98), Laub (1995: 73), and Semprun (1996: 26).
7. Consult, for example, Alcoff (1991: 20), Dauge-Roth (2010: 172), Gallimore (2009: 15–22), Hinton and O'Neill (2009: 1), and Staub (2006: 880–7).
8. Geoffrey Hartman uses the term 'intellectual witness' to refer to those who did not experience an event (such as the Shoah) first-hand, but who feel compelled to bear witness to it. The function of the intellectual is, then, to provide a 'witness for the witness', to 'actively receive words that reflect the

darkness of the event' (Hartman 1998: 37, 41). According to Hartman, this notion includes both witnesses who have contact with eyewitnesses, or what he calls the 'first generation', and those who see the Shoah not as merely a past event but as a 'contemporary issue requiring an intensity of representation close to eyewitness report'(1998: 38).

9. A type of narrative or account which is created through dialogue and sharing.
10. I borrow this term from Catherine Coquio, quoted in Viviane Azarian (2011).
11. Refer to notes 2 and 3.
12. For more on the reader's involvement, consult Kenneth Harrow (2005: 40).
13. In a collaborative project on the meaning of genocide memorials, which led us as a research team to visit all the districts and listen to testimonies, I found that many of the cultural and historical elements of Rwanda and the genocide that I had encountered by reading literary texts were confirmed by the stories we heard. These realities therefore do inform my analysis of the texts, but my focus is on how stories are told rather than on the social and historical content of the stories.
14. I use the term 'story' in a very broad sense, referring mostly to the act of narrating an event, in the sense ascribed to it by Paul Ricœur (1983: 116) in his discussion of 'mise en intrigue' through the process of mimesis I (prefiguration), mimesis II (configuration), and mimesis III (refiguration). I intend no connotation regarding the truthfulness or fictional value of the accounts in question to be derived from the term 'story'.
15. Small sections of this book were originally published in other sources—see De Beer (2015, 2016a, b, 2019) and De Beer and Snyman (2015)—and have been edited and reworked here within the framework of this text with the kind consent of the relevant journals/publishers.
16. The following texts were published as part of this endeavor:

    Murambi: le livre des ossements (2000) by Boubacar Boris Diop from Senegal;

    L'aîné des orphelins (2000) by the Guinean writer Tierno Monénembo;

    *Murekatet*e (2000) by Monique Ilboudo from Burkina Faso;

    La phalène des collines (2002) by Koulsy Lamko from Chad;

    L'ombre d'Imana: voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda (2000) by Véronique Tadjo from Côte d'Ivoire;

    Moisson de crânes: textes pour le Rwanda (2000) by Abdourahman A. Waberi from Djibouti;

    Nyamirambo! (2000), a poetry anthology by Nocky Djedanoum from Chad;

    Le génocide des Tutsi expliqué à un étranger (2000), an essay by exiled Rwandan Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa; and

    France-Rwanda: Les coulisses du génocide, témoignage d'un rescapé (2001), a testimony by genocide survivor Vénuste Kayimahe.

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CHAPTER 2

Trauma and Storytelling in Africa

A Listening-Writing Project

The origin of the project entitled '*Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire*' (hereafter referred to as 'the project') can be traced back to a writer's residency initiated in 1996 during Fest'Africa[1] by the Chadian author Nocky Djedanoum and Maïmouna Coulibaly from Côte d'Ivoire, both from journalistic backgrounds. Djedanoum explains that after an initial shocked reaction to the images of genocide that confronted him on the television screen, he felt compelled to do something concrete (in Mongo-Mboussa 2000).[2]

Djedanoum expressed surprise that the Westerners who came to write about the genocide seemed to have no need to ask permission from the Rwandan authorities, whereas he, an African writer, was initially treated with distrust (ibid.).[3] It was only in July 1998 that Djedanoum's group, consisting of African writers, film makers, and a sculptor,[4] left for Kigali. They spent several months in Rwanda, visiting genocide sites, prisons, and orphanages and meeting survivors, perpetrators, returnees from exile, foreigners, and other inhabitants of post-genocide Rwanda. Not all of the writers involved in the project were able to participate in the first journey and several returned later for further visits. The project extended over the following two years and resulted in, among other things, the publication of the texts that are analyzed in this book.

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A closer look at this commemorative initiative reveals that the majority of the participants were not genocide survivors or eyewitnesses. Seven of the texts were published by non-Rwandan authors and were based on the stories of survivors or adaptations thereof. These include four novels, two travel accounts, and a poetry anthology by authors from African countries as diverse as Djibouti, Chad, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, and Burkina Faso.

These writers saw themselves as precursors of those who would one day find their own voices to narrate the genocide. The Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop remarked that those who had seen their own mothers raped and their loved ones killed would eventually tell the story in depth, but that this would take time, if not generations, because novels are crafted with old memories, rather than with the 'immediate, raw reality' (Diop 2006).[5]

Certainly, at the time the project was initiated, few Rwandans appeared to have obtained the necessary distance from the genocide in order to be able to write literary or even testimonial texts about it (Kopf 2012: 67). Only a handful of personal testimonies, not to mention fictional representations, of the genocide had been published and what had been written mostly came from outside the continent. This situation has since changed, but at the end of the 1990s, the authors participating in the project were writing into a 'void' of representations of the genocide (ibid.). Indeed, only two of the project participants were Rwandan: one of them was a survivor who published a testimony and the other a Tutsi who lived in exile from a very early age and who wrote an essay undertaking to 'explain' the genocide to a stranger.

Fest'Africa established an office in Kigali, which continued the activities initiated by this group of intellectuals (Djedanoum, in Achariant 2002: 4). The endeavor eventually comprised various stages, and efforts were made to bring the texts and testimonies back to the people of Rwanda. In 2000, in an attempt to include Rwandans who could not read the texts, some of them were adapted for the theater and staged with the participation of actors and students from the University of Butare.[6] This event attracted the interest of other authors, artists, and researchers, both from the continent and elsewhere, and Djedanoum considered it to be the crowning moment of the project (ibid.). Although other texts, authors, and artists became associated with the project at different stages, my analysis is limited to the nine texts published initially.[7]

The project is exceptional in a number of ways, not only because of its interactive, collaborative nature, but also due to the coming together of a group of transnational African authors[8] to write on an event that took place on African soil, providing us with a seminal example of what Stef Craps would call the trauma esthetics that is relevant to a 'minority' trauma (2014: 46). Diop noted that, in contrast to their European and American counterparts, African intellectuals had initially reacted mostly with awkward silences or indifference (2005: 83).[9] This project surely added texture and nuances to the representation of the genocide, which had, until then, been largely dominated by Western and Eurocentric perspectives.

The period of the genocide in Rwanda and its aftermath were eventful times for the continent and its democracies in terms of Human Rights; some uplifting, other depressing. South Africa was joyfully celebrating its first democratic election (27 April 1994) and the end of the apartheid regime. In 1996, South Africa launched its Human Rights Commission. In Nigeria, however, the prominent activist and author Ken Saro-Wiwa was sentenced to death together with eight others, and executed by hanging in 1995, despite international protestation against the politically motivated trials. Much has been written about how the international community failed Rwanda and chose to focus on the events unfolding in South Africa at the time.

One of the challenges faced by the group of writers was keeping a suitable intellectual distance while at the same time providing appropriate listening: 'For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears. Testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude' (Felman and Laub 1992: 70–1). This role required of them to 'actively receive' the words of those who did experience the genocide (Hartman 1998: 48): 'We had to learn to listen to irreparably broken human beings recounting our own novels to us before we could write down even the first word' (Diop 2003: 122). Their aim was to 'ponder, listen, observe, try to understand and reflect together' and hope that the Rwandans themselves would, in time, be able to take on the arduous task of narrating the genocide (Djedanoum 1999; my translation).[10]

The authors seemed acutely aware of the interactive, dialogical nature of witnessing. Abdourahman Waberi writes about searching for a form of poetry to express the pain in such a way that it could somehow be not universal, but at least 'shared' and 'shareable' (in Brezault 2000).[11] One can never truly share the experiences of others, nor speak of their pain; one

can only listen to them silently and with modest humility: 'listen to them at length, brush against them lightly, caress them with awkward words and silences' (Waberi 2004: 15; my translation).[12]

Koulsy Lamko likens his role as a writer to that of a ferryman moving between two shores, a medium through whom words can pass and who hopes to transform his own life as well as that of others (in Kalisa 2005: 263).[13] The authors' intent was clearly not to silence or usurp the voice of the other, but rather to create spaces for encounters and plurality as well as open the way for Rwandans to start telling their own stories. The intention was *not* to provide a conclusive text on the genocide, but to be a type of humble listener and, at best, a precursor or interim measure until the Rwandans themselves could write their stories; this is to my mind precisely what defines the historic and literary value of the project.

An 'African Response'

This section deals with the African roots of the project participants. I also consider the communitarian notion of *ubuntu*,[14] with its focus on solidarity, as well as the capacity of the oral tradition to build bridges and share stories.

I have chosen this paradigm for various reasons. Firstly, the participants of the project all hail from the African continent and were therefore in a position to narrate the genocide in ways which take into account the cultural values of the continent they were writing about. Secondly, if the writers truly wanted to act as appropriate listeners[15] and display a sense of solidarity, it would make sense to write texts that engaged with the cultural and traditional framework of the witnesses they were listening to and whose stories they were telling.

Such a reading seems to cohere with the spirit of the project as it was originally conceived; it is commonly accepted that this joint effort by a transnational group of African authors was 'an unprecedented phenomenon' in African literature and that the 'old idea of Pan-Africanism, of an overarching African identity' was an important motivation for the participating writers (Cazenave and Célérier 2011: 84, 86). Furthermore, this project has been read from a variety of points of view; my intention is to add a fresh perspective by looking at their contribution to the existing body of knowledge on the genocide through this particular lens.

Never before in history had a group of African writers gathered, in the face of traumatic events which had taken place in an African country, to

produce literary works which would be at the same time 'individual' *and* 'collective' (Djedanoum 1999).[16] It would seem that the collaborative nature of the project, in spite of the restrictions it may have introduced, offered a potentially more effective platform to respond to the duty of memory and reflected the communal scale of the trauma.[17] Through such an endeavor, it became possible to express not only a personal response to the genocide but also a polyphonic and mutual one; the writers were able to respond both as individuals and as a voice from the African continent.

Thus was conceived an attempt to redress the imbalance between the large-scale reporting by Western media and the near-silence and seeming indifference on the part of African intellectuals, by adding an 'African response' to the genocide (Small 2007: 85). This silence could easily (and erroneously) be interpreted as consensus with the Afro-pessimistic version of events offered by Western media, colored by a somber image of the 'dark' continent, associated with 'interethnic hatred' and 'savagery' (Small 2005: 122–3; my translation). The project was also an attempt to resist this prevailing sense of despair directed at the African continent (ibid.: 123–5).

One can ask whose memory is being represented here and, if it is a collective memory, whether we are dealing with Rwandan or African or even world memory (Kopf 2012: 67, 68). In this regard, the participants faced a dilemma: were they to write as individuals or as 'African citizens' (Hitchcott 2009: 153)? This is possibly why Nicki Hitchcott describes them as 'global African citizens', thus underlining the inherent tensions of such a collective identity—being at the same time African and world citizens (ibid.: 152–3).

Furthermore, the composition of the group was unusual: the authors hailed from various geographical locations but still had the 'colonial experience' in common (ibid.). Hitchcott has suggested that this composition is a reflection of the '*identité africaine*' in its diversity and plurality, while at the same time bringing together writers who had much in common (ibid.). Abdourahman Waberi claims that their initiative offered a way of 'inscribing' an African tragedy 'into the field of reflection and literature written by Africans themselves' (in Hirchi 2006: 601; my translation).[18] Their unique mandate, then, was to write the stories of their own continent in their capacity as African individuals against a backdrop of certain shared historical experiences.

Not only can such literature be rehumanizing, as I suggest in my introduction; it seems that it can also be a pre-emptive force which sensitizes us

to conditions in our society that potentially lead to genocide (Montesano 2015: 88). Patrice Nganang (2007) argues that, after the genocide, literary testimony in Africa, which was traditionally written within a tradition of victimhood, should be replaced by a new type of writing: one which would prevent future tragedies on the continent.[19]

Afropolitan Authors

A quick glance at the body of authors that constituted the project reveals that it would be a misconception to classify them exclusively as 'African' writers. They have all lived and worked outside the continent and their approaches to writing have naturally been influenced not only by the cultures and paradigms of their countries of birth, but also by those of the other countries and continents they have inhabited. Indeed, Waberi would argue that it is this 'interstitial space' that they occupy that enriches their creative responses to a task such as writing about the genocide, in a way that takes into account the Rwandan context and paradigm within the larger context of the continent. Waberi submits that many contemporary African authors currently living outside the continent

> test their creative machinery in an interstitial space that is always haunted by their experiences in, and on-going relationships with, Africa. It is a space between here and elsewhere, the intimate and the colossal, yesterday and today; a space, finally, that is both foreclosed and open, once improbable, familiar, and strange. This space is in the process of becoming the main scene, if not the *common place* of their enquiry. (2011: 105)

Certainly, writers from the Global South are less and less seen as representatives of the continent and increasingly as 'individual and authentic voices', open toward the rest of the world (De Meyer 2015: 191; my translation). Thus, focusing exclusively on the 'African' elements present in the work of the writers involved in the project would be a gross oversimplification of what they contribute in terms of representation of the genocide. Searching for a type of 'African frame' which guides and underpins the texts might potentially confine one's reading to an essentialist idea of 'Africanness' based on what Waberi has called 'binary oppositions':

> In order to understand the turbulence of globalization it is necessary to discard the following binary oppositions: rootedness vs. cosmopolitanism, relativism vs. africanity. The infinite and unpredictable number of possible relations between cultures, places, and temporalities leads us to question the diverse without denying the contours of one's own enclosure, and many African writers sift these enigmas through the sieves of their texts. (2011: 105)

What I hope to do, instead, is to take into account the 'contours' which make up the 'enclosure' of an author growing up with African traditions, while acknowledging that contact with other cultures provides him or her with ways of engaging creatively with, or even problematizing, African culture.

Waberi asserts that 'Francophone African writers, whether or not they work outside of their native countries, remain, as we have seen, ready to make theirs the exploratory power of writing' (ibid.: 110). This interstitial and exploratory space in which African roots dialogue with both its own traditions and other worldviews is inhabited by the majority of the project authors, as is the case with many modern diasporic African writers.[20] The literary contribution of these authors therefore can be better understood within the pluralistic, dynamic, globally connected frame of Afropolitanism.[21]

Ubuntu *and the Oral Tradition*

A critical point of reference for traditional African values is the notion of *ubuntu*, which is present in multiple contexts and forms on the continent and of which I provide only a brief introduction, emphasizing aspects which will be helpful for my analysis.[22]

This worldview is widely accepted as a 'trademark' of African cultures (Gyekye, in Krog 2008: 360) and is found in many African ontologies and in a number African languages, albeit it under a different name (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25). This concept has taken on many forms in discourses on African philosophy and has at times been called 'African humanism' (Gaylard 2004: 267), 'Afro-communitarianism' (Metz and Gaie 2010: 273), or 'interconnectedness-towards-wholeness' (Krog 2008: 355). A Rwandan equivalent of *ubuntu* is the term *ubumuntu*, which is generally accepted as meaning to be human(e), empathetic, and caring. In post-genocide Rwanda, this term has popularly become associated with

the notion of peacebuilding and reconciliation facilitated through dialogues called the 'Ubumuntu Conversations' (Musundi 2018).

A variety of sources[23] are available that discuss the meaning of *ubuntu*; in short, it is an indigenous African or sub-Saharan ethical perspective, which 'reflects the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs, beliefs, value systems and the extended family structures' (Kamwangamalu 1999: 26). Scholars of *ubuntu* generally agree that this sense of community represents an alternative voice to individualist-orientated Western discourses, as it evaluates a person's actions in terms of their impact on the harmony and communal relationships in a society (Metz and Gaie 2010: 273).

Some of the fundamental values associated with this notion are 'respect for any human being, for human dignity and for human life, collective sharedness, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, communalism' (Kamwangamalu 1999: 26). It plays an important role in community building, as it is associated with the ability to uphold mutual reciprocity, dignity, peace, and harmony; to connect with another in a humane way; and to show compassion, empathy, and solidarity (Gyekye, in Krog 2008: 360; Nussbaum 2003: 21). The South African researcher Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela defines the essence of *ubuntu* as 'that capacity to connect with another human being, to be touched, to be moved by another human being' (in Gade 2012: 489). *Ubuntu* values consensus, a respect for the beliefs of others, communal responsibility toward the ecosystem, co-existence, networks of relationships, brotherhood, kinship, and inclusivity (Botha 2005: 91–2). With its focus on harmony and community, this notion thus has a significant role to play in post-violence contexts, where reconciliation, rehumanization, and restoration are deeply necessary.

Although *ubuntu* is often associated with South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC),[24] my use of this term follows Thaddeus Metz's 'normative-theoretical' description which does not limit it to the borders of South Africa or to the way indigenous southern African societies understood it in the past, but includes wider contemporary understandings of this notion (2011: 534–5). In spite of the cultural diversity of the African continent, there are threads of commonality in terms of the values, traditions, and practices present in various African societies, of which the notion of *ubuntu* is an example (Kamwangamalu 1999: 26).

Although different regions have their own taboos, gods, and customs, there are indeed general elements that exist in African tradition, such as

the presence of the sacred in everything, the relationship between the visible and the invisible realms and the living and the dead, and a strong sense of community (Hampaté Bâ 1996: 12). One can of course easily be accused of essentialism and homogenization when attempting to ascribe certain values to 'African' culture and tradition; however, there are grounds for 'qualify[ing] a theory as "African" as opposed to Western' (Metz 2007: 333). Furthermore, these recurring elements are present 'not only in the oral traditions of indigenous African societies, but also in the writings of present-day African literati' (ibid.), a view that has directed my analysis of the project. Metz nonetheless prefers to call these elements 'tendencies' and 'intuitions' rather than 'essences' (ibid.).

The transmission of this value system is invariably linked to the oral tradition. Its values are thus not intrinsic, but rather passed on 'by means of oral genres such as fables, proverbs, myths, riddles, and story-telling' (Kamwangamalu 1999: 27). *Ubuntu*, or African humanism, is 'a way of life' which Es'kia Mphahlele claims is 'embedded in our proverbs and aphorisms and oral poetry, and in the way our elders spoke to us' (in Gaylard 2004: 273).

A logical place, then, to start looking at traditional and communal practices in terms of storytelling within the African context would be the oral tradition,[25] a tradition with which the authors from the project are intimately acquainted. Nevertheless, a writer such as Tierno Monénembo, rather than speak of 'oral tradition' or 'African culture' when referring to African literature, labels which suggest a type of rigidity and stagnation, prefers the notion of '*fonds culturel africain*', a cultural collection or stock which acts as a source of inspiration, but is characterized by renewal and invention (Monénembo 2007: 177).

Monénembo poetically admits that he 'entered into the world through the doorway of the tale',[26] that his 'Ariadne's thread' is that of the spoken word, that his 'cradle' was the 'kingdom of words' and that his cultural foundation was that of the grandmother, the sage, and the griot (Monénembo 2007: 174; my translation). For this author, these three elements of his heritage are embodied in three oral forms: the tale (which he characterizes as being supple, exploratory, and open-ended), the proverb (which in contrast is concise ['*lapidaire*'], precise, peremptory, and prescriptive), and finally the griot, that bearer and guardian of the spoken word, who is also a creator, a type of 'writer without a quill' (ibid.: 175, 176).