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# Third-Party Testimony and Uses of Fiction: Collecting Voices of the Rwandan Genocide

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Certain contexts seem to impose limits on the uses of fiction almost naturally. It is relatively common to consider that the testimony of a survivor of a mass crime, when brought over to the side of fiction by a third party, entails a form of hijacking, or even an ethically questionable appropriation. Recently, the fiction *Revoir Paris*, based on the attack of the Bataclan in Paris, has shown how close proximity to the event can inform fiction (Winocour, 2022; see Pireyre, 2022). The debate on fictionalization was not born yesterday, but it is particularly acute when it touches on mass crimes or attacks. The case of survivors' accounts of this specific kind of violence provides considerable information about the limits of fiction, at least ethical limits. The stakes of such cases are thus significantly distinct from the discussions on writing from real events or *faits divers* (miscellaneous news stories). In the case of mass violence linked to a colonial past, for example, the debate on appropriation in fiction is doubled by ethical considerations relating to the reconduction of structural violence. In the case of genocide, which will concern us in this article, the desire to restore dignity to the survivors and the disappeared by telling their stories often comes into conflict with a concern for epistemic equality by virtue of which *speaking for* survivors tends to constitute a form of violence, even when it happens through fiction. In the face of the atrocity, the first urge is generally transmission; that is, to transmit what happened so History does not repeat itself (see Diner, 2009; Cesarini and Sundquist, 2011; Johusck, 2012). And fiction, when written by a third-party, appears in this specific context as a danger of distortion.<sup>1</sup>

In many instances, the attesting function of testimony aims to establish a fact and transmit an experience (Detue and Lacoste, 2016). This aim rules out the possibility of transposing an experience into fiction, because fiction diminishes the attesting function of testimony. As we will see, however, in certain cases fiction represents a solution for a bystander, who is eager to transmit by delegation. Far from perpetuating violence by subtracting from the testimony its function of attestation, fiction allows the one who did not live through an experience of mass violence to approach it without seizing it or appropriating it. How can one respectfully report on

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<sup>1</sup> On Rwanda and fictional distortions or caricatural treatment of facts in movies, see Destors, 2014; Dauge-Roth, 2010. For the same question in literature, see Lacoste, 2009; Hitchcott, 2015.

the suffering of others while maintaining the freedom of judgment necessary for the development of a discourse on social facts? Or, knowing that identification with the victims and perpetrators is impossible, how can the experience of extreme violence be transmitted without repeating the symbolic violence that is specific to structural domination? These questions are at the heart of historical and sociological work on testimony and bring a third question about fiction, regarding literature from an ethical point of view: does fiction provide a certain amount of protection to witnesses who expose themselves by addressing their testimony? Or does fiction, on the contrary, tend to convey fantasies of violent events? I will suggest ways to raise these questions and outline possible ways of responding to them.

The aim of this article is to unfold this debate through two literary works rooted in the genocide of the Tutsis of Rwanda. The Rwandan writer Yolande Mukagasana, a survivor of the genocide and activist, rejected fiction in one of her first works, a testimony written with the French writer Patrick May. Yolande Mukagasana has been a spokesperson for survivors and an active interlocutor with perpetrators of the genocide. Trained as a nurse, she has taken part since 1994 in numerous projects, telling her story on theatrical stages and in humanitarian or political assemblies. She has published two testimonies recounting the conditions of her survival and the death of her relatives, *Not My Time to Die* (*La mort ne veut pas de moi*, 1997) and *Don't be Afraid to Know* (*N'aie pas peur de savoir*, 1999). In her work, documentary literature and the refusal of fiction respond to the impossibility of speaking on behalf of the disappeared. For his part, Boubacar Boris Diop's novel, *Murambi, The Book of Bones* ([2000] 2020) is a fiction based on a residence of the author in Kigali. Throughout his novel, Diop tends to narrate experiences of survivors he has met in Rwanda. But fiction here is presented as an ethical precaution against appropriation and distortion that documentary writing, according to Diop, would not have been able to avoid.

## **Bearing Witness to the Rwandan Genocide: The Impossibility of Fiction**

The genocidal context is often thought of as a paradigmatic case of the collapse of authority into violence and force (Coquio, 2015). Testimonial literature and collections of voices redraw the possibility of a shared authorship and leave us a responsibility, one that the witness cannot take on, which is to prove and establish justice: these literary forms engage in a reflection on the authority of witnesses and of the third party who mediates their word. As Kali Tal has previously expressed it in her work *Worlds of Hurt*,

Bearing witness is an aggressive act. It is born out of a refusal to bow outside pressure to revise or to repress experience, a decision to embrace conflict rather than conformity, to endure a lifetime of anger and pain rather than to submit to the seductive pull revision and repression. Its goal change. The battle over the meaning of a traumatic experience is fought in the arena of political discourse, popular culture, and scholarly debate. The outcome of this battle shapes the rhetoric of the dominant culture and influences future political action. (Tal, 1996, p. 7)

One can draw out from this comment a question regarding fiction and delegation: when combined (that is, when a third-party writes a fiction about a vivid experience of violence), are fiction and delegation inherently forms of “revision” or “repression”? In the particular context of the Rwandan genocide, does a fiction necessarily bend to the pressure of a dominant culture? Studies on the transposition of genocide experiences into fiction have shown its limits and have identified, in some cases, a tendency to psychologize the political stakes of colonial domination. As these studies show, testimony is closely linked to intimate traumatic experience and presupposes a positioning of the subject who says “I” (Dauge-Roth, 2009). This positioning is anchored in a faith in the possibility of transmitting a vivid experience, even if the project of transmission itself is marked and weakened by the experience of extreme violence.

Between 1994 and 2000, the voices of survivors were still highly marginalized (see Dumas et al., 2015). Before 2000, only Yolande Mukagasana had published two testimonies in France and Belgium that have become canonical. This survivor, now living in Brussels, co-wrote the play *Rwanda 94* (directed by Jacques Delcuvellerie and created by the Belgium collective *Groupov*).<sup>2</sup> Following these testimonies, in 2001, Yolande Mukagasana compiled the testimonies of survivors and killers in a volume entitled *Wounds of Silence (Les Blessures du silence)*, published by Actes Sud.

Mukagasana's testimony was first performed on stage during a performance of the play *Rwanda 94*. A preliminary version of this play was presented at the Festival d'Avignon in 1999. Since then, it has been staged in the European part of the francophone world and in Canada until 2004, when it was staged in Rwanda on the tenth anniversary of the genocide. In terms of form, *Rwanda 94* is a mix of genres combining fragments of testimonies (delivered by true survivors on stage), soundtracks, written and audiovisual archives, and moments of fiction. The play follows no linear plot besides the quest of the journalist named Bee Bee Bee as she seeks to understand how this genocide was possible. The composition is kaleidoscopic and polyphonic and puts on stage true survivors of the genocide. Yolande Mukagasana opens the play with a monologue recounting her experience

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.groupov.be/index.php/spectacles/extraits/id/9>

of genocidal violence. Sitting alone on a small iron chair, she tells her own story, the same story that she publishes the same year, entitled *Death does not want me*, and had partially told in her previous book *Don't be Afraid to Know*.

On stage, Mukagasana declares: "I am not an actress, I am a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda, simply. This is my new identity. What I will tell you is only my life for six weeks during the genocide."<sup>3</sup> On stage, as in her written testimonies, Mukagasana stresses a feeling of being in a "state of out-of-jointness". She explains this feeling as a fracture and dissociation within herself between a plurality of "I's". This divorce in her own self led the survivor to be accompanied in the writing process. In her first book, *Death Does not Want Me*, co-authored with Patrick May, Yolande Mukagasana addresses the issue of witnessing and writing in a cautionary note at the beginning:

I am a Rwandan woman. I did not learn to put my ideas in books. I do not live in the written word. I live in words. But I met a writer. He will tell my story. My story? That of a Tutsi woman who lived through the Rwandan genocide of 1994. Since then, I have only one friend, my testimony. But maybe one day I will be able to make friends. (Mukagasana, 1997, p. 13)<sup>4</sup>

Yolande Mukagasana suggests that her testimony proceeds from a pact between her "I" and the "he" of the writer. However, the third-party writer fades in the narrative, seemingly disappearing because he must not overshadow the survivor's word. The link with the vivid experience remains apparently direct, as the survivor herself stresses: "I only have one friend, it is my testimony." But in *Don't be Afraid to Know*, we can read at the end of the testimony some reflection on the necessity of a third party to tell her story. She then describes the process that connects her to Patrick May: she recounts, he notes and rewrites, then she reads and rectifies. Strikingly, the description of the delegated writing process is obvious, as the rest of the book is written by Patrick May. This description of the writing process is thus a fragment where the gap between the "I" who speaks and the "I" who writes for the witness is even more noticeable.

Regarding this consideration of the self's fragmentation, we could argue, following the analysis of Jean-Pierre Karegeye, that Yolande Mukagasana's testimony bears three "I's": the first "I" is the one of the testimony, which has to legitimate its connection to the truth; the second "I" is the one of the writer, which in this narrative is mostly invisible, but still implied; and the third one is the fictional "I," the one that will appear in *Rwanda 94* (Karegeye, 2014). This last point deserves to be

<sup>3</sup> "Je ne suis pas comédienne, je suis une survivante du génocide au Rwanda, tout simplement. C'est ça, ma nouvelle identité. Ce que je vais vous raconter, c'est seulement ma vie de six semaines pendant le génocide" (Le Groupov, 2012, p. 15). See also the non-integral video footage of the play available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wO06-qa1ffc>

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations are mine.

discussed in regard to theories of character and fiction: is Mukagasana a character in the play or is she a witness on stage? Her speech rejects fictionality and refuses to be even associated with the function of actress, but what about this multiplication of “I”s? First, she denies her role as an actress, claiming “I am not an actress”; then she asserts herself: “I am a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda”; However, the play *Rwanda 94* involves some fictional elements: two fictional journalist characters try to decode the messages of the victims of the genocide from beyond death. Could we then say that Mukagasana is in fact playing her own role? This would mean that the witness expresses a certain suspicion for fiction while taking part in it.

I would rather argue that Mukagasana’s testimony, which is pronounced upstream of the fiction, is brought back by contrast to the side of truth. By refusing, even temporarily, to take on the role of “actress,” Yolande Mukagasana raises the question of the representation of the genocide and refuses its fictional dimension. At the end of her monologue, she declares, with her hand raised, that she wants to testify for the truth. Paradoxically, it is the explicit refusal of fiction that tends to give this scene a fictional dimension, since it symbolically shifts Mukagasana's statement onto the stage of a theater, while the survivor acts as if she were in court. We can argue that this fictionality touches more on the framework in which a discourse of truth is stated than on the discourse itself. This setup is used as a warning at the threshold of the play: the crossing from the factual to the fictional (even if it is a framing fiction) is operated here by a single gesture, a way of indicating that the subsequent fiction focused on the journalist Bee Bee Bee is also closely linked to reality, even though the contract is explicitly fictional (see Schaeffer, 2019).

According to “mimetic” theories—those often called the most intuitive—characters cannot be subsumed into their linguistic, theatrical, or virtual condition, as Lavocat put it (2016, p. 347). These theories also invite us to venture beyond the conception of identification, notably those stated by Jauss. We recall that Jauss distinguished different reader attitudes depending on the status of the character. When faced with the story of a genocide survivor, if we follow Jauss's typology, then the story would aim for a catharsis. However, in the case of a testimony about mass violence, such a catharsis cannot be conceived without raising serious ethical questions: catharsis will never be enough to provide justice, and it is indeed justice and dignity that survivors demand in the first place. However, we can argue with Catherine Naugrette that a form of compassion is aroused in *Rwanda 94* by the prevalence of testimony over fiction (Naugrette, in Darmon, 2011). The choice of the tragic choir, embodying voices of the dead and addressing their speech to the audience, would call for an “artialisation” of specific emotions, an “Emotional material” (*matière-émotion*), according to Jean-Charles Darmon, aiming at arousing not passivity but “critical responses, aesthetic and political” (Darmon, 2011, p. 177).

In this perspective, catharsis will appear as a way to awaken the “sense of the human”, as underlined by Darmon (2014).

The refusal of fiction professed by Yolande Mukagasana has a certain relationship with the refusal of identification or empathy which could both lead to political inaction. The scenic fiction in which the testimony is delivered, on the contrary, places the spectators inside the fiction. The fictional framing thus tends to include the reception and make it responsible for what is said on stage, as if it were in a courtroom. From a rhetorical perspective, Mukagasana is addressing a Western audience as a Rwandan. The play confronts the audience with the role of France and Belgium in the genocide through a fictional framing: the play invites us to think about Europe's responsibilities. The spectators become judges confronted with the survivor's statement – even if they know perfectly well it is only for the time of the play. The fictional framing which shifts the testimony from the stage to the courtroom thus requires a repositioning of reception.

## **Fiction in Rwanda, after 1994: A Commitment to the Real**

I have underlined the complex relationship of history of genocide to the truth and fictionality. But one essential point still needs to be clarified. In 2009, in a brief text about genocide and imagination, Boubacar Boris Diop—a Senegalese author who wrote about the Rwandan genocide as part of a literary residency in Kigali—reminded us that the genocide is based on a racist fiction of ethnic separation between Hutus, Tutsis and Twas. He writes:

The imagination is all the more authorized to account for such a genocide because the recent history of Rwanda is mainly the result of a conflict between fiction and reality. It all started with the fantasies of a certain colonial ethnology that *invented*, with a disconcerting scientific flippancy, a non-African history for an African country. (Diop, 2009, p. 377)<sup>5</sup>

Following Diop's commentary, I cannot stress enough that this racist fiction (or rather, this lie) was elaborated by Western colonial powers and some experiences of the Tutsi's genocide have been relayed by outsiders (see James, 2020, p. 201-204). Surprisingly, Diop's observation posits that the most effective antidote to a falsehood manufactured by a colonial state lies within the realm of fiction, as reliance on documents and archives may inadvertently warp the essence of reality.

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<sup>5</sup> “L’imaginaire est du reste d’autant plus autorisé à rendre compte d’un tel génocide que l’histoire récente du Rwanda résulte dans une large mesure d’un conflit entre la fiction et la réalité. Tout y est parti des fantasmes d’une certaine ethnologie coloniale qui a inventé, avec une déconcertante légèreté scientifique, une histoire non africaine à un pays africain.”

To delve deeper into this perspective, let us now explore the inherent potential and capabilities of fiction; it is precisely this outsider perspective that will now be examined.

In 1998, the Lille-based Fest’Africa project invited ten African writers to a residency in Kigali, titled: “Rwanda: Writing by Duty of Memory.” Four of them chose fiction to convey what witnesses had told them and what they themselves had discovered in the field. The writer Boubakar Boris Diop is one of them. During the residency, he met survivors and killers and produced a fiction based on these meetings as well as visits to memorial and massacre sites. In the case of writers who are witnesses at a second level (that is, “bystanders” through the stories of survivors they met), the question of the legitimacy for affirming facts arises. Among Africans familiar with civil wars and colonial domination, it is, however, possible to recognize a shared experience. This is what Boubacar Boris Diop stresses in his novel *Murambi, The Book of Bones* and in a long postface, while warning against “fictional overkill” and valuing the power of imagination:

I didn't want to come back from the Land of a Thousand Hills with a work of fiction, and in a way, the promise was kept: *Murambi, The Book of Bones* gives much more importance to the facts reported by my interlocutors than to the tricks often associated with the experimental writing that was, if I may say so, my trademark. I completely changed my mind after a week. The discussions with the survivors and killers as well as the visits to the sites of the Tutsi genocide were a history lesson that I was eager to share with my readers. To my great shame, I had just learned what I should never have doubted, namely that in Rwanda, too, there had been victims and executioners. [...] *Murambi, The Book of Bones* remains a novel insofar as it reveals the tumult of a tragic history and, through various individual trajectories, the subjectivity of an author. (Diop, 2020, p. 149)<sup>6</sup>

Diop claims he doesn’t want to restate the “cold” facts (p. 150)<sup>7</sup> and that is why, according to him, fiction is a necessity, and is not incompatible with the restitution of facts. Fiction then becomes dependent on the commitment made to this reality, which, paradoxically according to Diop, only an appeal to the imaginary can make credible when told from an outsider perspective. However, the author of *Murambi* employs a very specific form of fiction. His work, taking the form of an investigation,

<sup>6</sup> “Je ne voulais pas revenir du Pays des Mille Collines avec une œuvre de fiction et, d’une certaine manière, la promesse a été tenue : *Murambi, le livre des ossements* accorde beaucoup plus d’importance aux faits rapportés par mes interlocuteurs qu’aux tours de passe-passe souvent associés à une écriture expérimentale qui était, on me permettra de le signaler, ma marque de fabrique [...] *Murambi, le livre des ossements* reste un roman dans la mesure où s’y perçoit le tumulte d’une histoire tragique et, à travers diverses trajectoires individuelles, la subjectivité d’un auteur.”

<sup>7</sup> “Taking notes on the edge of a mass grave is inappropriate. I still wanted to be true to the experiences of my interlocutors, but I no longer claimed to be a neutral scientist. It was no longer a question of coldly collecting facts but of listening to the stories of destroyed lives and faithfully echoing them.” / “Prendre des notes au bord d’une fosse commune est inapproprié. Je voulais toujours rester fidèle aux expériences de mes interlocuteurs, mais je ne prétendais plus être un scientifique neutre. Il ne s’agissait plus de collecter froidement des faits, mais d’écouter les récits de vies détruites et de les restituer fidèlement.”



features a series of embedded testimonies in which the words of witnesses and survivors find their rightful place. Fiction, in this case, designates the act of interweaving testimonies within a narrative framework, concurrently infusing the text with the invention of characters.<sup>8</sup> This dedication to portraying reality manifests itself in the form of a pedagogical and polyphonic choral narrative. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this text is the evident stylistic simplicity, which emerges from a deliberate avoidance of the extravagant and metaphorical. The profound brutality of the genocide negates the use of metaphors. Consequently, the novel firmly situates itself within the domain of historical fiction or documentary fiction—manifestations of fiction intricately woven from tangible realities yet executed through the artistic prism of fictional devices. Such a nuanced conceptualization of fiction evokes a dichotomy between factual and fictional representations on the one hand (essentially distinguishing between Mukagasana's unembellished testimony and Diop's imaginative novel) but also between different types of fictionality. Diop encourages us to consider the difference between the fictionality of objects and the fictionality of means (see Pouillaude, 2020, p. 91). One must grasp that this demarcation (between fictionality of objects or means) fundamentally contravenes a monolithic conception of fiction. In the case of *Murambi* the setting and plot are imagined, but the testimonies are unequivocally culled from empirical realities, firmly anchored in the historical crucible that is the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsi. While there is debate regarding such a distinction between the fictionality of objects and means – one could indeed argue that representing a real object through fictional means always amounts to fictionalizing that object at another level – it nonetheless remains, as noted by Pouillaude, that fiction based on real objects can only be understood and function artistically in reference to elements of reality (p. 92).

The question then remains: what can fiction offer in addition to testimony, according to Diop, and especially to someone who stands as a third party? For Diop, the essence lies not in wielding his literary quill to merely convey the testimonial accounts of witnesses, as Patrick May does. Rather, it resides in his adept curation of testimonies, which he subsequently imports into the realm of fiction. While the realm of fiction undoubtedly boasts its own inherent merits, chief among them the capacity for reader identification, the very act of transmuting factual accounts into the realm of fiction harbors an inherent peril—a proclivity toward a subtle distortion of historical veracity. Recent controversies surrounding the fictional

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<sup>8</sup> The author notes that the central figure, Cornelius, takes his name from an individual killed in 1994: “We are lost in the crowd, coming and going. Two women pass by me, and I hear one say to her companion, ‘This is where our Cornelius remained.’ I didn’t yet know what novel I was going to write, but I immediately thought that no matter what, its main character would be named Cornelius.” / “Nous sommes perdus dans la foule qui va et vient. Deux femmes passent près de moi et j’entends l’une dire à sa compagne : ‘C’est ici que notre Cornelius est resté.’ Je ne savais pas encore quel roman j’allais écrire mais j’ai aussitôt pensé que quoi qu’il arrive son personnage principal s’appellerait Cornelius.”

instrumentalization of real events gathered in interviews by authors remind us that the ethics of fiction, especially in the context of the history of genocides, should not be taken lightly.

In the concluding reflection offered within the postscript of *Murambi*, Diop mentions that his background as a journalist greatly facilitated his fieldwork endeavors. He recounts numerous encounters with survivors, whose identities were discreetly veiled within the novel. He also cites Yolande Mukagasana and her work *Don't Be Afraid to Know* as a testimony that allowed him to fully grasp the importance of transmitting the stories of survivors: "One of Yolande Mukagasana's works is titled *Don't Be Afraid to Know*. This means that for the renowned Rwandan survivor, it is not enough to empathize with the suffering of the victims to give meaning to the famous 'Never Again.' It is equally essential to have a detailed understanding of the circumstances of the tragedy and even the motivations of the perpetrators" (Diop, 2020, p. 147).<sup>9</sup> Considering this dual ambition, fiction possesses the capacity to delve into the conditions that rendered the genocide feasible. It goes beyond merely scrutinizing the "how" of the unfolding events and the experiences of the victims, aiming to investigate the political backdrop that facilitated the occurrence of such events. According to Diop, it is the responsibility of writers to investigate such events.

Diop's words are stern: he believes that the refusal of certain African intellectuals to confront reality, which he likens to a form of intellectual captivity (while referencing Sartre and his preface to Senghor's anthology), may explain why it is necessary to convene authors in Kigali ten years after the genocide. The gathering of African authors, whether witnesses or heirs to colonial violence, at the sites of these atrocities confronts them with a history that, while different from their own, shares similarities, particularly in raising questions about France's responsibility in these acts of violence. Diop highlights this in a set of reflections found in the afterword: "In my case, the genocide of the Tutsis harked back to a certain colonial past. I naturally focused on France's role in Rwanda [...] the book originated from the realization that ordinary racism, a cornerstone of France's colonial policy, still persists, half a century after 'Independence,' at the heart of its African policy" (p. 155).<sup>10</sup> However, when confronted with the thorny question of a potential fictional treatment of the genocide issue, Diop responds solely through metaphor (p. 148).<sup>11</sup> This implies that fiction comes to the aid of the outsider, serving as a means to speak about a history

<sup>9</sup> "Un des ouvrages de Yolande Mukagasana s'intitule *N'aie pas peur de savoir*. Cela signifie que pour la célèbre rescapée rwandaise il ne suffit pas de compatir aux souffrances des victimes pour donner du sens au fameux 'Plus jamais ça' : il est tout aussi essentiel de connaître en détail les circonstances de la tragédie et même les motivations des génocidaires."

<sup>10</sup> "Dans mon cas, le génocide des Tutsis renvoyait à un certain passé colonial. Je me suis donc tout naturellement focalisé sur le rôle de la France au Rwanda [...] l'ouvrage est né du constat que le racisme ordinaire, ferment de la politique coloniale de la France, reste, un demi-siècle après les 'Indépendances', au cœur de sa politique africaine."

they haven't lived. The prevailing discourse on the universality of fiction poses a challenge here, insofar as fiction is presented as a subjective prism through which historical events and the real experiences of survivors are filtered.

Because the Genocide is a kind of reality, as Catherine Coquio emphasizes, which “overflows the existing categories of understanding and perception” (Coquio, 2004, p. 142-143), the fictions elaborated within Diop's novel do not seek to repair or to console, but rather to construct, drawing from collected individual experiences, a comprehensive depiction of a situation shaped by colonial history. As the author notes in the concluding remarks of his afterword, it also serves as a means to involve all readers in what may seem like a specific narrative, where they will, through the twists of fiction, come to realize that this genocide does not unfold in a distant and unfamiliar world but is also intertwined with Western history.

## Conclusion: Situated fictionality

The survivor, Mukagasana, and the “bystander,” Diop, share a common responsibility: bearing witness to the facts and honoring the victims. However, their objectives diverge along different paths. Nevertheless, both strive to construct a symbolic resting place for the victims through literature. Yet, crafting a narrative based on survivor testimonies collected on-site raises the complex issue of “the appropriation of testimony by the visitor,” as astutely observed by Catherine Coquio. The act of collection evokes shades of ethnographic endeavor, a gesture laden with particular significance in this context, notably in Rwanda, given the country's colonial history (Coquio, 2015, p. 67). This consideration prompts us to reflect on the nature of the relationships that emerge from the process of investigation and testimonial collection. It compels us to contemplate not only the commitment of the interlocutors but also that of the witnesses themselves.

The pursuit of axiological neutrality, while representing a scientific ideal, proves illusory in cases such as this one, often verging on partiality. The post-genocidal landscape necessitates an acknowledgment of executioners and victims, demanding a stance from those who seek to document this history. In light of the fact that survivors' voices have been inadequately heard, Diop rejects the notion of extracting facts from their words or making selective choices. Rather than isolating facts from

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<sup>11</sup> “The novelist is not an historian, and by approaching reality too closely, paradoxically risks dissipating it, much like dreams that fade in the early morning, leaving us with a slight sense of melancholy, knowing they will never return or be recounted. It is these wanderings in an obscure, uncertain, and at times hostile universe that bring the writer closest to the truth of human beings and societies.” / “Le romancier n'est pas un historien et, à serrer de trop près la réalité, il risque paradoxalement de la dissiper, comme ces rêves qui s'effilochent au petit matin et dont nous sentons, un rien mélancoliques, que jamais ils ne reviendront ni ne seront racontés. Ce sont ces errances dans un univers obscur, incertain et parfois hostile qui rapprochent le plus l'écrivain de la vérité des êtres et des sociétés humains.”

survivor accounts, Diop's intent is to “echo” the narratives already articulated by the witnesses themselves. This act of echoing stands in contrast to pure factuality and neutrality; it emerges as a response to the witness's testimony, capable of amplifying the narrative by disseminating it while remaining faithful to its original form. In essence, Diop's narrative, though fictional, can be likened to an enclosed space whose boundaries resonate with the words of the witnesses.

Whether through Mukagsana's testimony or Diop's fiction, the endeavor to convey the experiences of Rwandan genocide survivors necessitates a clear departure from the ideological and political commitment (inherited from Sartre's era in the 1950s). It entails embracing a distinct paradigm forged by the genocides of the 20th century. The writer's role as a “spokesperson” for the victims obliges them to craft a fresh form and a novel language capable of faithfully rendering this emerging reality without appropriating it for personal gain. The ultimate goal is to fade discreetly into the background behind the voices of those who bear witness to the history of mass atrocities. This distinction is evident in the shift from an ideological and political form of commitment to one centered on the symbolic (factual or fictional) representation of the voices of the victims, rather than the promotion of a specific ideology or politics.

The temporal distance maintained by fiction, as it remains chronologically removed from the events of 1994, provides a crucial space. Here, we can not only acknowledge the historical facts but also engage in a deeper reflection on their enduring legacy and what it means to respond to that legacy in the contemporary context as inheritors. Importantly, the novel avoids the pitfall of fostering too close an identification with the reader, thereby preserving a critical distance between our role as witnesses through reading and that of the actual survivors.

Within the context of a genocide, the intricate relationship between fiction and reality, or between fiction and factual accounts, necessitates a particular kind of commitment. Conversely, this commitment is reciprocated within the very structure and narrative devices of the text. This commitment is incumbent upon the spokesperson, who either pens narratives on behalf of survivors or stages their words within a fictional framework. In this way, fictions about the Rwandan genocide establish a complex connection to reality, one that calls for shared responsibility between the audience and the act of reception. This approach serves to distance the narratives from forms of sensationalism and the resulting passivity that such sensationalism can generate. The conspicuous rejection of outright fiction and the meticulous precautions taken by the various authors mentioned in this context demonstrate that the presumed incompatibility of fiction with testimonial accounts warrants nuanced consideration.

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## PLAN

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- [Bearing Witness to the Rwandan Genocide: The Impossibility of Fiction](#)
- [Fiction in Rwanda, after 1994: A Commitment to the Real](#)
- [Conclusion: Situated fictionality](#)

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