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The Ethics of Fiction. African Writers on the Genocide in Rwanda

This essay explores literature on the genocide in Rwanda that resulted from the project *Rwanda – Écrire par devoir de mémoire*, »Writing in Duty to Memory«. The literary texts that will be discussed are written by African authors who deliberately sought to create narratives of the genocide and the post-genocidal society in Rwanda for public memory. They wrote from a belated position trying to understand, to comprehend and to mediate a memory they had no direct experience of. The project took an innovative approach to the literary representation of genocide, as will be argued in the first part. It did not only shape the duty to remember as a collective undertaking, but also merged patterns of civil society engagement with the field of literature. Furthermore, it was framed by the intention of bearing witness as a writer and to use fiction as a means to create and transmit knowledge on the genocide. It thus defined a particular point of departure at the interface of social-political, ethical and aesthetical commitment. This will be reflected through Geoffrey Hartman's concept of the intellectual witness and Chinua Achebe's notion of the uses of imagination in the quest of historical truth.

A closer look on the works and aesthetical choices of Boris Diop, Véronique Tadjo, Koulsy Lamko and Tierno Monénembo explores their capacity to perform acts of secondary witnessing. »Secondary« here is not only understood in terms of temporal succession, but in a broader sense as a second, accompanying witness to the eyewitness' report. Diop, Tadjo and Lamko inscribe this position into the text, creating highly self-reflexive narratives through which the reader gets mentally involved into ethical questions of representing genocide. Monénembo chooses a completely different approach by narrating the novel entirely from a fictional survivor's perspective. His achievement resides in giving voice to a subaltern subjectivity that would remain unheard and unlistened to in the public debate on the genocide without the intervention of the secondary witness.

Although the texts are products of an intense encounter with deeply traumatic experience, the author argues that they resist being analyzed in terms of trauma narratives. They are more concerned with giving testimony than with creating representations of trauma. One aspect that should be taken into account, however, is

vicarious traumatization. While in psychotraumatology vicarious traumatization is understood as an integral part of the witnessing process that brings traumatic memories into language and communication, the concept has hardly been used in research contexts that deal with cultural representations of trauma. The resulting questions are, what does the exposure to trauma do to the witness and what does it mean in the process of writing and remembering genocide? These are questions that remain to be explored in the analysis of literatures of trauma.

The author suggests looking at witnessing in and through literature in terms of an interactive process that does not end with the text, but where the text is part of. To fully acknowledge this process its analysis has to include the reader. This argument is emphasized in the third part that comments on experiences with discussing the texts in class with students of African Studies, Comparative Literature and International Development Studies at the University of Vienna.

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