

Writing and reading literature as form of empathic witnessing – the example of the “Writing in Duty to Memory”-Project

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Introduction

In this paper, I will talk about the importance of the project “Rwanda – Ecrire par devoir de mémoire” – “Writing in Duty to Memory” – as an interface of socio-political and aesthetic commitment. The first part deals with the context of the project and some general remarks about the problems associated with the idea of “art about the genocide”. In the second part, I will discuss the relationship between literature, memory and trauma on a theoretical level with an emphasis on the use of imagination as a means to bridge the gap between the “real”, the individual experience of it, and its narrative representations. The third part presents a reading of the novels *Murambi – Le livre des ossements* by the Senegalese author Boris Boubacar Diop, *La phalène des collines* by the Chadian writer Koulsy Lamko, *L’ainé des orphelins* by the Guinean writer Tierno Monémbo, and the text *L’ombre d’Imana* by Véronique Tadjo from Côte d’Ivoire with regard to their performance of narrative witnessing. I will also briefly comment on my experiences with discussing these texts in class with students of comparative literature and International Development Studies at Vienna University.

The project “Rwanda – Writing in Duty of Memory” was initiated by Nocky Djedanoum, Chadian writer and director of the festival Fest’Africa, and the journalist Maïmouna Coulibaly. Ten African writers of different nationalities were invited for residence in Rwanda in 1998 in order to research and write about the genocide of the Tutsis. The whole project gave rise to a lot of debates about the possibilities, limits and the legitimation of fictional literature as a means to approach and transmit the memory of the genocide. What can creative

writing contribute to the process of memory work – in this special case writing by foreign authors with little or no personal relationship to Rwanda prior to their residence there?

When I first discussed the novels which resulted from the project in class with students of comparative literature, they were quite unanimous in their opinion that it is morally at least questionable to make art out of real suffering and violence. We started out by discussing the work of the Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. He travelled to Rwanda shortly after the RPF had seized control of the country and the terror of the army, Interahamwe militias and civilians had come to a halt. In the following years he created several installations from the large number of pictures he took and testimonies and impressions he collected. They were shown at various exhibitions, above all in Europe and the USA. Though the students were sympathetic to the piece of work itself they rejected the very idea of “art about the genocide”. “Art” in this case meant an exploitation of the suffering of others for the purpose of one’s own success. Even if it is important to bear this aspect in mind, it seems that in the face of extreme suffering it gets more difficult to value and conceive of art as a way to explore life and reality and to develop alternative means of perceiving.¹

In her analysis of the project, the romanist Véronique Porra criticises the velocity with which memory work with regard to the genocide of the Tutsis was begun. She also underlines the important distinction between the work of mourning, which can only be done by the people of Rwanda themselves, and the duty to remember.²

I agree with her that it is important to distinguish literature produced by foreign writers from memory work within the society concerned. In fact, the purpose and motivation of the project and its position in the process of memory work marked a problem right from the beginning. Boris Diop tells us that he at first was rather sceptical of Nocky Djedanoum’s suggestion that he participate in the project. He felt that what happened in Rwanda should not be used by a writer to prove that he was up to write about it. After the group’s residence in Rwanda and the publication of his novel he still expressed the conviction that it was too early for novels. The events were still too close and it would take another fifteen, maybe twenty years to find words and images for the experience. He also points to the fact that the Rwandans they met told them not to write novels but just to tell what happened.³

Despite of the scepticism which accompanied the project⁴ it was quite successful in its output of fictional and semi-fictional literature. All of the participants published a book except the only English-writing author, Meja Mwangi. Four chose the novel as their medium, namely Boris Boubacar Diop with *Murambi – le livre des ossements*, Monique Ilboudou with

Murekatete, Tierno Monénembo with *L'ainé des orphelins*, and Koulsy Lamko with *La phalène des collines*. Véronique Tadjo and Abdourahman Waberi took to more fragmentary, semi-fictional forms, *L'ombre d'Imana* being a sort of travel diary, a collage of impressions, reflections and stories, and *Moisson de crânes* a volume of essays. The two Rwandan participants, Jean-Marie Vianney Rurangwa and Venuste Kayimahe, were opposed to the idea of writing fictional literature about the genocide. But still Rurangwa, who explicitly refused a fictionalizing approach, introduced a fictional element into his text. The text *Le génocide des Tutsi expliqué à un étranger*, where the author expresses his view of the genocide and the reasons that led to it, is written in the form of a fictional interview. Kayimahe was the only participant who had been to Rwanda when the genocide of the Tutsis started. He survived and was able to flee to Kenya with part of his family, but had to leave behind five of his children. One of his daughters was murdered. Kayimahe published his testimony in *France-Rwanda. Les coulisses du génocide. Témoignage d'un rescapé*. He especially explored the role France played by supporting the dictatorship, which made the genocide possible and prepared the ground for it. Nocky Djedanoum who, together with the journalist Maïmouna Coulibaly, initiated and organized the project published a volume of poetry with the title *Nyamirambo!*, which is also the name of a neighbourhood of Rwanda's capital Kigali

At the time the project started, not many testimonies had been published yet. The investigations and collection of testimonies by the human rights' organisation African Rights, *Rwanda. Death, Despair and Defiance*, appeared as soon as 1995. Yolande Mukagasana was one of the first whose testimony *La mort ne veut pas de moi* appeared as a book in 1997. Documentary books such as Philip Gourevitch's *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*, which later inspired the Hollywood film-production *Hotel Rwanda*, and Alison DesForges' *Leave None to Tell the Story* have been published from the late 1990s on. Over the past few years, several testimonies have appeared, such as *Nous existons encore* (2004) by Annick Kayitesi, *Comme la langue entre les dents* (2000) by Marie-Aimable Umurerwa, *La Paix dans l'âme* by Chantal Umutesi, and the collection *Les Blessures du silence* (2001) collected and edited by Yolande Mukagasana. I want to especially mention *Survivantes* (2004), a joint work by the Algerian journalist Souâd Belhaddad and Esther Mujawayo, a Rwandan sociologist and former associate of the British NGO Oxfam, who lost almost all her family and later trained as a psychotherapist in order to work with other survivors. The publication is not only a concentrate of political, social and historical information, but also impresses the reader with the complexity, the high level of reflection

and knowledge with which the two women explore what it means to live with the memory of the genocide.⁵

The participants of the project wrote their texts into a void of public representations of individual experiences of genocide survivors on a national as well as an international level. Furthermore on an international level, most of the published material about the Rwandan genocide was written from Western perspectives. The interest of the project was twofold: It should involve African intellectuals and introduce explicit African perspectives into the debate about Rwanda's recent history as well as fulfill a moral demand of immediate witnessing. The urgency to witness and to act against forgetting was of great importance to the participants. Diop for example declares: "Et nos romans, écrits dans l'urgence du témoignage, ne disent encore rien en profondeur sur le génocide. Cela viendra plus tard et ce sera l'oeuvre des victimes elles-mêmes."⁶

Literature, memory and trauma

With regard to the relationship between literature and history in the face of extreme violence and trauma, the project "Writing in Duty to Memory" has a very specific point of departure. The intention of using fiction as a vehicle to mediate a reality so horrible that it is difficult to imagine was preconceived. It did not derive from the individual encounter with a specific history and experience that demanded to be expressed in literary language. On the contrary, the encounter was already shaped by the intention of bearing witness as a writer. Intellectual and literary witnessing was taken for granted as a concept. This represents a shift in the discussion and exploration of the interaction of creative writing and memory work with regard to massive violence and trauma. So before I take a closer look at some of the texts that originated from the project, I first would like to briefly discuss the concept of literature, especially fiction, as a form of witnessing.

In my research about relations between literature and trauma I started out with a question that arose from my personal experience as a reader. The first time I asked myself this question consciously was when reading *Algerian White* by the Algerian writer Assia Djebar. Djebar had written the text under the impression of the murder of friends, colleagues and family members by radical islamists during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s. Similarly to the participants of the Rwandan project, the author declares that she was driven by the urgency of

immediate remembrance.⁷ My question was simply “How can it be that I like this book?” How can I be touched and attracted by a piece of writing that brings the violence and suffering of those concerned so painfully to mind, rendering them more “real” in my eyes than did the reports in the media before? What exactly makes for its attraction? Taking a closer look at this question, we see a tremendous contradiction opening up between the language and the content of the narration.

Now the experience of deriving some sort of strength from reading literature that puts into words the dimension of pain, suffering and violence we usually treat as “unspeakable” is maybe as old as literature itself. Geoffrey Hartman, in his essay about Shoah and the intellectual witness, deals with the same question when he compares the interest of what he calls “a bystander after the event who observes it from an ambiguous position” to the emotional involvement of spectators in a theatre.

“[Y]et most viewers, while they might not feel pain, would not admit taking pleasure from a suffering that is known to have been actual rather than imaginary. In fact, we find it so difficult to value the feeling of pleasure, or seeming mastery, that comes from the ability to face painful events through thought or mimesis, that we justify this voluntary witnessing as a kind of labor.”⁸

What I think important here is Hartman’s observation of the difficulty to value this experience. It seems dangerously close to the idea of deriving pleasure from the suffering of others or – as my students felt with regard to the idea of “art about the genocide” – to use human suffering as material for some other purpose. Indeed it is a narrow, and sometimes maybe even invisible line which separates witnessing from distorting, bearing witness as a writer from promoting oneself as a writer. In order to judge the quality and authenticity of the literary witness we cannot refer to her or his fiction alone. We need the comparison with documentary, eye witness reports, historical and sociological research. But beyond this evaluation of the factual truth there is the dimension of what the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe analyzes as “the truth of fiction”. In his essay of the same title, Achebe defines art as “man’s constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given to him; an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence *through his imagination*.”⁹ Imagination, Achebe writes, is not opposed to the quest for historical truth but in fact constitutes a powerful tool for it. However, just like any tool it can be used in different ways. Achebe therefore distinguishes between “beneficent” and “malignant” fiction, such as

racism. The crucial difference, he declares, is that “beneficent fiction” never pretends to be true but on the contrary remains conscious of being an act of mimesis. Thus it makes use of imagination as a form of empathy and a means of experience.

“Imaginative identification is the opposite of indifference; it is human connectedness at its most intimate. [...] My theory of the uses of fiction is that beneficent fiction calls into full life our total range of imaginative faculties and gives us a heightened sense of our personal, social and human reality.”¹⁰

When we read literature as social testimony we should bear in mind some of the basic rules of how fictional literature works:

First, it makes use of imagination as a means to bridge the gap between the “real”, the individual experience of it, and its narrative representation. Creative writing as creative work with language and imagination thus can function as a mediatory when dealing with a reality that is difficult to represent.

Second, creative writing probes the limits and possibilities of language. This proves to be particularly important with regard to the resistance of traumatic experience to narrative representation.

When literature represents and testifies to traumatic memory, there is in fact a rather complex and multilayered process of communication at work. Writing and reading are two poles, and all listening, witnessing, experiencing and remembering constantly moves between one and the other. Good writers are maybe above all good listeners. That is to say, their skill consists to a large extent in the ability to be simultaneously sensitive to themselves, to the narratives of their time and to what these narratives evoke in themselves and in others. Furthermore, they are - or should be – able to hear what the narratives and the people of their time and their social surroundings conceal. Actually, their art to a large extent crystallizes in their ability to transform what they perceive in themselves, in others and in the narratives of their time into a linguistic form that meets this perception. The same holds true to a certain degree for the reader. Reading – like writing – is a cultural practice that can be exerted with more or less quality. Literature as social testimony does not only demand attentive writing but attentive reading, as well. Active listening and a conscious and attentive use of imagination and mimesis are necessary in the process of creating narrative transmissions and transformations of traumatic memory.¹¹

Irene Kacandes explores the importance of reading as part of the transmission of traumatic memory through literature in her essay “Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work”. She

compares the dynamics which evolve between writer, reader and the text with the dynamics explored by the psychoanalyst Dori Laub in the process of reconstruction of traumatic memory and testifying to traumatic events. As Kacandes shows, a reading which is aware of the dynamics of traumatic memory has to take several levels of witnessing into consideration.¹² She compares these to the levels Dori Laub defines in his article “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival” with regard to witnessing in relation to the Holocaust experience:

“(T)he level of witness to oneself within the experience; the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others; and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself.”¹³

Kacandes’ transmission of this model to literary theory reads as follows:

“In accounting for a literary text, one needs to investigate components of witnessing at the level of the story (that is, the events that make up the plot), at the level of the text (that is, the specific forms the telling of those events takes), and at the level of the production and reception of the text. [...] That is to say, literary texts can be about trauma, in the sense that they can depict perpetrations of violence against characters who are traumatized by the violence and then successfully or unsuccessfully witness their trauma. But texts can also ,perform‘ trauma, in the sense that they can ,fail‘ to tell the story, by eliding, repeating, and fragmenting components of the story.”¹⁴

The importance of Kacandes’ connection of trauma theory and literary theory lies in the fact that she not only points to the performative, mimetical level of the literary text; she also demonstrates the necessity of a reading which recognizes the performance of trauma in the text as well as the moments where it “fails to tell”, in order to let transmission flow.

Narrative strategies and techniques in the works of Diop, Tadjou, Monénembo and Lamko

The novels which emerged from the project “Writing in Duty of Memory” for the most part do not go deeply into the narrative representation of trauma or what I would call the art to tell while simultaneously performing the impossibility to tell.¹⁵ On the performative level of trauma – that is the way the psychic structure of traumatic memory is reproduced on the narrative level – they remain more or less silent. This may be due to the necessity of immediate testimony the project prescribed and the authors also felt.

As to what I would call their aesthetic commitment the authors took different positions. Boris Diop for example says he wrote his novel with a quite cynical attitude towards questions of

form and aesthetics. He deliberately renounced a more elaborate composition but tried to put the story down as “artlessly” as possible:

“Pendant que j’écrivais ‘Murambi’, j’ai dit dans un mail à un ami que j’étais en train de construire mon roman avec beaucoup de cynisme. [...] Je lui ai alors expliqué que tout dans ce livre fonctionnait selon un mépris total de la technique romanesque, de l’intrigue et de toutes ces choses-là. Je m’en foutais vraiment. Dans mes textes précédents, j’étais très soucieux de la forme [...] Ici, il n’était pas question de cela. Après ce que j’avais vu au Rwanda, je n’avais aucune envie de jeux formels, c’aurait été vraiment ignoble de ma part de revenir de là-bas et de me planter au milieu de la scène pour dire: ‘Regardez comme je sais faire de belles phrases avec le sang des autres!’ J’avais surtout un souci d’efficacité immédiate.”¹⁶

Véronique Tadjo however declared that she felt more obliged to put all her literary skill into the work just because of the responsibility she felt towards the victims and survivors.¹⁷

Nevertheless the question of style and writing technique did not come first. The biggest challenge she had to face when writing about Rwanda was the effort to find a balance between fiction and historical facts.¹⁸

What seem to be two different, even contradictory positions regarding the relationship of aesthetics or aesthetical choices and the will to tell what happened and still happens in Rwanda reveal a common ground when we take a closer look. They both express their concern about looking for and finding a form of narration that would meet the subject. Both show as well that in this particular piece of work the question of form gained a specific importance. Diop’s concern results in the deliberate rejection of what could be called the seduction of artistic self-importance. He clearly distinguishes the novel he wrote about his confrontation with the genocide from his novels written so far. Contrary to his earlier works which show a rather complex and elaborate structure he chose a form and structure that should lead directly, without detours and distraction, to the facts and the story about the genocide he wanted to tell.

Even if the writers all argue that the form of their texts was the outcome of deliberate decisions and choices I would like to pose the question whether they could at all have written their story of the genocide in any other way or, resp., in which way one can talk of a deliberate choice. The process of finding a form for what one wants to tell generally consists only to a certain degree of deliberate decisions. The subject of narration imposes its own

narrative demands as much as do individual perception and narrative skill. Most writers probably would agree that in the creative process a more complex interplay unfolds between theme, language, perception, the mental and emotional relationship with the theme, writing practice and technique. What strikes me in the statements of the participants of the project is their very emphasis upon treating the form of their narratives as a consequence of a deliberate decision only – as if it was totally within their reach. In part this emphasis may derive from a certain pressure to legitimize what they had written and how. But I would suggest that it also shows the need and the wish to be in control of what they narrated or, resp., if not of the subject of narration, so at least of the narration itself. The expressed concern with finding the right form thus would also point to the need to restore some sense of control in the face of the traumatic and traumatizing reality they encountered. If we remember the different levels of witnessing we – as readers and receptors of the writers’ witness – become witness to the destabilizing and dehumanizing power of the factual truth, which shows itself in the very emphasis on the search for forms which should contain this truth without letting it loose.

As for Boris Diop this search resulted in a novel with a clear structure and an equally clear, even simple language. The author himself declares that he had a young readership in mind and intended the novel to be accessible and easy to read:

“J’ai constamment pensé aux jeunes de tous les pays en écrivant ce livre. C’est d’ailleurs une des raisons pour lesquelles il est, de tous mes romans, le plus facile à lire.”¹⁹

“Murambi” consists of four parts entitled “La peur et la colère”, “Le retour de Cornelius”, “Génocide” and “Murambi”. Part one and three lead the reader into the time shortly before the massacres began and when they were in full course. They represent the perspectives of various characters – victims, perpetrators, members of the militias, representatives of the French military intervention, the local authorities and the RPF as well as average citizens, Tutsis and Hutus. Both parts consist of chapters written in the first person and bearing the name of the character whose voice they evoke. Part two and four build the fictional frame that holds together the individual stories. They tell the story of the Rwandan Cornelius who returns to his country in 1998 after having spent most of his life in exile. He discovers that his father organized the massacre in the technical school of Murambi and had his mother and his younger brother and sister killed together with the other more than forty thousand people who took refuge in the construction.

Koulsy Lamko incorporates fantastic elements into his novel “La phalène des collines”. The fictional plot of a group of foreign writers who visit Rwanda and the sites of the massacres

quite openly refers to the project. Pelouse, an exiled Rwandan, accompanies the group on its visit five years after the genocide. While it remains a visit to the others, for Pelouse the journey turns into a return and a renewed attachment to her mother country. Lamko integrates the past into the present through the voice of Pelouse's aunt, who wanders the country as a butterfly after she had been brutally raped and killed in the church of Nyamata.²⁰ The novel is largely narrated in the first person from her perspective, but also unfolds other narrative trails. Tierno Monénembo, too, situates his plot in the period of his residence in Rwanda. The novel is entirely narrated in the first person from the perspective of a fifteen-year old boy, Faustin. Monénembo starts the narration at its end with Faustin in prison waiting for his execution. The story unfolds retrospectively in the street jargon of a boy whose existence had been completely uprooted. It's a story of flight, survival and violence that draws a disillusioned and discomfiting picture of the post-genocidal society.

From the four authors mentioned here Véronique Tadjo departs the farthest from the novel form. "L'ombre d'Imana" is written as a travel diary. The journeys to Rwanda correspond to an inner journey of the author on her quest to understand and to trace the cruelty of what she understands as a menace to everyone's humanity. The text resembles a loose composition of personal reflections, historical evidence, and stories of people which show individual aspects of the catastrophe, written sometimes in the first, sometimes in the third person. Like Diop, Tadjo inserts a lot of factual knowledge into the narration. The fragmentary form reflects the impossibility of telling a coherent, linear story, of making a meaning out of what she encountered.

The visitor-narrator

Though rather different in appearance, Diop's, Lamko's and Tadjo's texts still seem to tell the same story in different forms. All three use as a narrative framework their own travel experiences motivated by the intention to write about the genocide. Diop and Lamko inscribe it into a fictional plot: In *Murambi* Diop portrays a returning expatriate and his impressions of Kigali, of the sites of the massacres – notably the parish of Ntamara, the church of Nyamata and the school of Murambi. Like the author, Cornelius intends to write about the genocide. Lamko overtly hints at the project with the group of writers and filmmakers who travel the country four years after the genocide. Nevertheless, like Diop he mainly employs the perspective of a returning Rwandan, Pelouse, who travels with the group but holds a particular position. Not only is she the only one who decides to stay, but she also loses all the

notes she took, all the evidence collected during the journey. Interestingly, Koulsy Lamko was also the only foreign participant who prolonged his residence in Rwanda. For several years he directed the Centre Universitaire des Arts at the university of Butare.

In both novels, the visitor-figure serves as a mediator for the authors' own experience as visitors to a post-genocidal society. The fact that the characters have Rwandan origins can be interpreted in various ways. It allows for identification and for keeping a distance at the same time, given the fact that both Cornelius and Pelouse, are plotted as strangers to their own country.

Cornelius in *Murambi* opens up an explorative, investigative path of discovery of the country, its people and its recent history as well as a perspective of secondary witnessing. Through the shared imagination of what it could mean to return to one's country after the organized killing of a whole population group, both author and reader find in Cornelius a medium for getting mentally involved. The seeming neutrality of this narrative perspective gets subverted when Cornelius learns that his father was a mass murderer responsible for the murder of his wife and children. With this turning point of the story, Diop renders the central narrative perspective more complex. Thus the novel, both on the level of the story – through Cornelius as a narrative character – and on the level of the text – through Cornelius as a narrative perspective – reflects a crucial problem of bearing witness, which Judith Herman defines in *Trauma and Recovery* as follows:

“[W]hen the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. The bystander is forced to take sides.”²¹

Unlike Diop and Lamko, Tadjou does not create a character for inserting the perspective of the visitor-witness but uses her own narrative self. Thus the idea, that it is not a question either of nationality or of direct involvement in the genocide to feel concerned about it and to have an interest in sharing and transmitting its memory, which may be considered as one of the driving forces of the whole project, is not left outside but reflected in the text. Her text is most considerate, critical and outspoken about the kind of interest that is at the heart of the project and the bridge to a global readership. While, as an author, she keeps her distance by not representing the factual outsider-perspective of the visitor-narrator as a fictional insider-perspective, as a narrator, she actually moves closer to what she narrates.

Tadjou's narration also proceeds in a rhythm entirely different from *Murambi*, *La phalène des collines* and *L'ainé des orphelins*. While the other three novels pull the reader into the

narration through their composition, narrative rhythm and language, in *L'ombre d'Imana* the narration unfolds slowly, with many halts, interruptions, reversals and changes of perspective, time and space. Tadjó's writing thus forces us as readers to slow down our pace. Again we see how the text does not only tell about an aspect of trauma – namely the difficult process of gaining knowledge about the facts and effects of massive trauma – but also reproduces and performs this difficulty on the textual level.

L'ainé des orphelins by the Guinean writer Tierno Monénembo, at last, does not rely upon the project and the journey motive as framework. Its narration unfolds entirely from an assumed inner perspective of Rwandan society. In my view it is also the most realistic and most consistent representation of the irreconcilable contradictions, the misery and the absurdness the violence left behind. Monénembo's narrator, Faustin, is a rather disturbing character who does not fit into victim-perpetrator-dichotomies: a fifteen-year old boy who is sentenced to death and waits for his execution in one of Kigali's overcrowded prisons. In order to learn how he ended up there the reader has to follow Faustin far back in his remembrance. We do not receive his story neatly packed into a chronological, linear narration, but have to put it together like parts of a puzzle – scattered pieces of information just as they come to the narrator's mind. Only gradually do we learn about his childhood in Nyamata as the son of a Hutu father and a Tutsi mother, how he survives in the days of chaos and utter violence, how he joins other street children in Kigali, how he retrieves his severely traumatized younger brothers and sisters from an orphanage and takes them with him and how he shoots his friend when he finds him having sex with his sister. He is arrested because of murder and sentenced to death, since he stays unrepentant in front of the court. The novel ends with a flashback that reveals how the boy survived the massacre in the church of Nyamata buried beneath the corpse of his mother.

L'ainé des orphelins represents a multilayered and powerful critique of how official "truth" is constructed by distortions, simplifications and projections. Faustin confuses the reader and his or her notion of justice and guilt by consistently resisting classification. Together with a clever reporter he makes money out of presenting himself as a survivor to foreign journalists and telling them invented stories. In fact, the true story of his survival is not accessible to him. More than the other authors, Monénembo succeeds to integrate into the narrative structure the conflictual nature and diverging interests of a collective as well as an individual memory process in the face of extreme violence. The novel also shows how fiction is capable of restoring a voice which would otherwise remain unheard and unlistened to in public memory.

Teaching the novels

In general, we react rather personally to the literature we read, whether we like a story or not, if its specific style, plot, characters, its language and its subject reach us or not. The important thing is that we are allowed to react personally and emotionally. The demand to keep a neutral, distanced and rational stance is not as strong as with other kinds of texts – such as journalism, documentary or research. When discussing in class the books of Boris Boubacar Diop, Koulsy Lamko, Tierno Monénembo and Véronique Tadjo – the only ones available at the time in Vienna – I found that the students reacted in rather different ways to them. What they had in common, though, was that they all more or less had a favourite book, one text to which she or he attributed more credibility and authenticity than to the others, which reached her or him more than the other texts did. This demonstrates maybe the necessity to put testimony in as many forms as possible. Reading and discussing the texts also motivated them to measure, judge and compare what they read and search for further information.

Most of the students approved of Tadjo's personal, almost intimate form and judged it more appropriate than the more conventional novel constructions of the other authors. Generally, they were rather critical whenever the artistic design of the narration imposed itself too strongly and the balance between factual history and fiction was not well handled. One student, however, declared that it was especially Lamko's fantastic elements, his metaphorical and poetically rich language that left a strong impression. In her perception, the inventiveness of the narration did not distract from factual information about the genocide it includes, but on the contrary led to bear it in mind. Generally, the students showed in their papers that the study of fictional literature made the historical dimension of the genocide more "real" to them.

Conclusion

There remains a lot to be said about the novels which originated from the project "Rwanda – Writing in Duty of memory", about whether they meet the challenge to create a memory of the genocide which is authentic both as history and as story, both in its testimonial and in its creative dimension. It needs to be discussed in more detail whether the imaginative response they represent is up to the reality they confront, whether the narrative act meets the subject of the narration. But the important thing is that they have opened up this field of discussion, that

they have opened the door for a specific approach both to the memory of the genocide and to the social and symbolic relevance of imagination.

¹ For a critical analysis of Alfredo Jaar's work about the genocide see Levi Strauss, David. „A Sea of Griefs is not a Proscenium. On the Rwanda Projects of Alfredo Jaar.“ In Jaar, Alfredo. *Let there be light. The Rwanda project 1994-1998*. Barcelona: Actar, 1998.

² Porra, Véronique. „Entre travail de deuil et enjeux autour du devoir de mémoire: A propos de quelques romans sur le génocide rwandais.“ Paper presented at Versions and Subversions: International Conference on African Literatures, Humboldt University Berlin, Germany, May 1-4, 2002.

³ Brezault, Eloise. Entretien avec Boris Boubacar Diop. Interview done in April 2000 on the occasion of the publication of *Murambi – le livre des ossements*.

<http://www.africultures.com/vitrine/rwanda/rwanda.htm> (accessed August 25, 2006)

⁴ See also Mrkvicka, Rita. „Ruanda. Schreiben gegen das Vergessen.“ Master thesis, Vienna University, 2005, 65-68.

⁵ Mujawayo, Esther, and Souâd Belhaddad. *Survivantes. Rwanda, dix ans après le génocide*. Editions de l'Aube: La Tour d'Aigues, 2004.

⁶ Di Genio, Lanfranco. „Entretien avec Boubacar Boris Diop“.

<http://www.fieralingue.it/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=303> (accessed August 25, 2006)

⁷ Djebbar, Assia. *Ces Voix qui m'assiègent ... en marge de ma francophonie*. Paris: Albin Michel and Montréal: Les presses de l'université de Montréal, 1999, 247.

⁸ Hartman, Geoffrey. „Shoah and Intellectual Witness.“ *Partisan Review* 65 (1998), 37-48, p. 39-40.

⁹ Achebe, Chinua. „The Truth of Fiction.“ In *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays 1965-1987* by Chinua Achebe. London: Heinemann, 1988, 95-105, p. 95-96

¹⁰ Achebe, Chinua. „The Truth of Fiction“, 103.

¹¹ See also Kopf, Martina. „ZeugInnen der Geschichte.“ In *Trauma und Literatur: Das Nicht-Erzählbare erzählen – Assia Djebbar und Yvonne Vera*. Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel, 2005, 53-67.

¹² Kacandes, Irene. „Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work: Reading Gertrud Kolmar's *A Jewish Mother*.“ In *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*. Edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, Jonathan, and Leo Spitzer, Leo. Hanover and London: Univ. Press of New England, 1999, 55-71.

¹³ Laub, Dori. „An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival.“ In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. London: Routledge, 1992, 75-92, p. 75.

¹⁴ Kacandes, „Narrative Witnessing as Memory Work“, 56.

¹⁵ See also Kopf, Martina. „Writing Sexual Violence: Words and Silences in Yvonne Vera's *Under the Tongue*.“ In *Body, Sexuality, and Gender. Versions and Subversions in African Literatures 1*. Edited by Flora Veit-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski. Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2005, 243-253.

¹⁶ Di Genio, Lanfranco. „Entretien avec Boubacar Boris Diop“.

<http://www.fieralingue.it/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=303> (accessed August 25, 2006)

¹⁷ Interview in *LiteraturNachrichten: Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft zur Förderung von Literatur in Afrika, Asien und Lateinamerika* 67 (2000), 7.

¹⁸ Tadjó, Véronique. „Der Schatten Gottes. Nachdenken über Ruanda.“ Transl. by Sigrid Groß. *Wespennest* 143 (2006), 59-60, p.59.

¹⁹ Di Genio, Lanfranco. „Entretien avec Boubacar Boris Diop“.

<http://www.fieralingue.it/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=303> (accessed August 25, 2006)

²⁰ Koulsy Lamko shares this allusion to the corpse of a young woman exposed in the church of Nyamata with Boris Diop and Véronique Tadjó, who equally integrated it into their texts.

²¹ Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery. The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books, 1997 (1992), 7.