

Monénembo's *L'Ainé des orphelins* and the Rwandan Genocide

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**Lisa McNee,**

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins* and the Rwandan Genocide," Lisa McNee discusses Tierno Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins*, a novel that offers a double discourse and a dual memory of the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994. McNee argues that *L'Aîné des orphelins* presents us with an extraordinary kind of fictional testimonial to genocide. Although Monénembo is not from Rwanda and did not participate in the tragedy, only someone who has paid the price of the clarity needed to distinguish between good and bad faith could have written a novel like *L'Aîné des orphelins*. Monénembo's characterization of Faustin as a young man who feels guilty without reason is plausible, given what we know of victims of abuse and their reactions, or those of survivors of other humanitarian catastrophes. One can only speculate about Monénembo's own experiences as an exile. In *Monénembo*, McNee proposes, we have a rare example of an intellectual who accepts the burden of a certain complicity, the complicity of those who did not speak out or intervene at the time of the genocide and who does not flinch at the cost of confronting that complicity. Of course, the Rwandan genocide recalls the shadows of other genocides and the reflections that others have shared may help us to better understand the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath.

**Lisa MCNEE**

### **Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins* and the Rwandan Genocide**

Crimes against humanity expose the cruel deficiency of those conventional codes most of us live by, as well as our self-defensive attempts to bury that knowledge, even when that means blaming the innocent victim. The torturer does not wish to be reminded of his acts, yet neither does the victim wish to remember the horrors of the torture chamber. Least of all do the onlookers who refused to make a move to prevent genocide wish to think about the lost opportunities and the hypocrisy of supposedly humanitarian pretensions that have led some to equate victim with killer (on the question of hypocrisy, see Destexhe 10-11; Semujanga 210). Memory and its gaps, voluntary and involuntary, are crucial, then, not only to the judicial process, but also to the process of recuperation and regeneration: The work of memory undertaken by West African novelist Tierno Monénembo in *L'Aîné des Orphelins* is the product of a major effort to commemorate the Rwandan genocide and to interpret that catastrophe and its consequences from an African point of view. We could see the text as a commissioned work, for the organizers of *Fest'Africa*, an annual event celebrating African writing and criticism, funded the writer's stay in Rwanda in 1999 and encouraged the work that led to the publication of this and other texts. Monénembo and several other writers such as Boris Boubacar Diop, Véronique Tadjo, and Abdourrahmane Wabéri were invited to participate in a series of events in Rwanda that included visits to commemorative sites and *lieux de mémoire* in Philippe Nora's sense. They as well as their Rwandan hosts thus took part in the ongoing work of reconstructing national and individual memories through cultural work. Although the novel is not linked to place in the same way that memorials are, the novels produced under the auspices of *Fest'Afrique's* Rwandan efforts offer physical and intellectual proof that the labor of memory is underway and that it will bear the fruits of peace.

*L'Aîné des Orphelins* offers a double discourse and a dual memory of the genocide that took place in Rwanda in 1994. Monénembo, who is from Guinea-Conakry, based the narrative on the testimonials he heard during his stay in Rwanda. Two voices weave the story then, for we hear "Faustin" on the surface, "Tierno" in the words. The narrative's structure also bears the marks of the trauma that has made it so difficult for survivors to face their memories; as a result, the novel, like a double-bottomed drawer, offers one version of its hero's life that is followed by a different version after he has been imprisoned and can tell the listener/reader about his experiences during the genocide. The novel itself thus undermines optimistic views of the possibilities for redemption and absolution offered by or to human nature. The narrative buries its hero Faustin's true memories under the weight of more current stories of his escapades as a member of a growing tribe of homeless street-children, only revealing his experiences of the genocide near the end of the novel, which closes with an ambiguous judgment. Faustin is both victim and murderer, child and man, innocent and guilty. These paradoxes link the narrative to other testimonials of genocide. Although we cannot reduce genocide to an abstract form -- each historical genocide has been unique in its own way -- certain characteristics that allow us to define genocide as a category of crime make it possible to compare different genocidal events in precise ways. The Rwandan genocide recalls the shadows of other genocides, and the reflections that others have shared may help us to better understand the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. Given the double structure and double voicing of Monénembo's narrative, as well as the text's focus on guilt and judgment, these issues cry out for our attention. The same issues belabor Primo Levi, who survived Auschwitz. Levi writes that "Whoever has sufficient experience of human things knows that the distinction (the opposition, a linguist would say) good faith/bad faith is impregnated with optimism and confidence in humanity, and all the more, and for better reason, when applied to men like those I have just named. It [the distinction] presupposes a mental lucidity that is the characteristic of a small number [of people], and that even this small number loses immediately when, for any reason at all, the present or past reality provokes in them anxiety or malaise. In these conditions, even if those who lie consciously or falsify the reality coldly indisputably exist, more numerous are those who lift anchor, distance themselves, momentarily or forever, from sincere memories and fabricate themselves a reality

that pleases them" (Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* 26-27). Monénembo's novels, particularly *L'Aîné des Orphelins*, reveal a similar discomfort with the simplistic oppositions that so often provide the underpinnings for the plots of westerns, adventure novels, exotic literature of the Indiana Jones variety, and other, more illustrious literary works that present Manichean moralities. Indeed, Monénembo's works show a similar intent to penetrate the shadows.

Survivors of genocide have been compared to Orpheus, that great musician who persuaded the God of the Underworld to permit him to return to the world of the living with his beloved Eurydice. The sole condition was that he could not look at her until they had both regained the world of light. Failing to meet this condition, Orpheus lost his love a second time. Unable to accept Eurydice's death, Orpheus remained celibate until his death. According to psychoanalysts Françoise Sironi and Claude Barrois, the myth "contient la configuration de la 'culpabilité du survivant'" (Sironi 119). For Barrois, the problem of the survivor is that she/he is caught between worlds; unable to return fully to the world of the living because she/he has not been able to mourn those lost to the genocide. Caught in a half-life that cannot be called death, the survivor tries to straddle both worlds. The living may feel guilty for thinking less frequently of their dead as time passes, or for choosing to return to an active life. At the same time, they feel guilty for thinking too often about their dead. As Sironi says, "il est question de culpabilité pour rendre compte du fait qu'ils parlent des morts, qu'ils sont parfois avec les morts et qu'ils ont du mal à vivre parmi les vivants" (120) ("There is a question of guilt as a way of accounting for the fact that they speak of the dead, are often with the dead, and that they find it difficult to live among the living"; all subsequent translation is mine). In other words, survivors' guilt is a nebulous sentiment that might better be called limbo. Faustin clearly lives in this limbo state. Although he shares no memory of criminal action with readers until later in the narrative, he is shadowed by guilt. Indeed, Monénembo's characters often see themselves as guilty parties, or live in the margins. In *Un Attiéké pour Elgass*, the narrator reveals himself as the guilty party who betrayed Elgass; in *Pelourinho*, we have another guilty character, and in *Les Écailles du Ciel* we see yet another trial underway in the interstices of the narrative. It is often difficult for the reader to say whether these characters bear the burden of a cosmic, existential guilt, or whether they are guilty of a punishable crime, a theme I discuss in my paper "Their Voices Cry out from the Earth: The Rwandan Genocide in the West African Imagination." Faustin, for example, struggles with the questions that Hobbes and other philosophers of contract theory in early modern Europe dealt with, as he tries to understand what the rights and responsibilities of members of human society might be after genocide. These questions stem in part from the doubt that hangs over survivors of genocide like a cloud: why me, and not some other? Why did I survive, when I am no better, no more important, than the average person? Why me, when so many died? The psychologist and Auschwitz survivor Bruno Bettelheim coined the term "survivor's guilt" to describe this reaction. Levi prefers to analyze the emotion in the context of what he calls the "gray zone," rather than speculating on the psychological processes at work. He observes, over and over again, that the survivors were privileged, and that this is why they survived. Some were privileged in very minor ways because they served the rations and thus had access to more food. Others, like Levi himself, were privileged because their professional skills were needed. Faustin seems to have been privileged merely because he was a young boy at the time of the attack, and thus smaller and more easily hidden under the mass of adult bodies. He survived by accident. The speed with which the genocide took place in Rwanda makes this plausible. He simply lay under the pile of the dead until the killers had left. One can only imagine what it was like, lying under the weight of the dead bodies. Their weight oppresses the young boy throughout most of the novel, but this weight is invisible. Ghostly. However, this accident is perhaps less problematic than the degrading manner in which he must live in the aftermath of the genocide. Street children are nobody's concern, until a social worker named Claudine takes an interest. In a sense, these marginalized children are expected to feel guilty for existing. Their situation derives from another, one that Levi describes as he delves more deeply into the question of the "gray zone," relying on Manzoni to explain the most difficult, perturbing thought: "Les provocateurs, les oppresseurs, tous ceux qui, d'une façon quelconque, font tort à autrui, sont coupables, non seulement du mal qu'ils commettent, mais encore du pervertissement auquel ils conduisent

l'âme des offensés" (44) ("The provocateurs, the oppressors, all those who, in whatever way, do harm to another, are guilty, not just for the evil that they commit, but also for the perversion to which they lead the soul of the victims").

The tales of most survivors are not pretty. In Rwanda, as in the concentration camps, people were willing to do almost anything to survive. Failing reprieve, Tutsi victims paid their murderers to kill them quickly, mercifully. As Levi notes sharply, suffering does not uplift or ennoble anyone. In the concentration camps, the first people to hit the incoming prisoners were often Jewish prisoners themselves who had been given jobs as Kapos by the Nazis. Similarly, the children in the Head Quarters have lost the innocence that we associate with childhood. They are thieves and bandits by necessity. The genocidal propaganda in Rwanda did not urge killers to spare innocent children, but to mow them down. The children were compared to weeds who will spring up as enemies. Better uproot them now, suggested hate propagandists, rather than wait to face them later, when they will be more dangerous (Gasengayire). Only luck explains Faustin's survival. Similarly, children were systematically killed in Nazi camps. Levi recounts the macabre tale of a young girl's miraculous survival in spite of the gas chamber, only to tell us that the SS in charge killed her with a blow to the neck because she was too young to keep the secret of the gas chamber. Monénembo's characters also feel guilty for more tangible reasons. In *L'Aîné des Orphelins*, for instance, the main character's crime is simultaneously obvious and ambiguous. As the title indicates, Faustin's role is that of the eldest of the orphans: the eldest of the remaining members of the Nsenghimana family, and thus the responsible figure. Faustin's "crime" is negligence, from his standpoint. He assumed that his sister was safe in the children's Head Quarters, but he was wrong, for Musinkôro, the leader of the street children, has sexual relations with her. Faustin reacts with rage. He does not question his sister or wonder whether her sexual relations with Musinkôro were consensual; he assumes that they were not. Faced with this social crime -- was not the leader also a father figure who took on an incestuous role in this relationship with Faustin's sister? -- he murders Musinkôro. Perhaps taking vengeance in this manner would have been viewed as a virtue in some societies; certainly, in many patriarchal societies, men are supposed to protect "their" women's virtue. By murdering Musinkôro to cleanse his family of dishonor, Faustin chooses to follow an honor code that colonialism, Christian evangelism, and the official law of the land repress. Figuratively and factually, this act signifies the return of the repressed: the return of the repressed memory of pre-genocide Rwanda, and the return of the repressed memory of guilt and shame, for an orphaned child has shown more respect for honor than the adults, guilty of genocide. This interpretation is of course a masculinist reading, yet the text lends itself to that interpretation, for Faustin becomes a martyr to his masculinist family values. And always, he must strive to live up to the ghost of his father, the man who heroically died alongside his Tutsi wife rather than deserting her.

Ironically, Faustin is executed for killing Musinkôro, while his cellmates, all guilty of crimes against humanity, look on. In fact, his true crime is that he answers honestly when asked during his trial if he regrets having killed Musinkôro. He says no, and a woman in the public area warns him that he should think of saving his neck. He responds, "Je n'ai fait que ça, ces derniers temps: sauver ma tête. Si on me la coupe, je n'aurai qu'un regret: n'avoir pas suffisamment profité du bon temps" (137) ("I haven't done anything but that, these last days: save my neck. If they cut my throat, I will have only one regret: that I haven't enjoyed the good times enough") and "Ah! dit le premier juge, il t'arrive tout de même de regretter! ? Ta propre vie, bien entendu, sûrement pas celle de ta victime! Tu es un monstre, Faustin! Tu ne mérites pas d'appartenir au genre humain! (137) ("Oh! Said the first judge, you sometimes regret something! ? Your own life, that's understood, surely not that of your victim! You are a monster, Faustin! You don't deserve to belong to the human race!"). The judge's statement is troubling for many reasons, but two stand out. First, as Destexhe writes, evaluating the murder of a single person with the same set of values that one uses to judge crimes against humanity trivializes genocide by ignoring the differing motives of the two crimes (10-11). Faustin wishes to protect the sister who survived the genocide by a miracle, while his cellmates chose to kill their neighbors and friends in a frenzy of hatred. The crimes are intrinsically different. Second, the judge seems to be demanding that a young child

take on the responsibilities of an adult. Why on earth shouldn't a child seek to enjoy life? Why should Faustin carry the burden of the existential guilt which adults -- whether guilty of genocide or of simply watching the genocide happen without defending their neighbors, friends and family members -- refuse to carry?

According to Sironi, survivors suffer from a "secondary trauma" due to their status as survivors of crimes against humanity: "Les survivants se rendent bien souvent compte qu'ils sont des témoins gênants aux yeux de tous ceux qui n'ont pas été protagonistes de leur tragédie. C'est fréquemment ce qui est à l'origine de leur amertume? Derrière la bienveillance, l'indignation et le désir de réparation des personnes politiques ou morales ? se cache en réalité une crainte. Les survivants sont craints. Ceux qui ont échappé à la mort ont un pouvoir (d'ordre psychologique) que les autres n'ont pas" (125-26) ("The survivors realize quite often that they are embarrassing witnesses in the eyes of those who were not protagonists in their tragedy. That is what is frequently the source of their bitterness ? Behind the goodwill, the indignation and the desire for reparations of political or moral persons? a fear is hiding, in reality. The survivors are feared. Those who have escaped death have a power [of a psychological nature] that others do not have"). The guilty survivor becomes, in a sense, the scapegoat of those who would rather not remember their crimes, or even the crimes of others whom they did not restrain. This represents a perversion of the scapegoat as it was originally understood. The scapegoat, we must remember, was originally the person chosen to carry the sins of the community in order to wash the community of those sins and their consequences. Wole Soyinka's play *The Strong Breed* gives us an exact representation of this process as it takes place when it is part of a socially accepted, controlled process (although Eman initially refuses this burdensome role, he agrees in the end to fulfill it and save his community). Isaac, who was replaced by a sheep after Abraham showed his willingness to sacrifice his son, gives us another. Even if we do not accept the logic behind this kind of sacrifice, it is clear that we cannot equate it with genocide. Indeed, Soyinka presents the scapegoat as a hero who is recognized as such by the community. This ancient process of socially sanctioned cleansing through sacrifice becomes something quite different in the context of the political and social life of an industrialized nation, and in the context of genocide. In Hitler's Germany, the Jewish people were the scapegoats of an insane, totalitarian system; in Habyarimana's Rwanda, the Tutsi played this role in a dictatorship no less insane in its own way. The word "souffre-douleur" ("human punching-bag") is perhaps more appropriate in this context than the word scapegoat, for the term refers to the person who is supposed to absorb, sponge-like, the pain that the community feels. Rather than cleansing the community, the sponge simply retains the tide of dirty water -- at least until someone squeezes it and wrings out the sponge in order to use it once again for the same purpose.

We ask the survivor of terror to become this sponge for us, and to release the words of torment for us. She/he thus carries a double burden: the burden of the painful memories of torture, and the burden that the oppressors and those who turned a blind eye to their acts do not wish to carry. She/he must provide a testimony, witness to the horrors that humanity is capable of committing, for no one else will do so. We do not think frequently enough about the courage that such testimony demands. The victim must relive the events of his/her torture, and face the disbelieving faces of those who do not want to believe, or the taunts of those who wish to scapegoat him/her and escape condemnation. Levi's discussion of the memories of the concentration camp includes a vital question: "Distinguer la bonne et la mauvaise foi se paie: cela demande une profonde sincérité avec soi-même, exige un effort continu, intellectuel et moral. Comment peut-on réclamer cet effort à un Darquier et à ses semblables?" (28) ("Distinguishing between good and bad faith is costly; it requires a profound sincerity with oneself, demands a continuous effort, intellectual and moral. How can we demand this effort from a Darquier and from the like?"). Obviously, we cannot claim this clarity from the perpetrators, so we claim this tribute from the victims -- from Primo Levi, Élie Wiesel, and from the growing number of survivors of the Rwandan genocide: See, for example, Yolande Mukagasana's *La Mort ne veut pas de moi*, Béatrice Umutesi's *Fuir ou mourir. Le Vécu d'une réfugiée rwandaise*, or Marie-Aimable Umurerwa's *Comme la langue entre les dents*. The question of memory thus becomes vital, for testimonial depends on memory. Monénembo has shown particular interest for the problems that traumatic memories can create. For example, vic-

tims and their listeners often doubt the memories of atrocities that they recount. Indeed, many victims simply erase or repress those memories that are too painful. *Les écailles du ciel*, Monénembo's first great success, won the Grand Prix Littéraire de l'Afrique Noire. In this novel, the community's memories of defeat are constantly put into doubt because different people remember them differently. Sibé, for instance, likes to believe he was a hero, while his friends remind the villagers that he was cowering in fear, far from combat during the decisive battle. Those who are more sincere have difficulty sustaining the notion of a reliable memory. For example, when the narrator and his friends face a veritable siege in their favorite bar, Chez Ngaoulo, the narrator claims that he remembers little of the event. "Combien de temps dura cet abominable siège? Je ne saurais répondre. Je n'en garde aucun souvenir précis. Et peut-être bien que cela vaut mieux ainsi" (177) ("How long did that abominable siege last? I wouldn't know how to answer. I don't retain any precise memory. And perhaps it's better thus").

Clearly, victims of trauma efface certain memories in order to go on with life. The scars remain embedded in the memory, but most victims cannot pick at the scabs too frequently. Faustin is clearly a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder, for he reacts in precisely this manner. Indeed, we learn little about him except that he seems to fear human companionship and he prefers living on his own in a hideaway that he finds after running away from the children's shelter where his one remaining friend, Claudine, finds a place for him. This flight from a comfortable home in the orphanage marks a flight from memory of all sorts. Memory is an uncertain instrument, as Levi remarks, and we need other people as well as other tools -- paper, pens, ink -- in order to supplement it. The hypothetical case of the castaway on a desert island provides a sort of case history of the uncertainties of memory. Robinson Crusoe, for instance, has great difficulty devising a calendar or method of recording events. Slowly, his "memory" disappears as he loses all but the most rudimentary social skills. His encounter with Friday signifies the retrieval of his memory, which is social. In fact, one could almost say that memory of social and biographical events only matters when we are involved in social relations. Crusoe needed to remember how to feed, clothe and protect himself more than he needed to be able to tell his story to himself. Yet he teaches Friday his language *in order* to tell him his story, and also to share the daily events that become life itself, because memory is important when we are in social situations. The metaphor of Crusoe demonstrates the relationship between writing and memory. And memory is fundamentally a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves, in the process creating our selves and our lives as social subjects. The fact that he imposes his language on Friday testifies to the importance of that self-narrative.

Faustin's story is that of a waif who flees human contact in terror because he has seen the barbarity of humankind. However, he does eventually decide to return to a form of social life, as his use of the pronoun "nous" in the following passage reveals: "[Faustin:] Nous n'avons besoin de personne. Moi en tout cas! [Claudine:] Celui-là va mourir, qui croit se passer des autres! Tu vois, je ne me contente pas de parler le kinyarwanda, je manie aussi les proverbes" (60). ("[Faustin:] We don't need anyone. Not me, in any case! He who believes he can live without others will die! [Claudine:] You see, I am not satisfied to speak Kinyarwanda, I also deal in proverbs"). At this point, Faustin has returned to the Head Quarters, the abandoned house that he and other homeless children have made their own. His return has little or nothing to do with Claudine's words, although these words do make him rethink his position. In fact, he finds his own "Fridays" -- his two siblings, the mute and tormented victims of post-traumatic stress disorder no one else at the children's shelter was able to help. Miraculously, they turn out to be his real siblings, lost in the mêlée of the genocide. His words draw his siblings out of the autistic world that they have known since the frenzy of the genocide, and he leads them into the intermediate world of the children's Head Quarters. Of course, this imposition of a "language" on his siblings differs from Robinson's teaching Friday his language in order to make him his slave. Yet Faustin has authority over his younger siblings, and clearly views himself as the father of the remainder of the family. His sense of responsibility, then, is the motive behind this radical decision to return to human society, which he regards as corrupt at best, and insanely murderous at worst. He views the Head Quarters as an intermediate world that lies between genocidal adult society and the total autarky of his previous isolation.

In the world of the Head Quarters, he and his siblings need a language in order to interact and to create viable social identities and the memories that sustain those identities. Only Faustin seems able to bridge the gap between the present and pre-genocidal life through memory and language; however, language fails him, and he uses violent retaliation in order to recreate the family and the role of the patriarch who protects his own.

Failures of language beset survivors of genocide as well as those who wish to denounce crimes against humanity. Sometimes we may be complicit with a certain form of negation of human rights offenses, for we choose not to speak of them. Indeed, the Parliament of Canada's recent recognition of the Armenian genocide was a major political victory for survivors and their descendants, for the federal government did not want to risk tense relations with Turkey. When we do focus on genocide, we may choose to focus on extraordinary exceptions, as Spielberg does in *Schindler's List*, or prettify tragic reality, as Benigni does in *Life is Beautiful*. Children did not survive in secret corners of Auschwitz and Schindler saved his workers' lives so that they could make profits for him. His Jewish accountant was the real hero, although this escapes the average viewer. The complicity that one sees in this context, according to Naomi Mandel, is related to the rhetoric of the unspeakable that veils Auschwitz from the critic's view and works to "protect us from the implications of a history that we simultaneously acknowledge and disavow" (215). Although Theodor Adorno considered poetry a "monstrosity" after Auschwitz, his concern that Europe's cultural producers were tainted by their cultures' involvement in the Nazi terror should not free us from paying the price that Levi believes clarity demands. As Mandel argues, a rhetoric of the unspeakable can also imply an acceptance of non-intervention -- indeed, a virtual absolution for those who watched while the genocide began in Europe, or those who watched and did not intervene in Rwanda (223). Moreover, it leaves the anti-Semitism that made the Nazi horror possible untouched. Mandel states explicitly that she does not wish to equate the Shoah with the genocide in Rwanda, which must be emphasized. However, she does compare the two experiences several times in her essay, partly because the current discourses absolving westerners for their decision to look away from Rwanda until after the bloodbath, and then disavow their guilt, corresponds so precisely with the issues of complicity and guilt that she analyzes in this essay. The distaste for detailed discussions of the anti-Tutsi propaganda simply leaves the system behind the ethnocide untouched.

In light of the problem of complicity, *L'Aîné des Orphelins* presents us with an extraordinary kind of fictional testimonial to genocide. Tierno Monénembo is not from Rwanda, and did not participate in the tragedy. Nonetheless, only someone who has paid the price of the clarity needed to distinguish between good and bad faith could have written this novel. Monénembo's characterization of Faustin as a young man who feels guilty without reason is plausible, given what we know of victims of abuse and their reactions, or those of survivors of other humanitarian catastrophes. One can only speculate about Monénembo's own experiences as an exile. We do know about the political repression and torture in Sékou Touré's Guinea, but the moral and psychological consequences of that reign of terror are perhaps less well known. However, life under that régime almost certainly prepared Monénembo well for the task of understanding Rwandan victims. Yet similar shared experiences do not account for the authenticity of a literary work, which is by definition the product of an effort of the imagination. In this writer, we have a rare example of an intellectual who accepts the burden of a certain complicity, the complicity of those who did not speak out or intervene at the time of the *simusiga* (event that leaves no survivors), and who does not flinch at the cost of confronting that complicity. By telling Faustin's story, Monénembo refuses to use the survivor as his *souffre-douleur* or his moral sponge. In this sense, the mission of the organizers of *Fest'Africa* 1999 is a true success.

Note: I thank Frieda Ekotto for pointing out the importance of the *Fest'Africa* commission as a facture in the production of the novel's discourse (at the 2001 African Literature Association Conference). My thanks also to Monique Gasengayire for letting me know that *simusiga* is the term Rwanda survivors use to designate the genocide of 1994.

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