

The (Un)Believable Truth about Rwanda

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ABSTRACT

Since the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, a proliferation of fictional and non-fictional narratives has appeared, many of them claiming to represent the truth about what really happened in 1994. These include a small but significant number of Rwandan-authored novels which, this article suggests, invite the reader to accept what I call a “documentary pact”. While there is no single version of the truth about what happened in Rwanda, one of the common features of fictional responses to the genocide is an emphasis on truth claims. Drawing on examples of both fictional and non-fictional responses to the genocide, this essay discusses the implications of Rwandan authors’ insistence on the veracity of narratives that are sometimes difficult to believe. Emphasizing the importance for Rwandan writers, particularly survivors, of eliciting empathy from their readers, this essay will show that the documentary pact is an effective means of appealing to our shared human experience.

KEYWORDS

Rwanda; Genocide; Tutsi; Truth; Belief; Documentary; Fiction

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Introduction

In Boubacar Boris Diop's 2001 novel, *Murambi, le livre des ossements*, a fictional Rwandan genocide survivor Gérard Nayinzira tells the protagonist, Cornelius, about the time he saw a militiaman raping a woman under a tree. During the rape, the commander of the militia passes by and crudely teases the young man: "Hé toi, Simba, partout où on va, c'est toujours la même chose, les femmes d'abord, les femmes, les femmes! Dépêche-toi de finir tes pompes, on a promis à Papa de bien faire le travail!" After walking on a few steps, the commander turns back on his heels, picks up a large stone and crushes the woman's head. Simba carries on raping the woman, seemingly even more sexually excited than before, as her body shudders in the throes of death. When he finishes telling the story, Gérard wants to make sure that Cornelius believes what he has told him: "J'ai vu cela de mes propres yeux", he explains, "Est-ce que tu me crois, Cornelius? Il est important que tu me croies. Je n'invente rien, ce n'est pas nécessaire pour une fois."¹

This horrific scene, itself a fictional example of the very real acts committed day after day, for one hundred days, during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, highlights the complicated relationship between storytelling, truth and belief. The event Diop's character Gérard describes is so awful it defies belief. Yet Gérard insists that the story is true – he saw it with his own eyes – and he wants reassurance that Cornelius believes him. The unbelievable nature of what he describes makes it all the more important that he is believed. At the same time, Gérard's words remind us that all stories involve a degree of fabrication, but, he says, in the case of the genocide in

¹ Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (Abidjan: Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes, 2001), p. 211.

Rwanda: "Je n'invente rien, ce n'est pas nécessaire pour une fois". If nothing is made up, then the story should not be difficult to believe. Yet, what really happened in Rwanda in 1994 is probably much harder to believe than any fictional account might be.

Since the Genocide against the Tutsi in 1994, a number of writers from Rwanda have sought to make sense of what happened in their country through fiction. These writers include genocide survivors, Rwandan exiles, a former RPF soldier, a human rights worker who resisted the genocide and the son of an alleged perpetrator.² Despite their different relationships with the genocide of 1994, these writers' works share the common yet paradoxical feature that is an emphasis on truth claims in their fiction. Each of them tries to convince readers of the veracity of their fictional stories with documentary features ranging from paratextual apparatus and historical facts to footnotes and photographs.³ This essay will suggest that such attempts to authenticate fictional narratives create what I call a "documentary pact" that invites the reader to believe the unbelievable. Through its emphasis on believability, the documentary pact creates a relationship of empathy between a genocide story that might otherwise be dismissed as unfamiliar or implausible and a reader who might struggle to believe that story.

Truth and Belief

In the view of one of Africa's most influential contemporary philosophers, Achille Mbembe, truth and belief are inextricably linked:

What is a true narrative if not the narrative believed true and so regarded by the person narrating it, hearing it, or accepting it? The problem is not to know

² See Nicki Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories: Fiction after 1994* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

³ Even Gilbert Gatore, whose novel *Le Passé devant soi* (Paris: Phébus, 2008) refuses to explicitly name Rwanda, is positioned by his publisher and in the media as both a victim and a witness (see Catherine Coquio, 'Poétiser l'enfant tueur. Questions sur *Le passé devant soi* de G. Gatore', in Deborah Lévy-Bertherat and Pierre Schoentjes (eds), *J'ai tué. Violence guerrière et fiction* (Geneva: Droz, 2010), 231-265 (262)).

whether what is drawn and “shown” is true, since, to a large extent, every system of truth rests on a system of belief. The question of truth is, effectively, resolved by the reader, not only through the mimetic and allegorical relation as such, but also through the direct relation of familiarity and plausibility that exists between what is narrated and everyday experience.⁴

Challenging Ricoeur’s definition of fiction as distinct from history, Mbembe suggests that, if a reader finds a narrative familiar and plausible, then he or she will more readily accept that narrative as true. Although Mbembe is writing here about political caricatures of the autocratic and longstanding President of Cameroon Paul Biya, his point could equally be applied to representations of historical reality in fiction. But whereas the excesses of a leader such as Paul Biya would be both familiar and plausible to many readers, the question of narrative truth becomes more difficult to resolve in a historical context that bears no relation of familiarity and plausibility to most of our everyday experiences. During just 100 days, over one million Rwandan people were killed in ways so brutal that they are unfamiliar to most of us and could therefore be dismissed as implausible; or, if not implausible, then so excessive that they become difficult to represent and therefore difficult to believe.

In *Murambi*, Gérard has a knowing interlocutor in Cornelius who, as the child of both a Tutsi victim and a Hutu perpetrator, might accept the tale of what he witnessed as both familiar and plausible. Indeed, the narrative suggests that he does believe the story when it states that, “Cornelius savait bien que le génocide n’était pas un de ces films d’action où les faibles peuvent toujours compter sur l’arrivée, au dernier moment, d’un jeune héros plein de force et de bravoure.”⁵ Alongside Gérard’s story, this comment raises the wider question of the role of fiction in representing genocide. The genocide in

⁴ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 159-160.

⁵ Diop, *Murambi, le livre des ossements*, p. 11.

Rwanda was nothing like an action film and no one came to save the Tutsi from attempted annihilation. Diop's narrator reminds us of this in the closing pages of the novel: "un génocide n'est pas une histoire comme les autres, avec un début et une fin plus ou moins ordinaires".⁶ Even if Gérard's words are believed by Cornelius within the fictional space of the novel, the reader is invited to reflect on the relationship between the story world Diop has created and the historical reality of the 1994 genocide. Eileen Julien pushes this question in her foreword to the English translation of *Murambi* when she asks,

What does a novel such as this bring to the awful violence of genocide that journalistic accounts and histories cannot? These forms of narrative [journalism and history] are held to a well-known standard of truth. They are meant to establish and report facts, to offer an accurate and balanced, if not objective representation of events. *Murambi* does not contain such elements.⁷

Although, as Julien notes, journalists and historians are held to what she calls "a well-known standard of truth", the fictive nature of both journalistic and historical writing has been demonstrated time and time again. As Leonora Flis reminds us: "The blurring of the border between fiction and nonfiction has been in existence for a long time, probably for as long as there has been narration, oral or written."⁸ The best-known critic of the conventional demarcations between history and fiction is probably Hayden White who has written provocatively about what he calls the "fictions of factual representation", by

⁶Ibid., p. 215.

⁷ Eileen Julien, "Foreword: An Urn for the Dead, an Hourglass for the Living", in Boubacar Boris Diop, *Murambi, the Book of Bones*, trans. Fiona Mc Laughlin (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp. ix-xii (p. ix).

⁸ Leonora Flis, *Factual Fictions: Narrative Truth and the Contemporary American Documentary novel* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), p. 178.

which he means "the extent to which the discourse of the historian and that of the imaginative writer overlap, resemble, or correspond with each other".⁹

Truth Claims

One of the striking common features of fictional responses to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda is an explicit emphasis on what, following White, we might call the "facts of fictional representation". This is particularly the case in fiction by authors born in Rwanda.¹⁰ Jean-Marie Rurangwa, for example, ends his novel *Au sortir de l'enfer* with an authorial postscript in which he states, "Je voudrais qu'*Au sortir de l'enfer* qui est un texte de fiction sur fond de vérité historique soit considéré comme un témoignage."¹¹ *Le Chapelet et la machette* by survivor Camille Karangwa opens with a warning: "Les faits que nous relatons vont certainement émouvoir ceux qui n'ont pas vécu de telles atrocités. Ce n'est pourtant pas ni le goût de la fiction ni la caprice de l'imagination. C'est la triste vérité que nous devons connaître et reconnaître."¹² Robusto Kana's novel about the Rwandan Patriotic Army, *Le Défi de survivre* is labelled a "roman historique" and Benjamin Sehene's fictional staging of the story of real-life priest Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, *Le Feu sous la soutane* is presented with the opposite of a disclaimer: as stated on the back cover, the text is "inspiré d'une histoire vraie".¹³

These statements of veracity are not unique to Rwanda genocide fiction by authors from Rwanda: writers from other countries make similar claims in their fictional works.

Québécois journalist Gil Courtemanche explains that his novel, *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* is not just a novel, but also "une chronique et un reportage".¹⁴ And of the six fictional works produced as a result of the 2008 Fest'Africa literary project, "Rwanda:

⁹ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 121.

¹⁰ Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, p. 41.

¹¹ Jean-Marie V. Rurangwa, *Au sortir de l'enfer* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), p.197.

¹² Camille Karangwa, *Le Chapelet et la machette* (Pretoria: Editions du jour, 2003), p.7.

¹³ Robusto Kana, *Le Défi de survivre* (Aix-en-Provence: Persée, 2009); Benjamin Sehene, *Le Feu sous la soutane* (Paris: L'Esprit Frappeur, 2005).

¹⁴ Gil Courtemanche, *Un dimanche à la piscine à Kigali* (Paris: Denoël, 2003 (2000)).

Ecrire par devoir de mémoire”, only the novel by Guinean author Tierno Monénembo, *L’Aîné des orphelins*, is explicitly presented as a work of the imagination. Even here, the status of the text is ambiguous since Monénembo writes in his epigraph that “Si le génocide rwandais est irréfutable, les situations et les personnages de ce roman sont, eux, fictifs pour la plupart.”¹⁵ If most (“la plupart”) of this novel is fictional, then it follows that some of it must be factual.¹⁶ However, if we return to Mbembe’s definition of narrative truth, then all these claims are potentially redundant since, what matters is not truth or facts, but the extent to which the reader believes the story.

Fictional Responses to 1994

This essay draws mostly on francophone examples, which include the novels and short stories written by authors from Rwanda. In 2008, at the same time as it applied to become the fifty-fourth member of the Commonwealth, the Rwandan government replaced French with English as the main language of instruction in schools. Because this switch is still recent, French was - and still is for the time being - the main language of fictional production in Rwanda. There are a couple of early novels in English by Rwandans exiled in anglophone countries (John Rusimbi and Aimable Twagilimana), but most published fiction has so far been written in French.¹⁷

There was very little written fiction from Rwanda until after the genocide.¹⁸ The only Rwandan writer to receive any critical attention before 1994 was J. Saverio Naigiziki, author of the semi-autobiographical novel, *Mes tranches à trente ans: escapade*

¹⁵ Tierno Monénembo, *L’Aîné des orphelins* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

¹⁶ As Josias Semujanga, notes, Monénembo deliberately mixes fact and fiction. See Semujanga, ‘Les Méandres du récit du génocide dans *L’aîné des orphelins*’, *Etudes Littéraires*, 35.1 (2003), 101-115 (p.111).

¹⁷ John Rusimbi, *By the Time She Returned* (London: Janus, 1999); *The Hyena’s Wedding: The Untold Horrors of the Genocide* (London: Janus, 2007); Aimable Twagilimana, *Manifold Annihilation* (New York: Rivercross Publishing, 1996).

¹⁸ See Romuald Fonkoua, ‘A propos de l’initiative du Fest’Africa: “témoignage du dedans”, “témoignage du dehors”, *Lendemain* 112 (*Rwanda -1994: témoignages et littérature*), 67-72.

ruandaise.¹⁹ While there had always been a very rich tradition of oral storytelling and poetry, some of which had been recorded in writing, most notably by the Catholic priest Alexis Kagame, books were almost exclusively produced for educational purposes alone. After the genocide, some Rwandans began to record their experiences by writing testimonies. Among these were a relatively high number of women, including Esther Mujawayo, Yolande Mukagasana and recent Renaudot prizewinner Scholastique Mukasonga. Fiction followed but was, and continues to be, a male-dominated domain. My own research has uncovered fictional responses in French by nine authors born in Rwanda: a former member of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (the RPF) (Robusto Kana); a so-called "moderate Hutu" who resisted the genocide (Anicet Karege); a Hutu exile (Joseph Ndwaniye); three Tutsi exiles, otherwise known as "survivors by destination" (Scholastique Mukasonga, Jean-Marie Rurangwa and Benjamin Sehene); two genocide survivors (Camille Karangwa and Vénuste Kayimahe); and the son of an alleged Hutu perpetrator (Gilbert Gatore).²⁰ I began, however, with Diop's *Murambi* because, although Diop is from Senegal and had never been to Rwanda until 1998, *Murambi* is probably the best-known fictional work in French by an African writer about the events of 1994.

In 1998, Diop was one of ten African writers who travelled to Rwanda as part of the Fest'Africa commemorative project, "Ecrire par devoir de mémoire".²¹ Diop's fifth novel, *Murambi* has been translated into English and Italian, and was named as one of Africa's best books of the 20th Century. The novel describes the return of an exiled Rwandan protagonist Cornelius, to his birthplace Murambi, to find out what had happened to his family, all of whom he believes were killed during the genocide. Generated by Cornelius's search for the truth about his dead relatives, the narrative concludes with the revelation of a very different truth when Cornelius discovers that his father Dr Joseph Karekezi

¹⁹ Naigiziki's novel was first published in 1950 and reproduced in 2009 in a new, edited version by the Université Paul Verlaine's Centre de Recherche Ecritures.

²⁰ Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, pp. 29-54.

²¹ For more information about the project, see Nicki Hitchcott, "A Global African Commemoration – Rwanda: Ecrire par devoir de mémoire", *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 45:2 (2009), 151-161.

ave the order for the massacre at the Murambi technical school in which 50,000 people were killed in a single night. It is also revealed that Karekezi was responsible for the murder of his own wife and children (Cornelius's mother and siblings). Through the character of Cornelius, a history teacher, the novel incorporates a meta-narrative on the relationship between history and fiction: Cornelius initially plans to write an absurdist play about the genocide, but then changes his mind after his return to Rwanda. As such, the narrative mirrors Diop's own experience as an experimental writer who, after visiting Rwanda and finding his preconceptions about the genocide challenged, chose to write it in a more straightforward manner. As a creative writer, Diop claims he had no respect for facts before he travelled to Rwanda; he was interested not in truth, but in raising doubts.²² Reflecting on his trip in his essay, *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir*, Diop recounts how he found himself struggling with the discovery that from now on facts would control his writing rather than his writing controlling the facts.²³

Documentary Fiction

In her review of *Murambi* for the US journal *Logos*, Nimu Njoya makes the brief suggestion that Diop's novel could be classified as a "docunovel".²⁴ She does this through a fleeting reference to James E. Young's influential study, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation*.²⁵ Like Mbembe, Young underlines the importance of the reader's belief in the truth of a narrative, which he describes as "the emotional experience of an illusion":

²² Boubacar Boris Diop, *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir* (Paris: Philippe Rey, 2007), p. 27

²³ Diop, *L'Afrique*, p. 24. In this essay, Diop also reflects on his earlier Rwanda-based novel, *Le Cavalier et son ombre*, written before he had visited the country, and which he dismisses as insincere (p. 25).

²⁴ Nimu Njoya, review of *Murambi, the Book of Bones* by Boubacar Boris Diop, *Logos*, 6:1-2 (2007) http://www.logosjournal.com/issue_6.1-2/njoya.htm, accessed 11 January 2018.

²⁵ James E. Young, *Writing and Rewriting the Holocaust: Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988).

That the reader responds to a work differently when he believes that it is “true” and has actually happened than he does when he believes the work is only “fiction” is a principal part of documentary fiction’s phenomenology: as such, the emotional experience of such an illusion becomes the aim of the writer.²⁶

For Young, the illusion of truth experienced by the reader is what distinguishes documentary fiction from other types of fiction and this hangs on the reader’s emotional identification with the story. Barbara Foley makes a similar point in her book, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction*. In Foley’s view,

The documentary novel is distinguished by its insistence that it contains some kind of specific verifiable link to the historical world. [...] It implicitly claims to replicate certain features of actuality in a relatively direct and unmediated fashion; it invokes familiar novelistic conventions, but it requires the reader to accept certain textual elements – characters, incidents, or actual documents – as possessing referents in the world of the reader.²⁷

Foley’s definition is even closer to Mbembe’s conception of truth, identifying the reader’s recognition of familiar and plausible referents as key to the documentary novel.²⁸ While, within the novel, Diop’s protagonist dismisses the idea of writing an Ubuesque play about the genocide, the novel itself is a carefully crafted, polyvocal narrative; it is a work of the imagination. The only evidence that *Murambi* relies on testimony and archival material appears at the end of the book when Diop acknowledges having read numerous books and documents as well as having spoken to many Rwandan people. He also implicitly frames the narrative with a truth claim when he writes, “J’espère n’avoir pas

²⁶ Young, p. 62.

²⁷ Barbara Foley, *Telling the Truth: The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986) p. 26.

²⁸ On the other hand, Njoya glosses what she calls the “docunovel” (not a term used by Foley or Young) as a work that “strictly limit[s] the imaginative interpretation in deference to testimony and archival material”.

trahi [les] souffrances [des Rwandais].”²⁹ Josias Semujanga describes how “Dans Murambi, [le] pacte de ‘véridiction’ est assumé par le ‘je’ qui de temps en temps adopte le point de vue de Diop lui-même qui précise les circonstances de création de son récit”.³⁰

Although *Murambi* seems to illustrate Foley’s definition of the documentary novel as making an implicit claim to replicate actuality, authentication of the narrative is often quite explicit in many of the Rwandan-authored texts, particularly those by writers who identify as Tutsi survivors. The first published francophone Rwandan novel was *Le Chapelet et la machette: sur les traces du génocide rwandais* by survivor Camille Karangwa in 2003. This important text will be my touchstone in the rest of this essay. Written in the third person, *Le Chapelet et la machette* tells the story of two fictional perpetrators: Father Dominique, a Belgian priest who incites acts of genocide in his sermons, and Célestin Gahinda, a Rwandan headteacher who becomes a militia commander. Whereas Father Dominique flees Rwanda for his own safety when the genocide is stopped by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, Célestin returns from a refugee camp and makes a full confession, becoming a witness for the prosecution of crimes of genocide.

Le Chapelet et la machette contains endnotes that refer to a list of terms and acronyms related to the genocide, some in Kinyarwanda, some in French, which the author explains as an attempt to make the language of the novel as realistic as possible: “En écrivant ce livre, nous avons voulu être le plus proche possible du langage utilisé couramment dans le contexte du génocide par la presse, les politiciens et la masse populaire.”³¹ Terms listed include some that are familiar to those with knowledge of

²⁹ Diop, *Murambi, le livre des ossements*, p.219. (Note that these acknowledgements are omitted from Fiona Mc Laughlin’s English translation).

³⁰ Josias Semujanga, ‘Murambi et Moisson de crânes ou comment la fiction raconte un génocide’, *Présence Francophone*, 67 (2006), 93-114 (p. 96).

³¹ Karangwa, p. 120.

Rwanda in 1994, for example, "inyenzi" (cockroach), the name given to the Tutsi by the *génocidaires* and "faire le travail", the euphemistic expression used to describe killing Tutsi. Karangwa's explicit insistence on replicating the language of the genocide risks undermining the text's status as a work of imaginative fiction, since we might infer that it should be read only as documentary. Indeed, although I have classified this work as a novel, its generic status is ambivalent. While, in his introduction, Karangwa describes the characters in his text as "prototypes" of people who really existed, thereby suggesting an imaginative interpretation of actuality, he otherwise refers to the text simply as a book: "Le chapelet et la machette est ainsi donc *un livre* qui s'inspire entièrement du génocide rwandais de 1994".³²

Denial

Karangwa's desire to replicate the language of the genocide can also be read as reminder of the power of discourse. As Foley writes about Afro-American documentary fiction, this kind of paratextual proof "foregrounds the relation between evidence and generalization and calls attention to the ideological nature of any discourse – itself included – purporting to represent reality".³³ Indeed, Karangwa unambiguously presents his book as a challenge to the discourse of genocide denial:

Il est regrettable de voir que certaines personnes nient toujours ou minimisent sciemment le génocide rwandais. Cela dérouté tout le monde et porte un coup dur au Rwanda qui lutte actuellement pour sa reconstruction globale. Il est évident qu'il ne peut pas y arriver sans passer par certains principes dont la recherche de la vérité et la justice.³⁴

³² Karangwa, p.7 (my emphasis).

³³ Foley, *Telling the Truth*, p. 266.

³⁴ Karangwa, p. 6.

With these words, Karangwa draws attention to the importance of survivors' stories being believed as a weapon against historical revisionism. This explains his attempts to authenticate his imagined narrative with documentation. Foley has identified a similar strategy in Afro-American documentary fiction, which she describes as "an inevitable reaction against the disbelief of a predominantly white audience".³⁵ Through various forms of authentication, Karangwa's text challenges the international community who chose to ignore what was happening in Rwanda in 1994, or who trivialized the genocide as "tribal warfare".³⁶ Karangwa takes this criticism further, explaining that he wants to confront those who continue to deny the genocide.

Over the past twenty-five years, opponents of President Paul Kagame, exiled perpetrators, and some writers and academics have sought openly to challenge the official version of the truth about the Genocide against the Tutsi. One of the most prominent Great Lakes scholars is René Lemarchand, Professor Emeritus of Political Science at the University of Florida. While he never denies that a genocide took place in Rwanda, Lemarchand calls into question the onus of responsibility for the genocide. In 2006, he wrote: "on the strength of the evidence now available I believe that a large share of responsibility lies with the Tutsi-dominated Rwanda[n] Patriotic Front" [the RPF].³⁷ The basis of Lemarchand's conviction lay in the claim by former RPF Lieutenant Abdul Ruzibiza that Kagame had ordered the shooting down of President Habyarimana's plane on 6 April 1994, which triggered the start of the genocide. An exiled dissident, Ruzibiza made the allegation in his 2005 book *Rwanda: l'histoire secrète* in which he also provides evidence of RPF crimes against humanity.³⁸ He then provided this same

³⁵ Barbara Foley, "History, Fiction, and the Ground Between: The Uses of the Documentary Mode in Black Literature", *PMLA*, 3 (1980): 389-403 (p. 391)

³⁶ Diop satirizes this in *Murambi* when he writes, "quoi qu'il arrive au Rwanda, ce serait toujours pour les gens la même vieille histoire de nègres en train de se taper dessus" (pp. 16-17).

³⁷ René Lemarchand, "Genocide, Memory and Ethnic Reconciliation in Rwanda", *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs. Annuaire 2006-7*, pp. 21-30 (p. 23).

³⁸ Lieutenant Abdul Joshua Rizibiza, *Rwanda: l'histoire secrète* (Paris: Editions du Panama, 2005).

evidence during the 2006 investigation led by French Judge Bruguière into the attack on the president's plane. Ruzibiza was a key witness in this controversial enquiry, which led to Kagame being indicted, but later retracted his statement in 2008 when Rose Kabuye, Kagame's chief of protocol was arrested.³⁹ Despite the unreliability of Ruzibiza's testimony, Lemarchand repeats the point about what he describes as Ruzibiza's "crushing body of evidence" in his much-quoted 2009 book, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa* and much more recently in his contribution to Cathie Carmichael and Richard Maguire's 2015 volume, *The Routledge History of Genocide*.⁴⁰ Lemarchand has also collaborated with exiled former Rwandan diplomat, Maurice Niwese, author of a revisionist novella about the genocide, who describes himself as "a survivor of the ethnic cleansing conducted by the Rwandan army in eastern Congo against Hutu refugees."⁴¹ Niwese's novella, entitled *Celui qui sut vaincre*, puts the RPF on trial for war crimes through the fictional story of leaked tape-recording of a government meeting.⁴²

While there is substantial documented evidence that the RPF's army, led by Kagame, did commit war crimes between 1990 and 1994, the claim that the RPF ordered the shooting down of the former president's plane was effectively discredited in the 2010 Mutsinzi Report based on interviews with over five hundred eye witnesses, including former officers of Hutu Power.⁴³ Mutsinzi's findings were confirmed in 2012 by a subsequent

³⁹ Claudine Vidal, "Les Contradictions d'un lieutenant rwandais. Abdul Ruzibiza, témoin, acteur, faux-témoin", *L'Afrique des Grands Lacs. Annuaire 2008-2009*: 43-54 (p. 46).

⁴⁰ René Lemarchand, *The Dynamics of Violence in Central Africa*, (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), p. xii and p. 133. See also René Lemarchand, "Rwanda: the State of Research", *Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence* (2013), <http://www.sciencespo.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/rwanda-state-research>, accessed 11 January 2018. René Lemarchand, "Genocide in the Great Lakes", in Cathie Carmichael and Richard C. Maguire (eds), *The Routledge History of Genocide* (New York: Routledge. 2015), pp. 166-182.

⁴¹ René Lemarchand and Maurice Niwese, "Mass Murder, the Politics of Memory and Post-Genocide Reconstruction: The Cases of Rwanda and Burundi", in Béatrice Pouligny, Simon Chesterman and Albrecht Schnabel (eds), *After Mass Crime: Rebuilding States and Communities* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2007), pp. 165-189 (p. 168).

⁴² Maurice Niwese, *Celui qui sut vaincre* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003).

⁴³ Philip Gourevitch, "The Mutsinzi Report on the Rwandan Genocide", *The New Yorker*, 8 January 2010, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-mutsinzi-report-on-the-rwandan-genocide>, accessed 11 January 2018.

investigation by two more French judges, Marc Trévidic and Nathalie Poux.⁴⁴ Despite this, the investigation was not closed until December 2018 and the story of Kagame's alleged responsibility in shooting down the plane continued to circulate. The most notable example of this story in the British context was the controversial BBC documentary film, *Rwanda's Untold Story*, screened in 2014, the year of the twentieth anniversary of the genocide. Focusing almost exclusively on alleged RPF crimes, including the allegation about the shooting of Habyarimana's plane, this documentary led to a Rwandan government-appointed inquiry committee accusing the BBC of the crime of genocide denial, and an indefinite ban on BBC Kinyarwanda broadcasting in the country.⁴⁵

False Truths

The people of Rwanda are highly sensitive to the power of the media in generating systems of so-called truth. Long before the president's plane was shot down, Hutu extremist newspapers had been publishing hate propaganda against the Tutsi,⁴⁶ but radio was the most effective way of reaching the widest possible audience: official government information in Rwanda was broadcast by radio. As early as March 1992, Radio Rwanda incited a massacre of hundreds of Tutsi in Bugesera with a fake news report that Hutu were about to be attacked there.⁴⁷ Immediately after President Habyarimana had signed a peace agreement with the RPF in Arusha, Tanzania in August 1993, the now notorious radio station RTLM (Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines)

⁴⁴ Andrew Wallis, *Silent Accomplice: The Untold Story of France's Role in the Rwandan Genocide* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), p. 226.

⁴⁵ Dugald Baird, "Rwanda Places Indefinite Ban on BBC Broadcasts Over Genocide Documentary", *The Guardian*, 1 June 2015 <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2015/jun/01/rwanda-places-indefinite-ban-on-bbc-broadcasts-over-genocide-documentary>, accessed 3 January 2018. For a discussion of reactions to the documentary, see Filip Reyntjens, "Briefing: The Struggle over Truth – Rwanda and the BBC", *African Affairs*, 114.457 (2015). 637-648.

⁴⁶ Gregory H. Stanton, "Could the Rwandan Genocide have been Prevented?" *Journal of Genocide Research* 6:2 (2004), 211-228 (p. 214).

⁴⁷ Alison Des Forges, "Call to Genocide: Radio in Rwanda, 1994", in Allan Thompson (ed.), *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), pp. 41-54 (p. 42).

started broadcasting overt anti-Tutsi propaganda as well as fake news about events in neighbouring Burundi.⁴⁸ Like Radio Rwanda, the more populist RTLM also identified human targets for the militia in the form of lists of names and locations of Tutsi people and so-called Tutsi sympathizers. Both radio stations cranked up the incitement to exterminate all Tutsi once the genocide had begun, claiming that the Tutsi had assassinated their president and calling for revenge.⁴⁹ Hutu were constantly reminded to keep up their “work” to eliminate the Tutsi or face their own death at the hands of these “enemies”. Human Rights Watch activist Alison Des Forges, who was a witness to the genocide in 1994, describes how, “after 6 April, RTLM called on all Hutu to ‘rise up as a single man’ to defend their country in what was said to be the ‘final’ war”.⁵⁰ Des Forges also recounts incidents where weapons had been planted by the *génocidaires* in order to substantiate fake media reports of planned attacks against Hutu, which continued to fuel the genocide.⁵¹

These hate media grew out of a long history of false truths that can be traced back to the former German then Belgian colonial powers who divided the people of Rwanda into three distinct groups: Hutu, Tutsi and Twa. People were identified as belonging to the groups of “Hutu” and “Tutsi” on the basis of perceived ethnic differences, despite the fact that they have always shared the same language, the same religion and the same customs. If there was ever a distinction between Hutu and Tutsi, it was based on class rather than race.⁵² In the eye of the colonizers, however, the Tutsi originated from outside Rwanda and were therefore closer to Europeans than what they saw as the indigenous Hutu.⁵³ Thus began the colonial fiction, based on a myth known as the ‘Hamitic hypothesis’, that led to the Tutsi holding a privileged position in Rwanda until

⁴⁸ Maria Armoudian, *Kill the Messenger: The Media’s Role in the Fate of the World* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2011), p. 41; Des Forges p. 45.

⁴⁹ Armoudian, p. 45.

⁵⁰ Des Forges, p. 48.

⁵¹ Des Forges, p. 50.

⁵² Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 98.

⁵³ Mamdani, pp. 79-87.

after World War Two, when Tutsi calls for independence from Belgium led to the colonisers switching sides. The colonial myth of the Tutsi as outsiders was later mobilized by Hutu extremists and the hate media to initiate and sustain the 1994 genocide. The Hutu were repeatedly told that the Tutsi were foreign, dangerous “cockroaches” who posed a threat to national security and needed to be exterminated. Eventually, a false truth system became a shared belief through historical manipulation and media propaganda. In October 1990, the invasion of Rwanda by the Tutsi-dominated RPF army served to confirm and reinforce this “truth” for all those who wanted to believe it.

Ideological ‘Truth’

The ideological power of narratives is an important thread in Camille Karangwa’s novel. With irony, the narrator refers to RTLM as a reliable source, the pure product of the Hutu intelligentsia.⁵⁴ When Hutu extremist Célestin hears of President Habyarimana’s death on the radio, he fears that the Hutu will now be re-enslaved by the Tutsi. This reaction illustrates what Petra Vervurst describes as the “so-called pro-Hutu” version of Rwanda’s history, according to which the “colonial powers had not invented but solely reinforced the essentialist ethnic identities that already existed”.⁵⁵ While the ironic tone and extensive use of direct questions in Karangwa’s narrative undermine the validity of this extremist Hutu belief system, the novel is saturated with characters insisting that what they believe is true. Indeed, the overuse of the word “vérité” in the novel reinforces the difficulty of distinguishing any absolute truth.

Of course, there is no single version of the truth about what happened in Rwanda. Yet, for President Paul Kagame and his government, the facts speak for themselves. As Kagame famously remarked in 2014 on the twentieth anniversary of the Genocide

⁵⁴ Karangwa, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Petra Vervurst, “The Relative Importance of Ethnicity, Class and Race in Colonial Rwanda. The Cases of Prison Policies, Corvées, Taxation, Census and Identity Booklets”, *Journal of Belgian History*, 42:4 (2012), 74-109 (p. 76).

against the Tutsi, "No country is powerful enough, even when they think that they are, to change the facts. After all, *les faits sont têtus*."⁵⁶ Here, Kagame's use of French in a speech otherwise delivered in English and Kinyarwanda suggests an implied rebuke of the French government's refusal to accept responsibility for their role in the genocide in Rwanda. 2014 was the year in which France refused to send a representative to the genocide commemorations in Rwanda after Kagame gave an interview to *Jeune Afrique* in which he spoke of "le rôle direct de la Belgique et de la France dans la préparation politique du génocide et la participation de cette dernière à son exécution même."⁵⁷ Kagame's repeated insistence on the irrefutability of the facts also underlines the Rwandan government's conviction that their master narrative is the Truth. The official RPF version traces the genocide back to European control of Rwanda and places responsibility for 1994 firmly in European hands. As Kagame said in that same speech,

All genocides begin with an ideology [...] This ideology was already in place in the 19th century, and was then entrenched by the French missionaries who settled here. Rwanda's two thousand years of history was reduced to a series of caricatures based on Bible passages and on myths told to explorers.⁵⁸

Since 1994, the Rwandan government has been attempting to undo the legacy of two centuries of divisionist ideology through education programmes and legislation. Alongside laws criminalizing genocide ideology, the *ndi umunyarwanda* ("I am Rwandan") programme promotes a unified national identity and it seems to be working: in my 'Rwandan Stories of Change project', we have found both survivors and

⁵⁶ Speech by President Paul Kagame, 20th Commemoration of the Genocide Against the Tutsi, Amahoro Stadium, Kigali, 7 April 2014. ("Les faits sont têtus" is the French translation of a famous quote by Lenin).

⁵⁷ François Soudan, "Paul Kagamé [*sic*]: Du génocide à la rwandité", *Jeune Afrique*, 2778 (6-12 April 2014), 22-28 (p. 23).

⁵⁸ Speech by President Paul Kagame.

perpetrators consistently repeating the RPF's historical narrative in their testimonies.⁵⁹ In Karangwa's text, *Le Chapelet et la machette*, the narrator implies that the official story of the genocide gets in the way of survivors' personal pursuit of the truth about what happened to their loved ones. When the genocide is over, Célestin, now reformed, visits the village of Gasenyi where survivors hope he will be able to tell them why their families were killed. Célestin, however, refuses to give the survivors any answers. Furthermore, the narrator comments that nobody wants to provide answers to these kinds of questions: "c'était devenu un sujet gênant pour certains. Il fallait plutôt décrier le colon, lui est responsable de tous les maux rwandais. Il fallait plutôt œuvrer pour l'unité et la réconciliation".⁶⁰

The Documentary Pact

In challenging the government narrative through the voices of survivors, Karangwa suggests that survivors find themselves marginalized in post-genocide Rwanda, their need for truthful answers disregarded. As such, the text echoes what Foley identifies as the "adversarial tradition" of Afro-American documentary fiction which, she explains, insists on the truth of a reality that has repeatedly been misrepresented or overlooked.⁶¹ Indeed, survivors searching for truth is a common theme in fictional responses to 1994. For example, both Scholastique Mukasonga and Joseph Ndwanaye present protagonists who, like Cornelius in Diop's *Murambi*, travel back to Rwanda after the genocide to find out what has happened to their loved ones; both without success. In *Le Chapelet et la machette*, Karangwa reminds us that the incomprehensibility of what happened in 1994 drives survivors constantly to seek answers:

⁵⁹ Laura E. R. Blackie and Nicki Hitchcott, "I am Rwandan': Unity and Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda", *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*, 12:2 (2018), 24-37.

⁶⁰ Karangwa, p. 85.

⁶¹ Foley, *Telling the Truth*, p. 235.

Ils n'allaient pas avaler n'importe quoi. Ils avaient droit à la vérité. Les voix des leurs jetés dans les rivières, les jérémiades de ceux brûlés vifs, les gémissements de ceux enterrés vivants, les cris des enfants séparés violemment de cette terre qu'ils commençaient à peine à découvrir les interpellaient continuellement.⁶²

Telling the truth about survivors' experiences is also a strong theme in Vénuste Kayimahe's novel, *La Chanson de l'aube*. Kayimahe is a survivor who was left behind to face the *génocidaires* when the French authorities evacuated only the French staff at the French Cultural Centre in Kigali where he worked. He is also one of the two Rwandans who accompanied Diop and the other African writers on the "Rwanda: Ecrire par devoir de mémoire" mission, having published his testimony at the end of that project.⁶³

Kayimahe's first novel, *La Chanson de l'aube* was published many years later, in 2014, and recounts the love story of a couple separated by the genocide: Laurien signs up to fight with the RPF army while Mireille is gang-raped, tortured and killed by the *génocidaires*, leaving behind their baby.⁶⁴ The couple's story is interspersed with italicized descriptions of historical events that document the RPF victory over the Rwandan army and the militia that stopped the genocide. Although the novel is presented by its publisher Izuba as a "roman témoignage", Kayimahe was not an RPF soldier and was eventually able to flee Rwanda with the help of some Belgian peacekeeping soldiers, escaping with some of his family to Kenya. Here, the publisher's description of the book reinforces what we might call the "documentary pact" created through both the italicized accounts of RPF military strategy inside the text and the presentation of the author on the back cover as a genocide survivor.

Camille Karangwa, on the other hand, is not explicitly presented as a survivor in the blurb of *Le Chapelet et la machette*, but as I have noted elsewhere, the book is

⁶² Karangwa, p. 86.

⁶³ Vénuste Kayimahe, *France-Rwanda: les coulisses du génocide* (Paris: Dagorno, 2001).

⁶⁴ Vénuste Kayimahe, *La Chanson de l'aube* (Toulouse: Izuba, 2014).

dedicated to the family members Karangwa lost in the genocide.⁶⁵ Furthermore, in his contribution to a collection of editorials from the online pan-African newsletter *Pambazuka News*, Karangwa is described as having survived the genocide in Rwanda.⁶⁶ Reflecting on his decision not to present himself explicitly as a survivor in his self-published novel, I have suggested that this could be read as the author's rejection of the stigmatized identity of survivors in Rwanda, a stigma described not only in *Le Chapelet et la machette*, but also in many other fictional responses to the genocide, including Kayimahe's novel, *La Chanson de l'aube*.⁶⁷

Whereas the documentary pact in Kayimahe's testimonial novel is established through both the paratextual framing of the author and the hybrid nature of the narrative, Karangwa's text uses a series of photographs placed at the end of his book. There are six photographs in all, reproduced in black and white and low resolution. The pictures show the site of the author's family home, now destroyed; two shots of the author's grandfather's house, now a ruin; the damaged walls of the author's primary school in Nyamiyaga; a house belonging to a Hutu family, untouched by the genocide; and finally, a view of the Rwandan hill where the author was born. Three of the photographs feature a man whom we assume to be Karangwa himself; his wife Eliane is included in the first of the pictures. By including images of himself and his wife alongside images of genocide destruction, Karangwa personalizes the text and makes it easier for the reader to accept and believe his extraordinary fictional narrative. Significantly, the first image is a picture of Karangwa's wife Eliane standing next to the ruin of his grandfather's house in almost exactly the same position as the author himself in a subsequent picture. The caption below the photograph of Eliane reads, "Ma femme Eliane qui a grandi au Burundi découvre avec amertume les horreurs du génocide rwandais". Just as Eliane

⁶⁵ Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, pp. 42-43.

⁶⁶ Firoze Madatally Manji and Patrick Burnett (eds), *African Voices on Development and Social Justice: Editorials from Pambazuka News* (Dar es Salaam: Mukuki na Nyota Publishers, 2005), p. xvii.

⁶⁷ Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories*, pp. 118-120.

accompanies Karangwa to find the ruins of his family home, so the text invites the reader on a similar journey of discovery of what the novel's subtitle calls "les traces du génocide rwandais" and, like Eliane, to experience an emotional response. Thus, the first photograph and its caption prompt the reader into the "emotional experience of an illusion" that Young suggests is necessary for a documentary narrative to be believed.

The photographs of Karangwa and his wife Eliane humanize the genocide and so increase the likelihood of the reader having an emotional experience; a response that moves beyond the guilt of strangers and is rooted in familiarity. Without the photographs, the text risks being received as distant and foreign. This attempt to make the genocide familiar is echoed in the glossary of genocide terminology discussed above. Here, the author explains that he does not want simply to translate the language of the genocide into French, but rather to invite the reader to have a more direct experience of the genocide for her or himself: "Notre souhait est que le lecteur sonde et pénètre lui-même le fond du génocide rwandais".⁶⁸

Conclusion

The lack of familiarity often experienced by non-Rwandan readers of narratives about the Genocide against the Tutsi is encapsulated in Suzanne Keen's reflection on her experience of reading about the Rwanda genocide in the *New York Times*:

There was no moment when I shared the feelings of a Tutsi victim. I had not seen pictures: unlike the scenes of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, the Rwandan genocide was not broadcast on television. I wondered whether the large numbers of victims impeded my response—a strong possibility. Or perhaps the dearth of white, middle-class, English-speaking, professional women like me among the

⁶⁸ Karangwa, p. 120.

victims short-circuited my empathy. I couldn't identify with them; they were too unlike me; their circumstances and their suffering were unimaginable.⁶⁹

Although Keen does not say that she read the news report with disbelief, and although she does admit to having been horrified and shocked by what she read, her comment here that the victims' circumstances and suffering were "unimaginable" takes us back to Mbembe's point about familiarity and truth. The lack of familiarity makes the story lose its power of persuasion, in Keen's words "short-circuiting" any empathy she might have expected to feel. While it would undoubtedly be very difficult for Keen to share the feelings of a Tutsi threatened with genocide, what she describes here suggests a lack of familiarity in terms of human experience. In this case, the documentary pact has failed.

Rwandan writers of fiction about the genocide against the Tutsi require an empathic response from their readers. Like Gérard in *Murambi*, Karangwa and his fellow authors want their stories to be believed. While the texts try to convince the reader of their veracity with documentary features such as paratextual apparatus, historical facts, footnotes and photographs, Mbembe's concept of familiarity is essential for the narrative to be accepted as truth. If the reader cannot identify with the story, then the narrative risks being rejected as untrue. This explains why documentary fiction is a more powerful medium than documentary alone, and why so many Rwandan writers choose to present their truth through fiction. In the closing lines of *Telling the Truth*, Foley writes:

Factual particulars may enter the text in a variety of ways to suit a variety of ends, but they frame and highlight the text's generalized proposition. The documentary novel's insistence that it has a particular truth to tell thus reinforces rather than undermines fiction's distinct status as a means of telling the truth.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Suzanne Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. xxi. Keen does, however, state that she is able to empathize with fictional characters in African settings.

⁷⁰ Foley, *Telling the Truth*, p. 268.

We should not assume, Foley explains, that, without its documentary apparatus, the documentary novel would not maintain its referential power. Rather, the documentation confirms the more general applicability of what is being described. By insisting on documentary credentials within a work presented as fiction, the text moves beyond the particular to the general.⁷¹ As Diop writes, reflecting on his own experience as a writer of fiction about Rwanda: "Nous avons, je crois, réussi à exprimer ce qui dans les souffrances du peuple rwandais interpelle tout être humain".⁷² Documentary authentication facilitates a text's status as factual truth, but fiction takes us beyond the facts to bigger truths about our shared human experience.

⁷¹ Foley, *Telling the Truth*, p. 267.

⁷² Diop, *L'Afrique au-delà du miroir*, p. 34.