

The Value of Memory in Testimonies on African Civil Wars: Kidder's and Beah's Problematic Journey to the West

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According to Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Mémoire*, memory and history cannot achieve the same goals. Collective memory is too personal, and thus remains "unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation" (Nora 1989, 8).¹ Thus, history and memory have radically different functions; however, they are not necessarily incompatible. Historians might be unconscious of their own, at times, biased perspectives. Nora reminds us that history has been used uncritically in France to create a strong sense of national identity through commemoration (1989, 11). And Nora's project, despite a claimed polyphonic approach, has nonetheless erased the role imperialism and minorities played in the construction of the French nation from the dominant discourse. Although this amnesia remains puzzling, it reveals that collective memory threatens the core of a homogenized France. In that sense, history emerges as a constructed discourse written from a certain viewpoint, which changes

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over time. Historians cannot write about colonization as they did during the height of imperialism because of the shifts in our collective memory. Indeed, Nora's opposition between memory and history seems less set in stone if we look more closely at two memoirs about contemporary civil wars in Africa: *Strength in What Remains* by American journalist Tracy Kidder and *A Long Way Gone* by Sierra Leone writer Ishmael Beah. Beah narrates his own experience as a child soldier in the Civil War of Sierra Leone (1991–2002) whereas Kidder narrates the truthful journey of Deogratias Niyizonkia, a young Tutsi who runs away to New York City to escape the violence of the civil war in his own country, Burundi. In both memoirs, the telling of forgotten wars by African witnesses investigates compelling modes of listening: they include the voices of absent Others in the form of folktales and anecdotes. The blurring between facts, fiction and memories is also reminiscent of Dave Eggers's strategy in another popularly well received text, *What is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng—A Novel* (2006), as exemplified by Valentino's preface:

I told my story orally to the author. He then concocted this novel, approximating my own voice and using the basic events of my life as the foundation. Because many of the passages are fictional, the result is called a novel. It should not be taken as a definitive history of the civil war in Sudan, nor of the Sudanese people, not even of my brethren, those known as the Lost Boys. This is simply one man's story, subjectively told.

Before Kidder² or Beah, Eggers is indeed the reference that comes to mind when “staging” Africans' testimonies in the US market. And Eggers's perspective is all the more telling in that he clearly thought about his transmission role in the US book market. Eggers's external position as a white privileged male and a well-known American writer allowed Valentino to tell his story. Surprisingly, such a concern is absent from Kidder's text,³ while Beah's memoir never discusses the role his American mother, a well-known story-teller, played in his telling of the story. These mediations of memory are also mediations of the market as Eggers shows and as we can see in Kidder and Beah's texts.

One can't help but think of Michel de Certeau's *The Writing of History*, when we read those African testimonies. Indeed, de Certeau asserts that history is nothing more than a narrative that produces a sense of reliability (de Certeau 1988, 93–94). Collective and personal memories become a realm of resistance against dominant discourses; they

encapsulate the marginalized voice of the people who have been denied a place in the grand narratives. Can we perceive this realm of memory as an alternative and valid discourse that criticizes the posture of the historian speaking *for* others? Since memory has been decentralized and democratized, it carries some capital essential to the deconstruction of imperialist perspectives. With decolonization, memory has slowly become the structure through which historical remembering has arisen, as developed by Chamoiseau and Hammadi in their essay, which is in part a response to Nora, *Guyane: Traces-mémoires du baigne*. Their project deconstructs an imperialist and mono-linear history by transforming monuments into a temporal and spatial knot of memory-traces, or “sedimented memories” (1994, 25). History has become a practice of othering (to reference de Certeau), which also emphasizes our visceral and emotive connections to the past. The traces characterize the authors’ journey into the occulted space of memories, and they uncover what de Certeau calls the “return of the repressed” (de Certeau 1988, 4)—meaning all the marginalized voices that have resisted assimilation in dominant structures.

This “return of the repressed” is what I will explore further in Beah and Kidder’s texts about the recent civil wars in Western and Central Africa, both published in America and recounted by African narrators. As the All People’s Congress of the Sierra Leone government is pitted against the Revolutionary United Front, Beah and his friends run away from their village and are forced to become child soldiers. Beah is then admitted to a rehabilitation center for former child soldiers in Freetown, and escapes the violence of the war by fleeing to the United States in 1998, with the assistance of an American rights worker and storyteller, Laura Simms.⁴ In *Strength in What Remains* (2009), Tracy Kidder, a renowned American journalist, narrates the journey of Deogratias Niyizonkiza, a young Tutsi from Burundi to New York City in the aftermath of the death of the newly elected Hutu president Melchior Ndadaye in October 1993. The story takes place during the civil war, right before the Rwandan genocide of the Tutsi (April–July 1994). Beah narrates his own story retrospectively, while Kidder uses a fictionalized third-person narrative in which he speaks *on behalf of* Deo in the first part of the memoir, and then switches to the first person in the second part of the book, staging himself as the main speaker of someone else’s narrative. The narrators expose differently how they have coped with a lost past shattered by years of war. However, by listening to their stories, one can wonder if there are more than some residual traces of subjugated voices. Do these

texts truly disrupt hegemonic discourses about the war in Africa, or do they embrace them despite their peripheral and critical positions? By deconstructing certain discourses about the war in Africa (violence, chaos, corruption, etc.), those stifled but genuine voices arouse other unconscious representations that should be examined. Both characters remember bits and pieces of the war in the light of their life in the United States and the remembrance of war itself is no longer indexical,⁵ but based on a collection of refracted memories. The experience of the war-survivor in Africa is reconstructed a posteriori and strangely echoes the experience of the migrant in New York City. To what extent has the presence of an American culture impacted the construction of Beah and Deo's personal narratives? Can New York City function as specific *memory-traces* capitalizing on the "return of the repressed"? The parallelism between the war-survivor and the migrant creates complex knots of meaning by conflating different spaces, times, and cultural experiences. What is the capital of such memories? This article will discuss the values of those postcolonial memories, when historical facts are offered within the novel's diegetic time, consciously blurring for the reader the lines between History and memory, between historical facts, personal narratives, and fiction.

As Beah wrote *A Long Way Gone*, he aimed to de-romanticize the war by providing another image of the conflict: "war is not fascinating."⁶ His words are reflected in the novel, as violence bursts forth in the first pages when Beah witnesses a "group of men and women who had been pierced by straight bullets" (2007, 13), but kept running. "The skin that hung down from their bodies still contained fresh blood" (2007, 13). If Beah's purpose is to clearly "de-romanticize the war," the causes of violence are left unexplained, as if to suggest that such an explanation is futile in regard to all the innocent and voiceless people who died. This war was simply born from the greed of military leaders and "rotten politics" (2007, 14). Known history of conflict over blood diamonds is eclipsed by a more general view of senseless violence. Does this puzzling silence about the complexities of geopolitics in Sierra Leone mirror the lack of interest from the American audience to understand the conflict? By silencing the factual and focusing on the psychological violence enacted on those involved in the conflict, Beah clearly calls into question the ethical representation of the war, but he does not ponder the silence of historical facts, conflating the silence of trauma—genuinely unrepresentable material—and the silence of political context, which is willfully unrepresented.⁷

One can argue that Beah's personal memory serves to transmit the impossible experience of the survivor otherwise so difficult to apprehend, underlining the artist's dilemma that war's stories cannot be told but have to be told nonetheless, reiterating de Certeau's idea that historical discourses must be challenged. Beah bears witness to the war in his own way by conveying not only his own story, but also those of his friends. Musa, Alhaji, Moriba, and Kanei's stories (2007, 78–86) and others are the only meaningful and tangible facts presented for understanding the violence of the war; "What was left of him [Saidu] was just a memory" (2007, 86). Beah's acknowledgment about his friend who dies in the flight from the conflict highlights the importance of memory in the telling of a war, to the detriment of data. This archival practice offers original ways to interact with current history, without being constrained by it. People's memories become crucial when those in power can tamper with narratives of war. In that sense, by using polyphonic voices, Beah has become a modern *griot* (or story-teller) that cements the memories of those without a voice and prevents his reader from forgetting or toning down the violence of the war. However, by presenting people's traumatic pasts, this depiction of Sierra Leone highlights the image of a savage country in need of rescue without entering into a debate about international aid agencies or politics of civil wars (Smith and Watson 2012, 612). This emphasis on horror⁸ could be, on the contrary, part of what Huggan describes as some sort of "postcolonial exoticism," where Africa has become a land of chaos and barbarism, as commonly depicted by the Western countries and media. Instead of de-romanticizing Africa, Beah's depiction of the war "lies in the perpetuation of racist myths about Africa and in the concealment of international roles in sustaining conflicts occurring there" (Baù 2010, 23). Denunciation of the war is hampered by a colonial mindset that the narrator is incapable of examining. Beah seems unable to question this narrative due to a strong market-driven narrative structure rather than as a result of some internal psychological block.

In "The Extroverted African Novel," Eileen Julien discloses the power relationships and the economic dependences between African writers and Western publishing companies: "What the literary and academic establishments both within and beyond African nations dub the 'African Novel' is the canonical, extroverted novel that speaks ... to a nation's 'others' and elites in terms ... they have come to expect" (2006, 683). In order to achieve literary recognition that can only happen in the West given the disenfranchised nature of the literary field in African countries,

writers like Beah support this paradigm and incorporate it directly into their own narratives without criticizing it. This colonial literary capital depicts Africa (and thus Sierra Leone) as a dark continent, othering it by simplifying its history and geopolitics. This kind of eurocentrism is more perverse in the sense that it seems fully endorsed by some African authors.

Kidder's *Strength in What Remains* brings another level of complexity to the othering of Africa. Some explanations of the civil war are presented in the middle of the book through Deo's vague recollection of history classes in his senior year of high school. Deo acknowledges that these classes are "incomplete, all but devoid of explanations for the term 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi.'"⁹ His Tutsi ethnicity is set aside for long stretches of the book (2009, 56). Deo learns along with readers about the ethnic differences in the country through the massacres because "the Tutsi-dominated government had decided its own purposes were best served by silence on the issues of ethnicity" (2009, 89). The reader is thus left to put back together all the pieces of Deo's shattered historical account. Deo remembers the Hutu rebellions in which they claimed more wealth and rights because they represented the majority, and he remembers the murderous retaliations by the Tutsi army in 1972 and 1988 (2009, 88). He remembers the national election of 1993 with the military coup by the Tutsi army aimed at overcoming the newly democratically elected Hutu president, Melchior Ndadaye (2009, 96). He remembers the Hutu retaliations that led to the civil war, which shattered his country:

The air had the sour smell of wet ashes ... He looked in. Bodies lay on the dirt floor inside ... Three children, a man, and a woman. She was lying on her back, and some fleshy stuff filled her opened mouth. Male genitalia. (2009, 119)

The violence Deo witnesses is recalled in details from his escape from Mutaho (Burundi) to his arrival at the Rwandan borders in various refugee camps organized by *Interahamwe* (or Hutu militiamen), several months before the beginning of the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, which would end in the killing of 800,000 people (mostly Tutsi and moderate Hutu). Kidder provides us with additional details about the violence that led to the civil war through Deo's own personal recollection and comments on the events: he wonders if this Hutu retaliation was carefully planned by militias outside and inside Rwanda because "the killers had

jerry cans full of petrol, and he knew from sounds he'd heard that some had guns and grenades" (2009, 124). Did this ethnic violence originate from Belgian colonization as his teacher affirms (2009, 89)? Deo questions what "Hutu" and "Tutsi" actually meant: "Had the Hutus been the original, the true Burundians, and the Tutsis more recent conquerors from the region of the Nile" (2009, 90)? Deo never provides definitive answers; he is too cautious to give a simplistic answer because his intuitions are barely corroborated by other sources than his own experience. However, Kidder gives more definite and explanatory answers in the second part of his book, *Gusimbura* (2009, 198–204), using Peter Uvin's research:

The Rwandan genocide was a carefully planned case of scapegoating, launched by a government of the majority against a powerless minority. Burundi's mass violence was an ethnic civil war between a minority government and rebels drawn from the majority, a war between two equally powerful armed factions. (2009, 201)

Explanation of the conflict is brought by the journalist and not by Deo, to an unintended effect: it would seem, as a result, as if Kidder's own analysis were more powerful than his narrator's. The direct witness's narrative of the war is mediated by Kidder's voice and Deo's silence remains highly problematic. The choices Kidder made in narrating Deo's experience perpetuates the "colonizing structure" Valentin-Yves Mudimbe exposed in his essay *The Invention of Africa*, "namely, the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from 'them' unless it is already 'ours' or comes from 'us'" (Mudimbe 1988, 15). Once again, factual knowledge comes from an American journalist, which echoes Achille Mbembe's statement in his recent essay, *Politiques de l'inimitié*: "Une instance représentative du 'Blanc' a pris ma place et fait de ma conscience son objet. Désormais, cette instance respire à ma place, pense à ma place, parle à ma place, me surveille, agit à ma place." [A representative of the 'White man' took my place and turned my consciousness into its object. From then on, this representative breathed for me, thought for me, spoke for me, monitored me, acted for me.] (Mbembe 2014, 112).

Kidder never directly witnessed the mass killing in Burundi, but talks about it through Deo, his primary witness. Although Kidder did some research to corroborate Deo's story (see the bibliography¹⁰ at the end of the book), he did not choose to narrate the story from his own point of view, the one of a journalist meeting a primary witness.

On the contrary, Kidder erases himself from the first section of the text. He uses internal focalization in the form of Deo's stream of consciousness with a third person narrative, which strangely conflates the practice of speaking *about* another—which is what journalists tend to do—with the practice of speaking *for* another—which is what writers tend to do. From the very beginning, we find ourselves reading a text that restructures Deo's account of the civil war in Burundi. Even more puzzling, Deo never takes control of his own narration by saying "I." As a result, the reader's experience is that it is impossible for him to speak up. Deo's repressed memory is carefully re-told by an American journalist whose discursive practice maintains Deo at a distance. In fact, Deo's memory seems more valuable because it is mediated by an American journalist who attests to the credibility of Deo's experience, but never discusses the choices he made in retelling Deo's testimony. Kidder never comments on his use of fiction to narrate Deo's true story. This lack of transparency from a highly experienced journalist is somewhat disconcerting. This is essentially a "colonial" act of appropriation of Deo's own words because it gives minimal agency to the African witness who, on the other hand, accepts this power dynamic. Deo's own memories of the conflicts are overshadowed and thus illuminate Mbembe's words about the colonial subject:

En tant qu'opération symbolique, la représentation n'ouvre pas nécessairement la voie à la possibilité de reconnaissance réciproque. D'abord dans la conscience du sujet qui représente, le sujet représenté court toujours le risque d'être transformé en un objet ou un jouet. En se laissant représenter, il se prive de la capacité de se créer, pour lui même et pour le monde, une image de soi. Il est obligé d'endosser une image contre laquelle il devra lutter sans fin. [As a symbolic operation, representation does not necessarily allow for reciprocal recognition. First in the consciousness of the person representing, the represented subject always runs the risk of being transformed into an object or a toy. By letting himself be represented, he deprives himself of the ability to create, for himself and for the world, a self-image. He is obligated to adopt an image against which he should fight endlessly.] (Mbembe 2014, 119)

To a certain extent, Deo has become the object of his own discourse and can't assert his own story. The representations of the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Burundi are highly problematic because they fall under a colonial imaginary that is barely questioned by the narrators. Deo and Beah

do not shed light on the dynamics of power, but embrace them. What is then the significance of such a discourse, if it is told by a silent narrator, or by one that adopts colonial representations of violence and chaos in Africa? The chaotic present often serves to depict a certain vision of the past, reminding the reader of a particular vision of the world.

What is left to Beah in this time of chaos is a tenuous connection to his past (before the war) and to stories that keep him alive and somehow human. Torn down by the war, the past has become an idealized time, marked by images of loved ones—his grandmother telling him the story of the moon, or his brother helping him when he was a kid (2007, 39)—a time represented by strong relationships between people. The present of the war only exists in relation to a glorified and harmonious past. Life seems as if it were better before. The representation of the war and its violence is scripted and always recalls an Edenic period. Those memories reinforce Beah's identity, root him into the Sierra Leone culture. They offer a way for him to re-establish a sense of humanity beyond the de-humanizing effects of his training as a child soldier. They suggest that violence in Sierra Leone is somehow foreign to the Sierra Leone culture and is the result of an incomprehensible civil war. His friends were not violent; however, they became violent as soon as they witnessed the death of their loved ones. Yet, "[n]one of this is anyone's fault" (Beah 2007, 96), which is exactly the same argument child soldiers hear at the rehabilitation center run by the UN. "It is not your fault that you did such a thing to me," says a staff member to Beah (2007, 140). In order to regain a normal life after the war, Beah is taught to tone down his own responsibility in the conflict, despite the fact that killing was his "daily activity" for two years and that he "felt no pity for anyone" (2007, 126). Beah sees violence as a drug imposed on him during the war, a foreign element that has corrupted his soul: "We needed violence to cheer us after a whole day of boring traveling" (2007, 136). But because this violence is somehow external, it can be eradicated with a strong will and the help of the international community. Memory serves a very specific purpose: it lets the reader know that redemption is possible by reconstructing Beah's previous identity. It maintains the hope that war cannot completely destroy his humanity and that Beah's life will improve. Beah's past is a trace of his untouched and unspoiled identity, nearly obliterated by the war. This narrative of a bright future is carefully crafted into the jacket of the book itself: on the front, a child soldier with a Kalashnikov and a rocket is walking head down toward an

uncertain future—his gaze is tense—while the back of the book presents Beah smiling and looking away, at his own brighter future. Beah’s metamorphosis from a soldier into a young adult is possible not only because of his strong desire to write but perhaps due to the help of international organizations. Beah unconsciously reiterates the image of a victimized child saved by a Western human rights organization, what Erica Burman calls the “adult Northerner” (1994, 241). Images of victimized children depicted in media and nonprofit campaigns perpetuate the myth of the adult Western North helping a vulnerable South and confirm the failure of their people and culture. “The model of the suffering, innocent child may sit easily with western assumptions of passive populations in need of rescue, but this threatens to ignore and undermine the positive role that political involvement may play in the lives of children coping with conflict and trauma” (Burman 1994, 244). In addition, Beah’s cover intentionally expunges any reference to Sierra Leone to situate its reader into the vast African continent. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch comments on the power some pictures can have on the reader when they document childhood vulnerability in a context of persecution or genocide:

As the child victim merges with the child witness, as we begin to recognize their identity, we ourselves, as spectators looking at the child victim, become witnesses, *child* witnesses, in our own right ... The adult viewer sees the child victim through the eyes of his or her own child self. (2012, Chap. 6)

The child loses his Otherness (and thus his identity) to become an “unexamined emblem of vulnerability and innocence” (Hirsch 2012, Chap. 6), blurring the context of the war in Beah’s case, which is very problematic. The cover gives a human face to the inhumanity Beah faced when he was engulfed by the war, but it also transforms him into a symbol of hope while it brings into view the thin line between perpetrator and victim.

However, Beah is subtle in his reenacting of the past. Although his memories are recounted through folktales,¹¹ they also evoke more modern forms such as rap songs. The allusion to rap music is a compelling one because it dismisses the false idea of an authentic and traditional Sierra Leone culture and promotes a sense of cosmopolitanism clearly attractive to a Western audience. By doing so, Beah illuminates the

mutual dependence existing between the West and Africa, as explained by Huggan in *The Postcolonial Exotic*:

Europe, like it or not, is part of Africa; and African literature is best regarded as neither celebratory self expression, nor reprehensible Western imposition, but rather as a hybrid amalgam of cross-fertilized aesthetic traditions that are the historical outcomes of a series of—often violent—cultural collisions. (56)

Beah explains how rap music “saved” him from being killed. This meaning could be metaphorical of the new providential Western savior. Newly arrived in a village, he and his friends were captured by villagers who thought they were child soldiers. Beah proves to them that they were not child soldiers by performing a rap dance. The dance convinced the villagers they were real children running away from chaos. According to the village chief, child soldiers do not listen to rap music (2007, 67–68). Unexpected and comical, this episode has nonetheless the same metaphorical values as folktales and clearly foreshadows Beah’s next performance as a child soldier. Beah is forced to dance to save his own life in the same way he will later perform his role as a child soldier to stay alive in the face of consistent death threats. In a teleological perspective of history in which the future can only get better, the reader is left hoping the child soldier role will be only a short performance he can eventually forget.

If the past provides Beah with a strong sense of identity and purpose in life, it is slightly different from Deo’s own account. Deo’s silences echo the fact that he does not want to remember what happened because of the *gusimbura*. *Gusimbura* is a Kinyarwanda term that means “to replace someone” or to “substitute.” “(P)eople don’t talk about people who died. By their names, anyways. They call it *gusimbura*. If, for example, you say, ‘Oh, your granddad,’ and you say his name to people, they say you *gusimbura* them. It’s a bad word. You are reminding people ... of something bad” (2009, xvii). The cultural phenomenon of *gusimbura* forces Deo to ‘relive’ suffering and sorrow at the mere mention of a dead loved one and this is why his grandfather’s death and his mother’s pain are so present for him. In fact, the *gusimbura* highlights the paradoxical nature of Deo’s participation in Kidder’s project. On one hand, he wants to share his experiences in order to tell the whole world about the civil war, yet by recounting his own story, he is forced to relive the pain, which can be unbearable. Instead of curing Deo, the catharsis

that the *gusimbura* could represent seems to eat away at him slowly because the mental visualization of the violence is too painful once it is expressed. Deo's behavior recalls what scholar Peter Uvin has noticed in Burundi: since the massacres of 1972, Burundian people have been opposed to prosecution and truth-telling because they don't want to jeopardize the transition and "they overwhelmingly think of themselves as having moved beyond ethnicity and division" (Uvin 2009, 164). However, Uvin never uses the word *gusimbura*, nor did any other scholars who worked on the conflicts in Burundi.¹² Deo's trauma encapsulates Ricœur's ideological stakes on memory: "What forgetting awakens at this crossroads is, in fact, the very aporia that is at the source of the problematical character of the representation of the past, namely, memory's lack of reliability" (Ricœur 2004, Part III, Chap. 3). Silences surrounding memory in Burundi are so entrenched in people's psyche that it seems almost impossible for witnesses to speak out about the recent past because no one does and no one wants to. Chrétien and Dupaquier recall in their book that Tutsi are still traumatized by the genocide of 1972 and don't want to talk about it:

'Ikiza', 'la catastrophe' de 1972 au Burundi, ne laisse guère de trace matérielle, elle ne fait que produire la souffrance et la frustration de l'absence ... Si on ne trouve pas de mots pour décrire les événements, c'est que le traumatisme a empêché une représentation symbolique de ce qui s'est passé ... Peut-être plus encore que l'interdit officiel du 'dire', non formulé mais parfaitement compris et relayé, c'est le caractère traumatique de la situation et ses conséquences psychiques, qui ont empêché le deuil. [Ikiza, the catastrophe of 1972 in Burundi, has not left any material traces except producing pain and frustration of absence ... If one does not find a word to condemn the events, it is because the trauma has prevented a symbolic representation of what happened ... Even more than the official refusal of talking, not put into words but perfectly understood and spread, it is the trauma of the situation and its psychic consequences that have prevented the grief.] (Chrétien and Dupaquier 2007, 465–467)

With the subsequent massacres of 1988 and 1993, this collective amnesia had irremediable consequences for the fabric of the Burundian society, since the violence had been denied for several years. Deo's *gusimbura* plays into this fear of remembering the extreme violence, and the society is not willing to cope with it collectively out of fear that it would endanger the nation's unity. Deo's story must nonetheless be

told according to Kidder, who interprets the trauma of the civil war in Burundi through the lens of the trauma of the Holocaust. Indeed, after the Holocaust, narratives of trauma needed to be shared so that the sufferers could re-build their sense of self. But in Deo's case, it seems clearly inappropriate; Deo tries to forget in order to stay alive. What if Kidder had imposed his vision of healing (mostly accepted in Western countries after the Holocaust) on Deo? What if Deo's recovery could only happen by forgetting his loved ones? Are there any alternatives to Deo speaking about his trauma? Kidder orchestrates Deo's memory to "save" him because he knows what is best for his friend. As Stef Craps acknowledges in his book, *Postcolonial Witnessing*, trauma theory has been mainly Eurocentric, echoing the work of the missionaries going to Africa to save the souls of the indigenous (2013, 20), whereas it should take into account the multicultural aspects of personhood. Forcing Deo to confront the trauma he has experienced and leading him to process the traumatic memories a certain way reveals two major problems. This approach dismisses Deo's own culture by toning down the importance of the words in materializing the violence of the past and it undermines Deo's own cultural strategy to cope with the trauma. This approach mostly focuses on the individual; however, one may wonder if it would be better to address Deo's trauma on a more collective scale, using truth-telling mechanism models such as the *gacacas* in Rwanda.¹³ Burundi's society has been in denial about its own history since the genocide of 1972.¹⁴ Instead of dealing with one individual, Kidder could recognize the impact of the trauma within the community itself and promote a more collective healing process in which the whole community participates, using or imagining different rituals to operate the catharsis.¹⁵

Rather than positing a necessary relation between aesthetic form and political or ethical effectiveness, trauma theory should take account of the specific social and historical contexts in which trauma narratives are produced and received, and be open and attentive to the diverse strategies of representation and resistance which these contexts invite or necessitate. (Craps 2013, 43)

The "return of the repressed" in Deo's and Beah's cases does not deflect the power of a dominant order, but underlines a commonly accepted conception of memory.

Beah's use of flashbacks is essential in understanding where he is writing from, as Eaglestone recalls:

the text echoes the accounts of trauma that stress that the events are not experienced as they happen but only afterwards, in fragmentary and broken ways, as the self struggles to work through and reintegrate itself. (Eaglestone 2008, 83)

The fragmentation of time mirrors Beah's internal struggle to free himself from the trauma. Beah's narration has an ethical purpose, which is made clear right from the beginning, with an explicit quote on the book cover from a journalist from the *Washington Post*: "Everyone in the world should read this book. We should read it to learn about the world and about what it means to be a human being." Beyond the moralist aspect of the paratext (should), what is puzzling is that the context of the war in Africa is deliberately toned down in order to highlight a transformative experience that could happen anywhere in the world. Beah's story is *not* about Africa, but about ourselves (and by "ourselves," the critic alludes to the American reader who has somehow become universal). What every reader should gain from Beah's personal account is *not* learning about the war in Sierra Leone, through polyphonic and personal memories, but becoming a better human being and a better citizen, as the cover of the book insinuates as well. The reviewer's imperative calls to mind Achebe's criticism of universalism and Eurocentrism in the 1970s: they are often "synonymous for the narrow, self-serving parochialism of Europe, until their horizon extends to include all the world" (Achebe 1995, 60). Again defining the book in terms of universal values, the critic tends to situate Beah's experience on a Western scale,¹⁶ rendering Beah's experience understandable for the average American reader. Even if the paratext does not totally summarize the author's purpose, it nonetheless underlines the transformative experience at the heart of Beah's story. The violence is there to emphasize Beah's coming of age, his own redemptive transformation from a child soldier into a cosmopolitan citizen: "'We can be rehabilitated,' I would emphasize and point to myself as an example. I would always tell people that I believe children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance" (Beah 2007, 169). The memoir becomes a *Bildungsroman* without really challenging Western modes of representations about Africa.¹⁷ Beah's memoir embraces dominant discourses about growth and fulfillment to

achieve recognition with a broader and international audience. It pertains to what Huggan calls the “anthropological exotic,” which “invokes the familiar aura of other, incommensurably ‘foreign’ cultures while appearing to provide a modicum of information that gives the uninitiated reader access to the text, and by extension, the ‘foreign culture’ itself” (2001, 37). The African is still utterly different, but brings us back to our sameness, the white norm that defines, construes, and classifies knowledge.

If the strength of Beah’s own desire to help youth throughout the world echoes Deo’s own will to “do something” for his country (2009, 228), Kidder brings another form of imposition to this cultural encounter. “And trying to build a clinic must also be a way, *I thought*, for him to reach back to his former life and connect it with his new one” (2009, 228, my emphasis). Kidder speaks for Deo, presenting his trip to the US as a transformative experience. His journey to the West changes him into this self-made man, gives his life meaning, and provides him with a clear objective to strive toward. Even if Deo gave up his dream of becoming a doctor, he knows that he can “resume that dream somewhere else” (2009, 252) after he achieves his vision of building a clinic in Kigutu, a “place of reconciliation for everyone, including him” (2009, 259). Kidder does not just recall Deo’s story, he conjectures about Deo’s memories and gives them a significance that slowly transforms Deo into a symbol, a man who builds a clinic from the ground up to bring Hutu and Tutsi together, a man who will put his past behind him and focus on the future of the nation “because remembering is not going to benefit anyone” (2009, 259). At this exact moment, Deo has become a message of hope for the reunification of Burundi. Deo is finally able to build his clinic after visiting Rwanda’s memorial sites, which Kidder recognizes as a “willed catharsis” (2009, 247). Referring to these memorial sites, Kidder writes,

They were a means of keeping a history that had to be known ... And surely these sites had great value for many survivors, as public recognition of their suffering, as places to mourn their murdered friends and families. Surely the sites were psychologically useful for some, as they seemed to be for Deo. (2009, 248)

Once again, Deo’s most intimate thoughts and pains, at this crucial moment, escape the reader, hidden and overshadowed by Kidder’s own

analysis of the journey. Without knowing what Deo is thinking, we can only conjecture through a third-person witness who retrospectively constructs these memorial sites as therapeutic for Deo's own sanity of mind. Deo's silence does not contradict Kidder's perspective, but it does not acknowledge it either. We are left undecided, even if we are easily influenced by Kidder's own perception.

Memory in both texts is used to give a sense to Deo and Beah's journey through violence, and to highlight their individualism and courage in times of war. What is striking in both texts is this unfailing message of hope they share with an American audience, along with the coming of age stories that allow each of the characters to reflect on the violence they have endured all along, and alone. Both Deo and Beah have become successful because of their hard work, perseverance, and achievement while maintaining a strong connection to their original culture, through memories or new constructive projects. In these stories, memories are not really about the war but they represent the values ingrained in the American culture. They seem to attest that change in Africa won't come from Europe as imperialism used to persuade us; rather, it will come from Africans going to the United States. Indeed, America gives Africans back their agency, at least once they have embraced American values. While Beah tends to idealize the past in a similar way to how some African writers used to idealize how the African cultures were before the arrival of the Europeans, Deo goes a step further and wants to start anew in his own country, an allusion to the American dream. But he does it by acknowledging Kidder as his voice, which is still very paternalistic. Deo's memories can't totally liberate him from his trauma, despite Kidder's efforts.

In their own and sometimes intricate way, *Strength in What Remains* and *A Long Way Gone* bear witness to the war in Sierra Leone and Burundi from a very peculiar perspective. These texts could be understood as a commemorative site of their own, but an external one, in which the assimilation into America functions as a narrative of redemption. It is less about the war as an historical event than it is about a life experience: Deo's and Beah's metamorphoses. These coming-of-age stories, both rites of passage from childhood to adulthood, and from naiveté to maturity, commemorate Deo's and Beah's strength of character against life's adversities. They function as exemplary life stories in which memory evokes self-sustainability and self-achievement and in which every Western reader can project him/herself. The traces left in both

postcolonial memoirs, far from subverting the grand narratives of the war in Africa—and far from being “a critical re-engagement with Western anthropological metaphors and myths” (Huggan 2001, 40)—on the contrary, perpetuate a colonial mindset whose capital is highly problematic because it continues to “other” Africa. The memory-traces of these two memoirs about civil wars in Africa untangle the psychic powers of the colonial experience, even today.

NOTES

1. “What we call memory is in fact a gigantic and breathtaking effort to store the material vestige of what we cannot possibly remember, thereby amassing an unfathomable collection of things that we might someday need to recall” (Nora 1989, 8).
2. This article is not about Eggers’s text. However, it is interesting to note that Kidder could be influenced by Eggers’s *parti-pris* in writing the story of an African refugee in North America. Indeed, Eggers used his fame to promote Deng’s story among a Western audience; Eggers is also listed as the sole author on the book’s cover, and he used a fictional voice to narrate Valentino’s story, which can recall Kidder’s own way of telling Deo’s story.
3. To analyse more in depth Eggers’s book, read “Humanitarianism, Testimony, and the White Savior Industrial Complex: *What Is The What* versus Kony 2012” by Bex and Craps.
4. Laura Simms has become Beah’s adoptive mother in the US but it is unclear to what extent she helped him write his own story. Beah barely mentions her in his memoir, except as a protective figure who can help him escape the war.
5. According to Marianne Hirsch, Jewish practices of commemoration can become a resource for future generations to understand the genocide. They are traces that “detail the acts of commemoration devoted to the dead” (1997, 246). In that sense, they become symbolic memory because they become “acts of witness *and* sites of memory” (1997, 246, my emphasis).
6. Ishmael Beah talks about his book *A Long Way Gone*. Lecture on the campus of IUPUI, on March 12 2009: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XuYi0apoIJA>.
7. It would be interesting to analyse more in depth whether Western accounts of African trauma tend to conflate these silences.
8. Beah says: “my nickname was Green Snake because I would situate myself in the most advantageous and sneaky position” (2007, 144). His new

- nickname informs his actions and his identity, or at least, this is how he interprets it, using the old naming framework to make sense of today's chaos. "Our innocence had been replaced by fear and we had become monsters. There was nothing we could do about it" (2007, 55).
9. "He [Deo] learned that Hutus made up about 85 percent of the country and the Tutsis about 13 or 14 percent; that for decades Tutsi big shots had controlled both the army and the government; that there had been many bloody Hutu uprisings, followed by even bloodier army repressions. This pattern had turned into a bloodbath back in 1972 That was the year ... when his uncle the doctor had been killed His uncle had been just one victim of a gruesome Hutu rebellion, which the army had put down with gruesome efficiency. They had killed all the Hutu politicians and intellectuals they could, even schoolteachers and nurses, and many schoolchildren—at least 100,000 Hutus in all, and some said 200,000 or even 300,000; many other Hutus had fled to neighboring countries such as Rwanda and Tanzania" (2009, 89).
 10. The bibliography mentions just a few names of specialists on the crisis and could have listed more works to discuss the different waves of violence in Burundi. Indeed, if scholars agree that the 1993 massacres could not be considered a genocide, most acknowledge, however, that the 1972 massacres are one of the first postcolonial forgotten genocides of Africa, but Kidder never expands on this idea, which is very important because the 1972 events triggered the 1993 events.
 11. See the tale of the wild pig (Beah 2007, 53) or the tale of the trickster spider (2007, 71). The tale of the trickster spider foreshadows what will happen to Beah. "In many Mende stories, the spider is the character that tricks other animals to get what he wants but his tricks always backfire on him" (2007, 71). In order to survive, Beah accepts to become a child soldier but it might backfire on him in the sense that it will change him forever.
 12. Kidder did not delve into the concept of *gusimbura* to explain Deo's behavior, which is surprising from a journalist who carefully documented Deo's trip from Burundi to Rwanda and then New York City.
 13. Local authorities have used the TRC and combined it with the *Gacaca* courts in postgenocide Rwanda, as a tool of reconciliation to mediate a past history of destruction and violence. "In the previous few years, Rwandan authorities had begun talking about resurrecting and adapting a precolonial model for dispute resolution called *gacaca* as the answer to the weaknesses within the national courts Based on the pilot phase, modifications were made in the *gacaca* law in 2004, and the official launch of *gacaca* activities nationwide quickly followed, including training judges for the initial information-gathering phase" (Conner Doughty 2016, 99).

14. Most scholars tend to see the massacres of 1972 in Burundi as a forgotten genocide (see Uvin, Chrétien, Lemarchand, Moore, etc.): “Amazingly, the 1972 killings of Hutus by Tutsi—what Stephen Weissman calls ‘the first clear genocide since the Holocaust’—have sunk into oblivion.... Remarkably, few observers seem to realize that the first genocide to be recorded in the annals of independent Africa occurred not in Rwanda but in Burundi, in the wake of an aborted Hutu-instigated uprising that caused the death of hundreds if not thousands of Tutsi civilians. Estimates of the number of Hutu killed during the ensuing repression range from 100,000 to 200,000. The killings lasted from April to November 1972, resulting in the death or flight into exile of almost every educated Hutu” (Lemarchand 2009, 71).
15. Uvin notes: “This puzzle is all the more perplexing as Burundi does not have any public rituals, mechanisms, or procedures of community integration or reconciliation. Not one Burundian, whether intellectual or peasant, Hutu or Tutsi, urban or rural, described to us any ceremony or rite of reintegration or reconciliation, whether traditional, religious, or state-sponsored” (2009, 166).
16. Kidder’s title is borrowed from a poem by Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood.” The journalist puts the poem in the epigraph of his book to underline the universalism of pain throughout time and space. However, one can question the values of choosing such a poet who represented for so long English Romanticism and was so prevalent in colonial education.
17. To better understand the concept of *Bildungsroman*, read Dedebas’s article which compares Beah’s memoir, *A Long Way Gone* to Kourouma’s novel *Allah is Not Obligated*. Both books are about child soldiers in the civil war in Sierra Leone, but Kourouma is more ironic. He “writes a self-reflexive *Bildungsroman* that contribute to the maturation of the reader” (70).

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