

Of murdered babies and silenced histories

Gendering memory in two francophone trauma narratives

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Gendering traumatized memory

Trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, includes the testimony of a Holocaust survivor named Bessie K. whose baby, concealed under her coat, was killed in Auschwitz after its cough gave it away to the ss. After returning from the camps, Bessie came to deny that her baby ever existed and found herself unable to tell her husband what happened. She then became plagued by feelings of guilt, as her denial seemed to her to equate to metaphorically killing her baby a second

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time (LaCapra 2014, xxxiv–xxxv¹). Issues of motherhood and infanticide are also at the heart of the trauma narratives included in this study, in that they are the lens through which Malika Mokeddem and Scholastique Mukasonga choose to approach their accounts of the catastrophic events they are dealing with, in a preoccupation with highlighting the gendered experience of trauma.

My study explores this articulation of gender with various traumas caused by recent historical catastrophes through a dialogical reading of two autobiographical narratives written in French and published in 2008: Algerian Malika Mokeddem's *Je dois tout à ton oubli* [I Owe Everything to your Oblivion] and Rwandan Scholastique Mukasonga's *La Femme aux pieds nus* [The Bare-foot Woman].² Despite dealing with different historical events (the Algerian War of Independence, the oppression of women, terrorism in Algeria during the “Black Decade” in the 1990s, and the 1994 Rwandan genocide), these two texts converge in revolving around tropes of infanticide, tormented genealogies and motherhood, and idealized and/or toxic mother/daughter relationships through issues of memory. Above all, these texts share a similar concern with finding a new aesthetics to render the specific, gendered experience of the historical catastrophes they are writing about and for which traditional narratives prove inadequate.

Using as a critical framework Michael Rothberg's notion of “multidirectional memory,” this paper sets out to examine the ways in which a woman writer feels compelled to resort to new aesthetic forms and themes to render the break from traditional narratives required for expressing her gendered experience of

¹ Bessie K.'s complete testimony can be found at the Yale Fortunoff Archive Tape A67.

² English translations by the author of the article.

trauma and memorializing her own history when it happens to be part of a larger history often dominated by male narratives. This study thus aims to create bridges between texts by women writing with the voiced intention of re-inscribing their stories within the dominant canons of French history and literature. I argue that this gendered expression of trauma occurs through the use of specific tropes: infanticide, “bad” mothers, or disturbed mother-daughter relationships, which are a way for the women writers included here to reclaim agency over their traumatic (his) stories and to subvert traditional male narratives which often uphold motherhood as the last vestige of humanity in situations of extreme trauma, while also moving beyond victimology³ and typical catastrophist discourses. Thus, my argument is that the shared, recurring tropes used by these women writers to express traumatic (his)story – be it experienced or fictional – allow them to find their own voices and challenge their positions as reified subjects of male historical and psychoanalytical narratives, thereby enabling them to re-appropriate their stories and move beyond passivity. The intertextuality with myths also plays a central role in these texts, in order for these authors to (re)write themselves into history, and debunk certain myths held by male narratives about “femininity.” My position is not that there is such a thing as an innate *écriture féminine* (women’s writing⁴) of

³ “Victimology” is a term that was coined in 1947 by Benjamin Mendelsohn and has now become an academic discipline which studies data relating to victimization. According to the Oxford dictionary, victimology is also “a mental attitude which tends to indulge and perpetuate the feeling of being a victim”.

⁴ “Écriture féminine” is a term coined by French feminist Hélène Cixous in her seminal article “The Laugh of the Medusa” meaning literally “feminine writing.” The idea of “écriture féminine” comes from Freud’s idea notion that women are incomprehensible and less “rational” than men; building on his idea of women as “the dark continent,” Cixous uses that as a metaphor to celebrate the lack of control possible over the position of woman in the phallogocentric Symbolic Order. Feminine writing is associated with the Lacanian Real, with

trauma, but that the writers included in this study intentionally develop specific tropes, for the purposes of reclaiming their stories, in a conscious attempt at differentiating themselves from their male counterparts. Thus, I will not be using “gendering” in a genetic sense, but as a political stance.

Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory (Hirsch & Miller 2011), builds on the notion of postmemory, while sharing some of the same preoccupations as multidirectional memory, but in a gendered perspective that is rather absent from Rothberg’s essay, as the following statement shows:

In its concern with justice, ethics, and repair, and the ways in which those domains are shaped by structures of family, generational identity, and home, *Rites of Return* marks a new moment in the field of gender and cultural studies (Hirsch & Miller 2011, 18).

Thus, Miller and Hirsch emphasize their gendered approach to the theorization of memory, in a transnational perspective, since their book contains essays from various perspectives (Korea, Palestine...). Furthermore, Miller and Hirsch place an emphasis on connections rather than comparisons⁵ in their transnational exploration of diaspora narratives. *Rites of Return* is presented as staging

the maternal body, which is barred from the Symbolic Order; she associates representational writing with the Symbolic, and non-representational writing with the female and maternal bodies. However, feminine writing does not belong exclusively to females; namely, Cixous argues that anyone can occupy the marginalized position of “woman” within the Symbolic order and write from that position.

⁵ Hirsch and Miller write: “In placing their stories alongside each other, we are putting forward a *connective* rather than *comparative* approach that places the claims, responses, and strategies of redress emerging from different contexts in conversation with each other. The performance of return crosses cultural divides and reveals both commonalities and differences among diverse groups with divergent histories” (Hirsch & Miller 2011, 8).

a dialogue between feminist and diaspora studies, offering a multifaceted paradigm of community *that acknowledges longings to belong and to return while remaining critical of a politics of identity and nation.*⁶ [...] An attention to roots and identity-based origins does not necessarily mean an appeal to a biological essentialism, shored up and masked by innovative technology. [...] *as feminists, we are committed to challenging idealizations of home.*⁷ Throughout this past decade, we have been actively engaged in the emerging fields of memory and trauma studies and particularly have come to appreciate the confluences and the commitments these theoretical projects share with feminism. Indeed, the notion of *postmemory* elaborated by Marianne Hirsch emerges from feminist insights into the mediated structuring of identity and the intersection of private and public forces in its formation (Hirsch & Miller 2011, 4).

These voiced attempts at thinking cultural memory and feminism through new paradigms clearly show the urgency of not only granting attention to what could be termed “minority” historical narratives, but, also, to reclaim a central position for women writers in cultural memory studies, by studying them in a connective, productive perspective. This is the statement that the present paper springs from.

Echoing Marianne Hirsch’s seminal work, *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism* (1989), where she argues that mothers and daughters are figures that have been neglected by classic psychoanalysis and confined to traditional, shallow narratives, and challenges Freud’s family romance and

⁶ My italics.

⁷ My italics.

notion of the Oedipus complex, these women writers offer various rewritings of the “great silenced story” (i.e., the mother/daughter story – *Mother/Daughter Plot* 37). By performing a close study of the shared tropes they use in reclaiming their stories, this paper will, first, give a brief overview of the multidirectional feminist trauma theory in Francophone literature that I am aiming to sketch, by demonstrating how the circulation of recurring themes (infanticide, troubled mother/daughter relationships and a deconstruction of the notion of “motherhood”) allows these writers to reclaim agency over their experiences. After exposing the theoretical background framing this study, I will move on to a detailed discussion of each one of the two texts included here, focusing more precisely on the figures of infanticide, childlessness, and motherhood and their various treatments and purposes in each text, while also highlighting the ways in which the Holocaust serves as a paradigm through metaphors providing a productive echo chamber in these narratives dealing with various traumas.

Towards a multidirectional feminist trauma theory

A critical overview

First, let me give a brief overview of the critical background in which this study is inscribed. By trying to sketch a multidirectional feminist trauma theory, I mean to study common tropes used by women writing in French in order to express a traumatic past or the inherited memory of that past historical catastrophe, which would constitute a sketch of transnational, shared women’s voice

of trauma, spanning across various contexts and time periods. More specifically, this study centers on the figures of tormented motherhood and the infanticidal mother, as counterpoints to dominant male discourses of trauma, in which the mother-child relationship is often idealized as a last vestige of humanity in situations of extreme trauma.

In this perspective, I am broadening Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory by examining how it can be extended to gender studies, since even mainstream memory theories seem to fall short of being able to render accurately the gendered experience of catastrophe. Following Rothberg's (2009) notion of "multidirectional memory," which demonstrates how marginalized collective memories interact productively instead of competing with one another, this paper reads dialogically an autofictional novel by a French Algerian writer, Mokeddem, titled *Je dois tout à ton oubli*, dealing with immigration, the Algerian War of Independence and the oppression of women in rural areas of Algeria, focusing on a violent mother/daughter relationship and a case of infanticide; and a memoir, *La Femme aux pieds nus*, by Mukasonga, a Rwandan author who now lives in France and survived the 1994 genocide, in which she lost her entire family.

According to Hirsch, the female body is the privileged site for the transmission of trauma – especially the physical closeness existing between the mother and her daughter, which she examines in "Mothers and Daughters," where she summarizes and challenges what Adrienne Rich called "the great unwritten story" ("Mothers and Daughters", 200), i.e., the mother-daughter plot. And yet, it seems that the mother-daughter relationship, while being central to both texts examined here, is, more often than not, used in a distorted way, so as to debunk any idealization of the mother-daughter relationship, which has too often been

used as a topos of “innocence” and “purity” in men’s narratives of traumatic history⁸.

These two texts – *Je Dois Tout à ton Oubli* and *La Femme aux pieds nus* – herald child figures as embodiments of trauma, while, at the same time, questioning the very narratives of “innocent childhood” – except for Mukasonga’s text, which provides an interesting instance of the fundamental differences in the ways in which memory and motherhood are intertwined, whether the writer is writing from outside or from within, or is a first-generation survivor, first-hand witness, or a second-generation survivor, or witness by proxy.

While trying to express what occurred beyond words, along with the sexed subjectivity of their experiences, these authors invent new narrative forms, i.e., what can be termed an aesthetics of catastrophe – a poetic memoir that serves as the symbolic shroud for her mother killed during the Rwandan genocide in Mukasonga’s case and an autofictional-cum-detective narrative in Mokeddem’s case. Thus, expanding on Hirsch’s theories of the mother-daughter transmission of memory, as well as on her recent work with Miller on trauma, migration, and gender, I will show the various ways in which these texts give rise to a counter-discourse of memory through the gendering of what tends to be suppressed by master discourses on trauma and catastrophe, and, thus, create a transnational literary voice of the gendering of trauma in literature written in French. This analysis provides an overview of the cathartic function of literature in the gendering of memory.

Let us now move on to a close reading of these two narratives and of the ways in which they exemplify the transnational

⁸ See, for instance, Primo Levi’s *If This Is a Man* (translated by Stuart Woolf, NY, Orion Press, 1959) or Robert Antelme’s *L’Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).

feminist voice of trauma that this study is trying to sketch in Francophone studies. We will therefore see how these two texts converge in two main ways: on the one hand, the use of a toxic mother/daughter relationship (mostly in Mokeddem's case) as displaced trauma, or screen memory,⁹ insofar as the narrator focuses on the dysfunctional family situation, which conceals the deeper trauma from which the text originates; on the other hand, the use of metaphorical or actual infanticide and extensive discussions of whether to remain childless or not at the core of the resilience process at work through writing.

“Ce Serpent familial” [that family snake]: Malika Mokeddem, Algeria, and the infanticidal mother

This multidirectional concern, intertwined with the desire to remain childless, is a central aspect of Malika Mokeddem's *Je Dois tout à ton oubli*, an autofictional narrative built around a case of infanticide and dealing with the 1954–62 Algerian War of Independence, immigration, the wave of terrorism in Algeria in the 1990s, and the tensions between what is presented as “modernity” and “traditions.” The narrator, Selma, is a female cardiologist in her fifties, living in France, having emigrated from Algeria in her twenties. As she is being haunted by a recurring nightmare, in which she is three years old and terrified as her mother is stifling her with a pillow, she suddenly remembers something that she had relegated to the confines of her mind: that, at the age of 3, she witnessed, through a keyhole, her mother

⁹ “Screen memory” is a term coined by Sigmund Freud in 1899 in the context of infantile trauma and amnesia. He hypothesized that screen memories, often trivial in appearance, served to conceal traumatic memories, as if to omit and record them at once (Freud, S. 1899. *Screen Memories*. Standard Edition 3. London: The Hogarth Press).

kill her aunt's baby daughter. She decides to go back to the remote village in the Algerian Sahara where her family lives, and where she hasn't been for 20 years, in an attempt at finally establishing a dialogue with her overbearing, abusive mother, and finding out what really happened on the day of the infanticide.

As the narrator travels back to her origins, the memories of her childhood and youth resurface and the War of Independence is paralleled with the narrator's struggle to set herself free from the weight of ancestral traditions in which girls have no other perspective than the prison of the domestic sphere. As she reconnects with her former university friends, who suffer from various symptoms of post-traumatic disorder induced by the war and the subsequent terror attacks of the 90s, Selma comes to see the war of independence as a reflection of her private struggle for liberation. Under circumstances too long to summarize here, it is the war that allowed her to flee to France, thus escaping what she calls "l'univers carcéral du désert, [le] cachot de ses traditions" (Mokeddem 2008, 27) [the concentrationary world of the desert, the prison of traditions].

She eventually comes to see the "sacrificed baby" as the victim of those stifling traditions. Images of the baby being stifled with a pillow actually mirror the stifling sensation oppressing the narrator whenever she is around her family:

Peu à peu, Selma prend conscience aussi de ce qu'elle doit à cet oubli. Il est à l'origine de tous les refus qui la constituent et de sa relation, si particulière, avec sa mère, et qui n'a jamais relevé de l'habituel conflit entre mère et fille. Depuis ce meurtre, Selma était devenue insomniaque et s'était mise à fuguer. Elle filait en douce échappant ainsi à l'épouvantable sensation d'étouffement (Mokeddem 2008, 38).

[Gradually, Selma also develops a new awareness of what she owes to that oblivion. It is the origin of all the refusals that constitute her and of her relationship with her mother, which is so particular, and has never fallen under the category of the typical mother/daughter conflict. Since that murder, Selma had started suffering from severe insomnia and had started to run away on a regular basis. She would quietly leave the house, unnoticed, so as to escape that horrendous stifling feeling].

Mokeddem's narrator then replaces the sacrificed baby girl in a larger context of gendercide, wondering how many millions of female newborns are sacrificed every year in places like China or India, and using Holocaust metaphors, likening Algeria to Medea, the epitome of the infanticidal mother: "En vérité, c'est au pays tout entier, à l'Algérie, que sied le rôle de Médée. C'est elle [...] qui a assassiné les uns, exilé les autres, *fait incinérer des bébés dans des fours* (my emphasis) [...]" (Mokeddem 2008, 73) [The truth is, it is the country as a whole, Algeria, that should play the part of Medea. It is her who assassinated some, exiled others, *incinerated babies in ovens*].

Selma then exposes why she has decided to remain childless, so as to break the cycle of violence and entrapment, by making sure she never destroys her daughter's life in the same manner as hers was destroyed. Her rejection of motherhood is also likened to a rejection of her origins, of memory, and of passing on anything: "[La mère] a forgé son refus de l'enfantement. Elle n'a jamais eu de mère et elle ne sera jamais mère" (Mokeddem 2008, 138) [The mother forged her rejection of motherhood. She has never had a mother and she will never be a mother], thereby what is passed on is non-motherhood. The narrator's un-mothering, abusive mother has passed on to her the inability to be a mother.

Selma refers to her family as “ce serpent familial” [that family snake] (Mokeddem 2008, 33). Throughout the narrative, a parallel is implicitly drawn between the baby that Selma will never have and the murdered baby girl who has come to stand for the Algerian roots and war traumas that she wishes to forget: “Et lequel des deux hommes de la maison est-il le géniteur du *bébé sacrifié* (my emphasis)?” [And which one of the two men in the house is the *sacrificed baby’s* genitor?] (Mokeddem 2008, 33), whereby the baby becomes cast as the sacrificial victim of an entire generation.

Thus, infanticide is used in the novel as a sort of screen memory, a displaced trauma, which has come to embody all that the narrator wants to run away from upon moving to France and starting a new life. Infanticide is also at the core of Scholastique Mukasonga’s *La Femme aux pieds nus*, albeit for rather different purposes than in *Je Dois tout à ton oubli*.

Scholastique Mukasonga: Mothering memory after the Rwanda genocide

Scholastique Mukasonga, a survivor of the 1994 Rwanda genocide now living in France, writes *La Femme aux pieds nus* so as to pay tribute to her mother Stefania, who was killed during the genocide, along with all of Mukasonga’s relatives. The text becomes the symbolical shroud with which she covers her mother’s dead body. However, her autobiographical novel is symbolical on more than one level, insofar as, as a woman from Sub-Saharan Africa, and as a Tutsi – i.e., the ethnical minority in Rwanda that the Hutus aimed at exterminating during the genocide – she is writing from the perspective of a triple alienation: as a woman, as an African writer, and as an ethnical minority. Her goal is, therefore, not only to give a voice to her

dead mother, but, also, to the countless other voiceless Rwandan women who have been silenced by history.

The novel opens with the mother Stefania's voice, presented as direct speech, therefore metaphorically restoring the murdered mother to life:

Quand je mourrai, quand vous me verrez morte, il faudra recouvrir mon corps. Personne ne doit voir mon corps, il ne faut pas laisser voir le corps d'une mère. C'est vous mes filles qui devez le recouvrir, c'est à vous seules que cela revient. Personne ne doit voir le cadavre d'une mère, sinon cela vous poursuivra ... vous hantera jusqu'à votre propre mort, où il faudra aussi quelqu'un pour recouvrir votre corps (Mukasonga 2008, 12).

[When I die, when you see me dead, you will have to cover my body. My body can't be seen by anyone, a mother's body should never be seen. It is you, my daughters, who have to cover it, you are the only ones able to perform that duty. No one must see a dead mother's body, or else, it'll be with you forever ... it'll haunt you until you die, when it will also be time for someone to cover your bodies].

The threat that if the daughter lets anyone see her mother's corpse she will then be haunted by its memory for the rest of her life can be read as an embodiment of the mother/daughter transmission of "postmemory," all the more so as the entire narrative revolves around the physical and emotional closeness that used to bind the narrator to her mother. According to Hirsch, postmemory generally occurs through the mother-daughter relationship (characterized by greater affective proximity than that between

a mother and a son)¹⁰. Now that her mother is no longer alive, Mukasonga regrets this unique mother/daughter relationship and laments: “Hélas ! je n’ai pas retenu tous les secrets que me confiait Stefania, les secrets qu’une mère ne confie qu’à sa fille” [Alas, I do not remember all the secrets that Stefania used to tell me, the secrets that a mother only tells her daughter] (Mukasonga 2008, 54).

Throughout her narrative, Mukasonga highlights the gendered experience of the genocide, emphasizing that the Tutsi women were targeted, much like Jewish women, for their reproductive capacities, as shown in the following excerpt:

Merciana, c’était la vraie chef de famille, une “évoluée” comme on disait alors. Je ne sais où elle était allée à l’école mais elle savait lire et écrire. Savoir écrire, c’était dangereux quand on a un père qui s’est exilé au Burundi. [...] Ils ont pris Merciana. Ils l’ont traînée jusqu’au milieu de la cour, là où tout le monde pouvait la voir. Ils l’ont déshabillée. Ils l’ont mise toute nue. Les femmes ont enfoui leurs enfants sous leur pagne. Les deux militaires ont épaulé lentement leur fusil. “Ce n’est pas le cœur qu’ils visaient, répétait maman, ce sont les seins, seulement les seins. Ils voulaient nous dire à nous les femmes tutsi : ‘Ne donnez plus la vie car c’est la mort que vous donnez en mettant au monde. Vous n’êtes plus des porteuses de vie, mais des porteuses de mort’” (Mukasonga 2008, 28–29).

[Merciana was the real head of the family, an “evolved woman” as we used to say. I do not know where she had attended school but she could read and write. Being able to write was dangerous when your father had left

¹⁰ Postmemory, as already mentioned, is a term coined by Marianne Hirsch so as to describe the experience of children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, who inherit a trauma they have not directly experienced.

to Burundi in exile. They took Merciana. They dragged her to the center of the courtyard, where everyone could see her. They undressed her. They exposed her naked. The women hid their children under their pagnes. The two military men slowly raised their guns to their shoulders. “They were not aiming at her heart, Mama would keep repeating, they were aiming at her breasts, only her breasts. They wanted to send us, Tutsi women, the following message: “Stop giving birth because it is death that you give when you birth. You are no longer carrying life, but you are carrying death”].

Throughout the text, women’s traditional, biological role as mothers is over-emphasized, marking a radical difference with Mokeddem’s narrative. This echoes narratives by Holocaust survivors, such as Charlotte Delbo’s *Auschwitz and After* trilogy, in which the return to “normalcy” after coming back from the camps can only be achieved through motherhood, and in which sterility is seen as almost as traumatizing as the Holocaust itself, as a second wound. Namely, most of the female survivors interviewed by Delbo in *Mesure de nos jours* focus their narratives around motherhood, either on their disappointment at the fact that, once they became mothers in turn, their grief and post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms were not alleviated, or on their inability to bear children after surviving Auschwitz, due to being too old or infertile, which they experienced as a second blow from fate, preventing them from overcoming trauma through giving birth (Delbo 1971). It is noteworthy that, for first-generation genocide survivors, in which women are especially targeted by the perpetrators for their reproductive capacities, as was the case for the Holocaust and for the Rwandan genocide, there is still hope for oblivion, i.e., hope that, by bearing children,

female survivors will overcome trauma and resume a “normal” life. The child figure is still invested with the hope for renewal.

Thus, Mukasonga highlights the centrality of motherhood in the Rwandan culture, by referring to “le prestige et les pouvoirs que la tradition rwandaise attribue à la mère de famille. [...] la haute chevelure des femmes, symbole de leur fécondité” (Mukasonga 2008, 46) [the prestige and powers that the Rwandan tradition attributes to the mother; women’s high hair-do’s, a symbol for their fertility] and, also, that “l’urugori était le signe de la souveraineté maternelle” [urugori¹¹ was the sign of the sovereignty of mothers] (Mukasonga 2008, 46), which sets the stage for the sudden disruption of the narrative by the intrusion of the unthinkable violence :

Stefania, Marie-Thérèse, Gaudenciana, Theodosia, Anasthasia, Speciosa, Leoncia, Pétronille, Priscilla et bien d’autres, c’étaient elles, les Mères bienfaitantes, les Mères bienveillantes, celles qui nourrissaient, qui protégeaient, qui conseillaient, qui consolait, les gardiennes de la vie, celles que les tueurs ont assassinées comme pour éradiquer les sources mêmes de la vie (Mukasonga 2008, 148).

[Stefania, Marie-Thérèse, Gaudenciana, Theodosia, Anasthasia, Speciosa, Leoncia, Pétronille, Priscilla and so many others, it was them, the Benefactress Mothers, the Benevolent Mothers, the ones who used to nourish, to protect, to advise, to comfort, the guardians of life, those that the murderers have killed as if they wanted to eradicate the very sources of life].

¹¹ In the Kinyarwanda language, urugori refers to hair decorations and, by extension, to a woman’s hair.

As the entire genocide experience is narrated through the lens of motherhood, Mukasonga also resorts to a form of magical realism, echoing a narrative technique shared by several other Francophone writers, such as Caribbean Maryse Condé in *Moi, Tituba, sorcière ... noire de Salem* (Paris: Mercure de France 1986) and Ivorian Ahmadou Kourouma in *Les Soleils des indépendances* (Paris: Seuil 1995), thus replacing her story within a historical and literary lineage. As the soldiers enter the village, we are told that “les vieilles femmes aux seins desséchés avaient des montées de lait, les bébés refusaient d’abandonner le ventre maternel” (Mukasonga 2008, 31–32) [old women with dried-up breasts were suddenly producing milk, babies were refusing to leave their mothers’ wombs]. The irruption of the catastrophe – etymologically, an over-turn of the normal course of events – literally reverses the normal course of life, affecting the very pillar of traditional Rwandan society – motherhood.

In light of the unfolding of the genocide narrative through the lens of motherhood, it is then no wonder that Mukasonga eventually emphasizes an optimistic vision through a narrative of resilience, presenting her current life as a mother as a way to overcome trauma and continue the cycle of life, moving beyond anger and resentment. However, ultimately, she laments over the fact that her becoming a mother does not alleviate the pain of not being there to cover her mother’s dead body:

Je n’ai pas recouvert de son pagne le corps de ma mère. Personne n’était là pour le recouvrir. Les assassins ont pu s’attarder devant le cadavre que leurs machettes avaient démembré. [...] Maman, je n’étais pas là pour recouvrir ton corps et je n’ai plus que des mots – des mots d’une langue que tu ne comprenais pas – pour accomplir ce que tu avais demandé. Et je suis seule avec mes pauvres mots et mes phrases, sur la page du

cahier, tissent et retissent le linceul de ton corps absent
(Mukasonga 2008, 13).

[I did not cover my mother's body with her clothes. No one was there to cover it. The murderers were able to take their time looking at the corpse that their machetes had dismembered. Mama, I was not there to cover your body and all I have left are words – words in a language which you did not understand – so as to accomplish what you had asked for. And I am alone with my poor words, and my sentences, on the notebook page, weave over and over again the shroud of your absent body].

While Mokeddem's narrative deals with physically returning to the site of family trauma, Mukasonga's return occurs through words and memory. While the first narrative upholds childlessness as a way to work through trauma, Mukasonga's text, which addresses a historical trauma that happened barely twenty years earlier, upholds motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment, perpetuating the special position of mothers in the society that has been destroyed by the genocide: "Avoir un enfant, c'était accéder enfin à la plénitude de considération, de respect, de puissance à laquelle toute femme aspirait" (Mukasonga 2008, 160) [Having a child meant finally accessing the full consideration, respect, and power to which all women aspired]. Becoming a mother is a way to counter the de-gendering effects of the genocide.

Conclusion

These two texts converge in staging memory through tropes of infanticide – whether metaphorical or literal – and placing motherhood issues at the core of the narrative. Broadening

Michael Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory" to include gender studies, this essay has sketched a multidirectional feminist trauma theory by highlighting the various echoes, recurring metaphors, and intertextualities spanning across two autobiographical novels written in French and dealing with different historical and personal traumas, different geographical locations, and different time periods. By reading these texts in conversation, I have argued that these women gender their memory with the voiced intention of re-inscribing their stories within the dominant canons of French history and literature, since women writers and Francophone writers still tend to be considered as the "periphery" of French literary production, with the publishing market and literary prizes being entirely centralized in Paris, and with male narratives still holding the monopoly over historical narratives.

For the first-generation genocide survivor (Mukasonga), emphasis is placed on motherhood as the ultimate fulfillment and as a way of reclaiming agency over her life, whereby becoming in turn a mother is depicted as the *sine qua non* condition of returning to "normalcy" and perpetuating the life cycle, in the same vein as many Holocaust survivors' narratives. The preoccupation with continuing the cycle and passing on the survivor's memory is, indeed, central throughout *La Femme aux pieds nus*. On the other hand, in Mokeddem, agency is presented as being reclaimed through a conscious decision *not* to procreate, to break the cycle of (post)memory and avoid taking the risk of traumatizing one's children. The potential child comes to be solely perceived as a living memorial. In Mokeddem, rejection of motherhood underscores a rejection of her own parental figures, which, as the texts unfold, amounts to a crisis of memory, of origins, and rejection of the original trauma. Thus, rejection of motherhood becomes a refusal of transmission.

The treatment of the figure of infanticide, central to both narratives, is also crucial in that it reveals the differing ways of coming to terms with the catastrophe itself and its memorialization: in *Je Dois tout à ton oubli*, the plot is centered on an actual infanticide; the narrator also eventually experiences her childlessness and the memory of the sacrificed baby as liberating – from the burden of her ascendance, from her Algerian roots, from her oppressed childhood and her condition as a woman. On the other hand, in *La Femme aux pieds nus*, the many instances of infanticide depicted in the novel are those caused by the Hutus, the perpetrators of the genocide, and childlessness is solely experienced as a consequence and stigma of the de-gendering violence caused by the genocide. In this perspective, motherhood is depicted as liberating and cathartic, and as a means to re-gender memory and counter the de-gendering effects of a genocide that targeted women specifically for their reproductive capabilities.

Furthermore, these two writers use recurring allusions to other historical traumas, thereby broadening the scope of their narratives and creating productive, healing lines of communication in a multidirectional perspective and a cathartic turn to the future. I have argued that the set of common tropes to which these female writers resort constitutes a common voice to women's writings dealing with the sexed subjectivity of trauma. These two texts not only converge in using tropes of motherhood and infanticide as the core of their narrative of traumatized memory – and let us not forget Adrienne Rich's statement that the mother and the childless woman are a false polarity, since both serve the institution of motherhood – but they also echo each other by the use of Holocaust metaphors and allusions to other traumas, thereby replacing the narrator's own trauma in a larger, multidirectional, transnational context.

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