

## The State, the Writer, and the Politics of Memory

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There is an ancient Indian saying that something lives as long as the last person who remembers it. My people have come to trust memory over history. Memory, like fire, is radiant and immutable, while history serves only those who seek to control it; those who would douse the flame of memory in order to put out the dangerous fire of truth. Beware these men, for they are dangerous themselves, and unwise. Their false history is written in the blood of those who might remember, and of those who seek the truth.

—Albert Hosten, Navajo Chief

Man's struggle against power is the struggle of memory against oblivion.

—Milan Kundera

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

### I

In *L'Histoire sous surveillance (History Under Surveillance)* Marc Ferro refers to what he calls the "silences of official history." These silences are, according to Ferro,

at times tied to the exigency of reasons of State, of its legitimacy, at times to the identity of a society and to the image it wants to have of itself. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Silence here might be legitimated as a morally justifiable State action and it is deemed in the interest of building a national identity. In actuality, however, silence constitutes a form of violence and functions as an authoritarian enterprise controlling the production of history. One could distinguish other kinds of silence: the self-imposed or involuntary silence serving as a form of resistance, as a defense mechanism, or as a somatic manifestation of an intense emotional trauma as recounted in Assia Djebar's novel *Vaste est la prison*. There is also the silence imposed by those in power as a means of political repression, the silencing achieved by excluding a group or a category of people from History, thus denying their roles as subjects or actors in the historical process. Finally, in relation to the revisionist history of the Holocaust promoted by some historians, Pierre Vidal-Naquet reminds us of the silence that consists of pretending that past events never occurred, and he states in *Les Assassins de la mémoire* that

ces assassins veulent frapper une communauté sur les mille fibres encore douloureuses qui la relie à son propre passé... Ils lancent contre elle une accusation globale de mensonge et d'escroquerie.

these assassins seek to crush a community in the many fibers, still painful, which link it to its own past. . . . They throw against it global accusations of lies and infamy. (8)

The aforementioned references serve as an introduction to my remarks concerning not so much the construction of memory, but rather the politics of the production of memory: a site in which history, power, ideology, and language come together.

In *Metahistory*, Hayden White explores the relationship between history and literature, both of which use similar tropes. Dominick LaCapra, in *History, Politics, and the Novel*, illustrates the "historicity of literature" and the ways in which historical contexts are interwoven in the novel. For her part, Linda Hutcheon, in conceptualizing a "Postmodern historiographic metafiction," also stresses the dialectic relation between history and fiction. These authors provide a theoretical framework and models for reading African and Caribbean novels, many of which fictionalize moments or portions of the national past or recent history. The novels of Caribbean writers such as Edouard Glissant, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Maryse Condé,

Daniel Maximin, and Jacques-Stephen Alexis, or the Africans Mouloud Mammeri, Sony Labou Tansi, Sembene Ousmane, Assia Djebar, and Mongo Beti reflect this preoccupation.<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary narratives such as Gabriel García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Milan Kundera's *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Ousmane Sembene's film *Camp de Thiaroye* all disclose models for presenting history. These authors successfully illustrate the gap existing between the official recording of (hi)stories and a non-official recollection of what actually happened. In *One Hundred Years*, the official account of the banana plantation workers' strike concealed the bloody massacres of the workers by the State army, proclaiming that "nothing had happened at Macondo." In a similar manner, the French colonial government kept silent about the massacre of African soldiers on strike at the Thiaroye military camp, continuing to recruit African soldiers for the war effort as if "nothing had happened." Thus, what becomes history is the official version of events presented by the ruling power. The non-official versions of the same events as recounted by the "vox populi" in García Márquez's novel, or in Sembene's film, can be read as the emergence of a counter-memory, which operates as a form of resistance against official discourses and which manages to include the voice of the oppressed and the subalterns<sup>3</sup> into the public space, restituting them into History. These narratives also function as the foundation of a non-official collective memory, a necessary component in the construction of a national memory and identity.

Contemporary studies have focused on the relationship between past and present and the very construction of memory.<sup>4</sup> This is a recurrent theme in the postcolonial novel, in regards to the hegemonic position assumed by Western culture towards Others and their pasts, or as a concern evinced by these other cultures themselves for the opportunity to rewrite a history from which the power of the master narratives has excluded them. My interest in the two novels considered in this article is concerned less with the opposition between West and non-West than with the relationship between the production of a national history and institutional power. It is also concerned with the ways in which the construction of memory generates myths in the Barthesian sense: stories and images invested with false meaning and carrying a mystifying ideology.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the construction of memory also recreates

a myth with a positive connotation, as intended by Mircea Eliade: that is, a fabulous legendary narrative aiming to and able to bring a community together and ensure its cohesion.<sup>6</sup> I also suggest that the two novels could be read as a statement about writing history, specifically Africa's past and recent history, through telling stories: stories of colonization and its discontents, stories of origins, as well as stories of political control and censorship, of who decides what to forget and what to remember.

A comparative examination of J.-M. G. Le Clézio's novel *Onitsha* and Boris Boubacar Diop's *Les Tambours de la mémoire* (*The Drums of Memory*) essentially intends to elucidate the different strategies by which discursive productions are controlled, national history produced, and memory created or confiscated. It also aims to uncover the mechanisms which allow a fictionalized account to conflate the historical, the political, and the ideological. The stories told in the novels attempt to record the past through an assemblage of fragmented accounts, facts, and events. If *Les Tambours de la Mémoire* and *Onitsha* seem to acknowledge the negation of a "an ideal continuity—as a teleological movement or a natural process," as Foucault suggests in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (88) the historical investigation at the heart of the novels is nevertheless intended to be a search for continuity, for origins. Moreover, if indeed *Onitsha*'s Geoffroy Allen acknowledges moments of rupture and discontinuities, his passionate search for the "missing link" is based on diffusionist assumptions which establish a direct filiation between ancient Meroë and the new Meroë, the present day African country in which he lives. In *Les Tambours de la Mémoire*, Boris Boubacar Diop goes beyond the binary opposition frequently found in anti-colonial fiction: the colonizer as oppressor versus the colonized as victim. Colonel Vezelis, the European Chief of Police, and his African acolyte Niakholy work together to control the "Queen" Johanna's action in the country. The new leader of the now independent country, Major Adelezo, is as ruthless as Vezelis the colonialist. The absence of a chronological marker between colonial rule and independence clearly suggests continuity, as the new independent state reproduces the same vertical hierarchy between the dominating and the dominated via a similar institutionalization of political repression.

## II

In *Les Tambours*, the life story of the narrator, Fadel, is inserted *en abîme*. Changing from an initially elusive character, he becomes the dominant figure in the second part of the narrative, through the "Notes of Fadel," a collection of intimate papers, trip accounts, and letters to friends bequeathed by the dying Fadel to his childhood companion Ismaïla. Ismaïla and his wife Ndella sort, organize, and arrange the notes into the second and third parts of the novel. The first part of the narrative therefore functions as a prefatory discourse which confers credibility and authenticity on the "Notes of Fadel." In this way, the narration inaugurates a history in which individual (auto)biography and national biography come together and overlap. In his personal commitment to reconstitute Johanna's life as a revolutionary and nationalist symbol, as well as in the story of his own persecution by the political regime in power, Fadel wants to bring to light the hidden or erased face of the nation's history. As Ismaïla states:

l'ensemble me paraît assez cohérent pour donner à la vie et à la mort de Fadel une idée de l'âpre lutte menée par la reine Johanna pour une véritable indépendance nationale.

the whole seems to me coherent enough to give, through Fadel's life and death, an idea of the harsh struggle conducted by Queen Johanna for the sake of a real national independence. (50)

In his search for Johanna, Fadel encounters harassment, opposition, and derision. Michel Foucault's work, particularly *Archéologie du savoir* (*The Archaeology of Knowledge*), *L'Ordre du Discours* (*Discourse on Language*), *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (*Madness and Civilization*), and *Surveiller et punir* (*Discipline and Punish*), provides a theoretical framework for the analysis of power relations. Foucault asserts that each society creates procedures of control and limitations of discourse and of speech. Among the external procedures which regulate this control, he distinguishes between those which would act as rules of interdiction, in speech or in behavior, and those that separate the rational from its opposite. The character of "the fool" in Hamidou Kane's novel *L'Aventure ambiguë* presents an example of how political or social power controls, prohibits, or limits speech by resorting to the opposition between reason and unreason, thus undermining the credibility of the speaker.

As for Fadel, he is obsessed by the desire to reconstitute Johanna's life in writing. He therefore leaves the comfort and the security of his father's home, a wealthy civil servant of the current regime, to embark on a seven-year journey in search of Johanna. In the minds of his entourage and the authorities, such an endeavor could be only a manifestation of unreason. The stigma of being "eccentric" and "touched" associated with Fadel testifies to his father's fear of becoming a suspect in the eyes of the regime, as well as to the regime's efforts to stifle a speech act which seeks to promote Johanna's action as revolutionary and liberating. The authoritarian ruler can now dismiss Fadel's project as illusory and his contentions about Johanna as the fantasy of a disturbed mind. Mocked as "le fou de la reine" 'the queen's fool,' Fadel is deemed irrational, his discourse about Johanna marked with the anathema of madness, rendered unacceptable and even inaudible. Fadel's tearful cry "mais pourquoi donc cherchez-vous tous à la faire oublier?" 'but why do you all try to make people forget her?' does not succeed in opening up a space for Johanna in the official national memory constructed by those in power, nor does his firm determination to defy the tyrant when he "pointe ses baïonnettes sur les poitrines nues et ordonne à la mémoire de se taire" 'aims his bayonets at the bare chests and orders memory to shut up' (119).

Since memory fulfills a function of identity and of knowledge, one might then ask: what events, facts, and characters of the past should be retained and inscribed in the national history in order to create the collective memory? In other words, what should be forgotten and what remembered? An anguishing question raised by one of the authority figures, the Most Royal Lady, in *L'Aventure ambiguë*, reflects the dialectic between remembering and forgetting, between collective amnesia and impossible anamnesis. She says to the other Diallobé leaders:

Si je leur dis d'aller à l'école nouvelle, ils iront en masse. Ils y apprendront toutes les façons de lier le bois au bois que nous ne savons pas. Mais, apprenant, ils oublieront aussi. Ce qu'ils apprendront vaut-il ce qu'ils oublieront? Je voulais vous demander: peut-on apprendre ceci sans oublier cela, et ce qu'on apprend vaut-il ce qu'on oublie? (*L'Aventure ambiguë* 44)

If I tell them to go to the new school, they will go en masse. There they will learn all of the ways to connect wood to wood that we do not know. But learning, they will forget as well. Does

what they will learn merit what they will forget? I want to ask you: can one learn this without forgetting that, and what one learns, is it worth what one forgets? (*Ambiguous Adventure* 34)

The Most Royal Lady's interrogation brings to mind another question: how and where should Johanna Simentho be inserted into the national history? Like Béatrice Chimpa Vita centuries before her,<sup>7</sup> Johanna was summoned by voices to leave her humble servant's position and take charge of the nationalist duty. She was "sent by God to kick the French out of the country." Through Fadel's narration of her life, Johanna and her revolutionary gospel will be engraved into the popular memory, accomplishing her transformation into a prophetic and mythical figure in whom reality and fiction intermingle. Mythic to some and real to others, Johanna has left her footprint in the people's imagination, remembered as "reine de légende . . . , morte, mais toujours vivante" 'queen of legend . . . , dead, but still alive' (B.B. Diop 280). Long after her disappearance, old people

n'arrêtent pas de se demander si voilà quarante ans, ils n'ont pas tous ensemble rêvé d'une jeune fille qui, surgie de la nuit de leur oppression, les exhortait à refuser la domination étrangère et leur insufflait le courage de prendre en main leur destin!

keep asking themselves if, forty years ago, they didn't all together dream up a young girl who, risen up from the night of their oppression, exhorted them to refuse foreign domination and filled them with the courage to take their destiny in hand! (56-57)

Fadel's project to find Johanna, or at least the traces of her political life and her remaining followers, originates from his indestructible desire to make her live again and perpetuate her memory. Her memory is at odds with the official one and illustrates the tension between the desire of the ruler to create a collective memory and the political necessity of distorting the significance of Johanna's life or enclosing her in a national amnesia. If Nietzsche denounces the prison-house of memory and celebrates forgetting as a liberating therapy, the desire to have Johanna forgotten and erased from history expresses the regime's manipulation of history. In his desire to sanctify Johanna, a character demonized in the official discourse, Fadel is challenging the established order. Henceforth, he has to confront the "State Apparati." As Louis Althusser has shown, it is

through what he terms the State Repressive Apparati and the Ideological State Apparatus that political power is exercised (*Positions* 65).<sup>8</sup> The first is disguised in the bureaucratic and panoptic structures working against Fadel; the second is coated in the official speeches and declarations, and the Party discipline, rules, and revolutionary slogans. These State Apparati function on the basis of both symbolic and physical violence, as well as on ideology. They simultaneously constitute the means of control and limitation of speech and knowledge. As for Fadel, the State Apparati make it impossible for him to collect information about Johanna which would allow him to produce and disseminate a national memory different from the official one. His narrative is one of a controlled, aborted discourse. The indirect refusal by the State employee to grant him access to the archives is only a disguised form of a politics of domestication and surveillance. Diop writes:

Les archives sur cette femme ne seront disponibles, monsieur, que cinquante ans après sa mort, avait expliqué l'employé avec un grand sourire.

The archives on this woman will not be available, sir, until fifty years after her death, the employee had explained with a wide smile. (58)

When Fadel tries to convince the civil servant at the Archives to permit him to enter, telling him that he is working on a thesis, the employee retorts, "Et si vous êtes un étudiant sérieux, pourquoi avez-vous choisi ce sujet et pas un autre?" 'And if you're a serious student, why did you choose this subject and not another?' Ultimately, Fadel's determination to pursue Johanna's memory leads to his silencing via a political assassination disguised as a mysterious automobile accident. Fadel re-enacts Johanna's earlier erasure from society, accomplished through imprisonment and eventual capital punishment. The State in fact entertains a meta-discourse in which Johanna's persona is derided and her political action trivialized and negated. Decried a subversive instigator, she cannot be inscribed into the official memory of an order to which she objects and which she seeks to subvert and overthrow. The State action against her thus constitutes a legitimate act of national security which will facilitate the construction of a unified body: the Nation. At any rate, if the individuals' bodies, here Johanna's and Fadel's, disappear in death and forgetfulness, the body of the Nation itself cannot die

because it is not yet constituted as a body, but always in the process of becoming.<sup>9</sup> Paradoxically, it is the physical disappearance of Johanna's individual body which inscribes her immediately into time and space as a popular national heroine. As one of the novel's protagonists asserts:

Aujourd'hui encore, si tu vas à Wissombo, tu verras que des dizaines d'années après le passage de Johanna les gens sont encore sous le choc. Tu trouveras à Wissombo de nombreux protagonistes de ces évènements. Et tous te feront le même récit. . . .

Even today, if you go to Wissombo, you'll see that decades after the passage of Johanna the people are still in shock. You will find there several participants to these events. And everyone will tell you the same story. . . . (56)

Fadel tells Johanna's story to his younger sister as an imaginary bedtime story. It begins with the ritualistic formula recalling the ancient times of myths and extraordinary events which accompany the birth of epic and legendary heroes:

Il était une fois une petite orpheline du nom de Johanna Simentho. La nuit où elle vint au monde, il y eut un violent orage et la pluie tomba jusqu'au matin sur tout le royaume de Wissombo.

Once upon a time there was a little orphan girl named Johanna Simentho. The night she came into the world, there was a violent storm and rain fell until the morning on all the kingdom of Wissombo. (54)

In her native kingdom of Wissombo, names of praise bestowed upon Johanna—"reine du monde" 'Queen of the world,' "fille de l'eau" 'daughter of the water,' "déesse de la pluie" 'goddess of the rain'—testify to her continued presence, her inscription in the popular imagination of Wissombo, memorializing her persona. By dismissing Johanna as just a "crazy" troublemaker, the official discourse seeks to relegate her to the realm of unreason and undermine the credibility of her revolutionary action, while Fadel's account makes

possible the production of a counter-memory woven into the textual representation in which (hi)story is cast.

In his search for Johanna, Fadel looks not only for archival documents but also for other "traces": that is, material signs which, unlike human recollection, present stability, durability and less room for error. Johanna's story as it appears in "Fadel's notes" has been reconstructed from fragments of documents and oral accounts collected in different times and places. These sources include the story of Johanna's life as it was told to Fadel's mother by the police chief, Niakoly, in order to show her how foolish her son was to engage himself in the search for Johanna, as told later to Fadel by Johanna's sister and the inhabitants of Wissombo who had known her. The recuperative power of memory and its textualization bring Johanna back to life in Fadel's notebook. One can evoke Georges Perec's narrator in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance (W: or Memories of Childhood)*. He, too, is a character searching for (auto)biography, tracking "traces," tracing a genealogy, whose personal history has been shaped by the collective one. In the reconstitution of his family history, he collects oral accounts, and he interrogates letters and photographs, expressing regularly the uncertainties of his own recollections with locutions such as "I don't know, I don't remember if, it is possible, it seems, I was wrong." Speaking of his relation to his parents, Perec affirms the instrumentality of textualization and the role of the writing process in the creation of "traces":

J'écris parce qu'ils [mes parents] ont laissé en moi leur marque indélébile et la trace en est l'écriture. Leur souvenir est mort à l'écriture; l'écriture est le souvenir de leur mort et l'affirmation de ma vie. . . .

I write because they [my parents] left their indelible mark on me and the trace of it is writing. Their memory is dead to writing; writing is the memory of their death and the affirmation of my life. (58)

### III

Le Clézio's novel *Onitsha* embodies the convergence of historical and literary imagination. It also encompasses the conditions and the possibilities of creativity in the absence of structures to control speech or imagination. In his attempts to reconstruct the history of Onitsha, Geoffroy Allen, the narrator's father, works as an indepen-

dent scholar with the freedom that independence from institutional space and normalized rituals provides, in addition to the absence of any political constraint or precaution. He fully enjoys the freedom to exercise his historical imagination, and the liberty to pursue his longtime dream of reconstructing the historical genesis of the Umundri people, among whom he has been living. In fact, what Geoffroy is recounting throughout the book is a founding narrative, a history of the origins, or the epic of Umundri. His heuristic endeavor takes into account a variety of sources: documents and monuments, manuscripts and inscriptions (506).<sup>10</sup> He revisits old documents in museums to excavate new meanings. At the same time, he is presenting a way of writing history which goes against the grain of traditional historiography based on written sources only. In addition, he scrutinizes Ptolemy's maps, interrogates linguistic similarities and substrates, onomastics and iconography, body garments and somatic inscriptions, religious invocations and rituals, as well as oral traces.<sup>11</sup> In these mnemonics disseminated through time and space is inscribed the memory of Meroë and its descendants, the people of Umundri.

The Umundri are settled on the shore of the Geir river. Their story, told in fragments to Fintan by Geoffroy, starts in 350, with the people of Meroë forced into exile after the conquest and the destruction of their land by those from Axoum or "the people of the North." The Umundri's genealogy is traced back to

Meroë, la ville de *la reine noire*, la dernière représentante d'Osiris, la dernière descendante des Pharaons. *Kemit, le pays noir* . . . tous les gens de Meroë, les scribes, les savants, les architectes, emmenant les troupeaux et leurs trésors sacrés, sont partis, ils ont marché derrière la reine, à la recherche d'un nouveau monde. . . .

Meroë, the city of *the black queen*, the last representative of Osiris, the last descendant of the Pharaohs. *Kemit, the black country*. . . all of the people of Meroë, the scribes, the scholars, the architects, leading the herds and their sacred treasures, left, walking behind the queen, in search of a new world. . . . (Le Clézio 117-18; my emphasis)

Meroë's people's journey is recounted as an exodus, reenacting the biblical narrative of *Genesis*. The exile ends with the settlement of

the third generation in the Promised Land which inaugurates the era of the New Meroë. The new land is located at the meeting point of the desert and the river and its new people originate from a blending of peoples, cultures, and techniques. Indeed, the story goes as follows:

Les peuples noirs d'Osimiri se sont alliés aux gens de Meroë. Ils ont apporté les graines, les fruits, le poisson, les bois précieux, le miel sauvage, les peaux de léopard et les dents d'éléphant. Les gens de Meroë ont donné leur magie, leur science. Les secrets des métaux, la fabrication des pots, la médecine, la connaissance des astres. Ils ont donné les secrets du monde des morts et le signe sacré du soleil et de la lune et *des ailes et de la queue du faucon* sont gravés sur les visages des enfants premiers-nés.

The black people of Osimiri allied themselves with the people of Meroë. They brought grains, fruits, fish, precious woods, wild honey, leopard skins and elephant teeth. The people of Meroë contributed their magic, their science. The secrets of metal, the fabrication of pottery, medicine, knowledge of the stars. They gave the secrets of the world of the dead and the sacred sign of the sun and the moon and *the wings and the tail of the falcon* are engraved on the faces of their first-born children. (168; my emphasis)

This same sign is revealed as the sacred sign of the Umundri people, the *itsi*, an ethnic scar that Geoffroy, at the conclusion of his research, recognizes crafted in the stone of the landscape and engraved on the face of Oya, the young woman living in his compound. Geoffroy's passionate research regarding the history of Meroë bears the modalities of an initiation journey which culminates in the ecstatic revelation of the *itsi*. For Geoffroy, the quest and the link he sought erupt into the present and Umundri past is projected in front of him with the clarity of an illuminated screen:

Le disque d'or du soleil apparaît tout d'un coup, il éclaire la stèle de basalte sur laquelle est inscrite le signe d'Osiris, *l'oeil et l'aile du faucon*. C'est le signe *itsi*. . . . La nouvelle Meroë s'étend sur les deux rives du fleuve, devant l'île, à Onitsha et Asaba, à l'endroit même où il a attendu pendant toutes ces années. . . . C'est ici que *la reine noire* a conduit son peuple, sur les rives boueuses où les bateaux viennent décharger les caisses de marchandises. C'est ici qu'elle a fait ériger la stèle du

soleil, le signe sacré des Umundri. C'est ici qu'Oya est revenue, pour mettre au monde son enfant.

The golden disk of the sun appears suddenly, it illuminates the basalt stele upon which is inscribed the sign of Osiris, *the eye and wing of the falcon*. It is the sign of *itsi*. . . The new Meroë extends across the two banks of the river, in front of the island, to Onitsha and Asaba, to the same place where he waited for all of these years. . . It was here that *the black queen* led her people, to the muddy banks where boats come to unload their crates of merchandise. It is here that she erected the stele of the sun, the sacred sign of the Umundri. It is here that Oya came back to deliver her child. (149; my emphasis)

Geoffroy's search and the (hi)story of Meroë embody a foundational narrative which reads as a myth of the origins or a national epic: both oral genres which incarnate and carry a community's collective memory, sustaining a national sentiment in view of a common history.<sup>12</sup>

Any thought about the past contains in itself a nostalgia for origins and for a lost time. *Les Tambours de la Mémoire* and *Onitsha*, while exercising in the unfolding of memory, operate on a symbolic level as nostalgia and a quest for origins. Fintan's voyage to Onitsha and his sojourn in Africa parallels Fadel's voyage in search for "Queen" Johanna Simentho. Both characters narrate their quest for a lost childhood kingdom. The pain engendered by the violence which accompanies the expulsion from the Kingdom is a sub-text and accounts for Fadel's obstinate search for Johanna and Fintan's African adventure. For both narrators, the will for anamnesis bears the significance of a genealogical anxiety as well as an aspiration to a personal archeology. Each of them is engaged in a geographical and symbolic journey, aiming to reconstruct how things became the way they are and to reconnect with "l'enfance du monde" 'the childhood of the world,' that is, the origins: the father, for Fintan, and Johanna's birth place for Fadel. In *Les Tambours de la Mémoire*, Johanna is the person who has filled Fadel's childhood with marvelous stories and who was cruelly torn away from his affection by the decision of a father more concerned about his own political career than about his children's well-being. In *Onitsha*, Fintan finally rejoins his father who, emotionally and physically speaking, was taken away from him by a career in the colonies and a dream about Meroë. Fintan's father was for him "cet homme qui lui était devenu étranger"

'that man who had become a stranger to him' (Le Clézio 64). By the conclusion of the narrative, "pour la première fois, il pensa qu'il était son père. Non pas un inconnu, un usurpateur, mais son propre père" 'for the first time, he thought that he was his father. Not a stranger, an usurper, but his own father (206). As in Georges Perec's *La Disparition*, Fintan's and Fadel's nostalgia originates in the disappearance of a relative. The quest for origins also becomes a quest for the constitution of the self, paralleling the quest for a national memory and identity.

In both Diop and Le Clézio, anamnesis develops as an individual process transformed into an initiation journey. In Le Clézio, Fintan's search follows a linear trajectory leading him from Southern France to Africa, to his father, himself embarked on an intellectual journey, in search of the genealogy of the Umundri people among whom he has been living.

#### IV

*Onitsha* and *Les Tambours* both contain multi-layered readings. As with the fairy tales analyzed by Bruno Bettelheim in *The Use of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, the stories told and carried through the novels are not innocent: they convey communal aspirations, political, epistemological as well as existential concerns (Assouline 48). In the conflation of the (auto)biographical with the national in *Onitsha*, for example, Le Clézio inserts his real childhood history into the fiction.<sup>13</sup> He inscribes his personal vision of societies and cultures, as evidenced in his other books: journey as evasion and a way to self identity, genuine interest in other cultures, cultural nomadism, refusal of systems, criticism of colonization, rejection of ethnocentrism, and desire to challenge the mainstream culture.<sup>14</sup>

The subtextual significance of both novels in fact carries a manifold critique. Diop conveys an implicit, but clear, denunciation of African totalitarian regimes under which, to quote Ferro, history has been put "under surveillance." He calls into question the construction by such regimes of a national memory entrenched in distortions, omissions or silenced (hi)stories. In Le Clézio, Geoffroy Allen's reconstruction of the history of Meroë is based on a diffusionist theory of culture,<sup>15</sup> despite its rejection today by most historians and anthropologists. On the other hand, in linking the people of Umundri to the descendants of the "black queen, the last represen-

tative of the Pharaohs," the author of *Onitsha* uses the controversial theories of Cheik Anta Diop, his disciples, and others, asserting the blackness of Pharaonic Egypt, its linguistic and cultural kinship with Black Africa, and the African origins (Egypt) of Western civilization.<sup>16</sup> In both Le Clézio and Diop, the characters' quest for the past and their attempts for a historical reconstruction raise questions about what constitutes history and how to write it. They echo current theoretical discourses<sup>17</sup> that suggest a new historiography in which narratives are constituted as both individual and collective history, such as Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, Claude Lanzmann's film series *Shoah* or Assia Djebar's novels *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison*.

In the comparative examination of Diop's and Le Clézio's novels freedom of speech and the politics of constructing memory is emphasized in the comparative. These questions raise other related issues, such as those concerning the State and its relationship to its citizens, in turn leading to questions of power and violence, power and knowledge, and finally, the function of memory.<sup>18</sup> *Onitsha* and *Les Tambours de la Mémoire* do uncover the politics of constructing memory by bringing into focus the ways in which political and ideological aims condition and inform representations of the past and impact the process of recollection. Since any reconstruction of the past originates from a location and a site of enunciation in the present, both novels sustain an interrogation of the process of anamnesis, the reconstruction of the past and the writing of history. In the face of attempts by institutional structures or political powers to confiscate memory or to put "history under surveillance," these novels and others take position in favor of the sovereignty and freedom of the writer. They give full right to literary and historical imagination by way of metafiction.

## Notes

1. Marc Ferro, *L'Histoire sous surveillance*, 52. I would like to thank Sara Johnson for her editorial assistance and her translation of quotations from the original French.

2. See Bernadette Cailler, *Les Conquérants de la Nuit Nue* and Barbara Webb, *Myth and History in Caribbean Fiction*.

3. See Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

4. See Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis*. Also, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

5. See Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*. A good example of such a myth was created in the 1970s through the Zairian television logo representing the then head of State as descending from the sky, thus equating him to a celestial being. The motivation behind this act was clearly political and ideological. The seductive power of the media was used in order to legitimate his position of power and inscribe his figure into the popular imagination as an exemplary mythical hero.

6. See Mircea Eliade, *Aspects du mythe*.

7. Béatrice Chimpa Vita, or Dona Béatrice, was a nationalist prophetess in the eighteenth-century Old Kingdom of Kongo. Her mission was religious and political: to give power to King Don Pedro, who was for her the legitimate King, and bring him back to the capital. At the same time, she wanted to create a national Kongolese Catholic church, independent from the European missionaries. Her followers were called the Antonins, because she purported to be a messenger of Saint Anthony. She was arrested and condemned to die on a pyre as a heretic. Among the few accounts of her mission, see the literary representation in a play by Bernard Dadié, *Béatrice du Congo*. See also my "Bernard Dadié: Literary Imagination and New Historiography." The historical figure fictionalized in Johanna Simentho's character recalls a prophetess and nationalist figure, Aline Sitowe Diatta (spelled by some as Alinsintouë, Diatta being her husband's name), a woman from Casamance, in southern Senegal. In 1942, Aline Sitowe had visions inspired by God and she led the people of Casamance to civil disobedience toward the French colonial order. She quickly made numerous followers, and the colonial administration, considering her a dangerous troublemaker, condemned her to deportation. Since then, her whereabouts have remained unknown. In the popular imagination of the Casamançais, Sitowe has become a legendary figure, the symbol of their nationalist aspirations. On the other hand, she is erased and banished from the official and public memory in today's Senegal, where the central government considers Casamance as an integral part of Senegalese territory. See Jean Girard, *Genèse du pouvoir charismatique en Basse Casamance* and Christian Roche, *Conquête et résistance des peuples de Casamance, 1850-1920*.

8. See also Althusser's essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Toward an Investigation)."

9. I am borrowing from Benedict Anderson's conclusion in *Imagined Communities*, 204-05.

10. "Document" as temporary, and "monument" as having permanent structures: distinction made by Hippolyte.

11. Geoffroy Allen, Fintan's father in the novel, was in actuality the author's father's friend M.D.W. Jeffrey, a British social scientist who had published on rituals and practices of the region as well as on the kinship between Ancient Egypt and West Africa. See the interview with Pierre Assouline.

12. See Anderson, and Ernest Renan's classic text "What is a Nation?"

13. Like his character Fintan, Le Clézio was born in Nice and at the age of seven, left France for Africa to join his father whom he did not know.

14. His *Rêve mexicain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), for example, intends to revalorize a non-Western culture.

15. Geoffroy's theoretical framework is definitely diffusionist, and thus challenges more accepted theories in the social sciences, such as evolutionism. The leading proponent of diffusionism was the anthropologist Franz Boas. Diffusionism, as opposed to evolutionism, emphasizes the diffusion in time and space of cultural trends and their reinterpretation in new clusters as the basis of cultural history.

16. In his time, Cheik Anta Diop's ideas were received with great reservations, if not hostility, by the mainstream academy. See, among his works, *Antériorité des civilisations nègres* and *Parenté génétique de l'égyptien pharaonique et des langues négro-africaine*. See also his disciple Théophile Obenga's *Origine commune de l'égyptien ancien, du copte et des langues négro-africaines* and others, such as Ivan Van Sertima, *Egypt Revisited*, and Martin Bernal, *Black Athena*. For a dissenting point of view, see Mary Lefkowitz, *Not Out of Africa*, and Robert Boynton, "The Bernaliad."

17. See Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire*; Michel de Certeau, *L'Écriture de l'histoire*; Jacques Le Goff, *Histoire et mémoire*.

18. See my "Langue volée, langue violée: pouvoir, écriture et violence dans le roman africain."

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