



Daughters Reappropriating Genocide Narratives in Scholastique Mukasonga (2008) and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse (2019)

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Abstract

In 2024, Rwanda commemorated the 30th anniversary of the genocide against the Tutsis. Various reports explain that women constituted 70% of the post-genocide surviving population, despite suffering particularly from gender-based violence. Drawing on two books from French Rwandan women writers and genocide survivors, Scholastique Mukasonga's *La femme aux pieds nus* (*The Barefoot Woman*) (2008) and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's *Tous tes enfants dispersés* (*All Your Children, Scattered*) (2019), this essay discusses the ways these writers' craft constitutes a form of activism that seeks to escape the reduction of individual Rwandan women's stories to the general narrative of the genocide. Indeed, Mukasonga's memoir and Mairesse's

multi-genre novel both largely focus on childhood memories of mothers and of their practice of motherhood. I argue that while these texts provide stories differently from what Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie calls a “dangerous single” (2009), one that would center “genocide” in narratives about Rwanda, they also illustrate the narrative limitations of such a method with the violence of (post)colonial history and survivor’s guilt permeating the texts. Ultimately, this essay investigates the extent to which these works, although centered on mothers, are, in fact, narratives about daughters’ responses to extremely traumatic events.

Keywords

Literature, genocide, kin, survivor’s guilt

Introduction

Between April 7, 1994, and July 15, 1994, Hutu extremists murdered approximately 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutu civilians in Rwanda (Gourevitch 4). Among the women reportedly representing 70% of the surviving population (Nowrojee et al. 19), French Rwandan authors, Scholastique Mukasonga and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse, document, in their respective literary works, their own experiences of the Rwandan genocide. Specifically, Mukasonga’s *La femme aux pieds nus* (*The Barefoot Woman*) (2008) and Mairesse’s *Tous tes enfants dispersés* (*All Your Children, Scattered*) (2019) commonly explore what a genocide does to motherhood and kin, particularly mother-daughter relationships. This particular focus deepens the historically dominant Western archives of the Rwandan genocide that have tended to center the macabre and to generalize the dead. Author, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, has theorized this method in a TED Talk titled “The Danger of a Single Story,” i.e., the danger of homogenizing the people narrated, here the victims of the genocide. Drawing on Adichie, this essay first contends that Mukasonga and Mairesse both complexify the story of the Rwandan genocide by having local women witnesses narrating and narrated. Yet, while their respective texts strive to decenter the macabre, they are permeated by the daughter narrators’ struggles to cope with the extreme violence of this historical fact. However, this essay contends that both literary works commonly

emphasize the daughters' responsibility to use their narrative privilege to preserve their mother's story and to decolonize the library of the Rwandan genocide by including women's views, ultimately, contributing to expand the knowledge of their country's history.

I. Tutsi Women Narrators Confronting Violence

In July 2009, author and public intellectual, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, delivered an influential speech entitled "The Danger of a Single Story" in Oxford, England, recorded for the American Canadian media TED Conferences. Adichie alerts her audience to the literature and media of political economic powers that do "not just [...] tell the story of another person, but [...] make it the definitive story of that person" (00:10:03). A major critique of the stereotypical Western stories of Africans, Adichie's argument specifies that the determinations and reductions of others concern everyone, regardless of power level and origin. She gives the example of her younger self listening to her mother's comments about Fide, an eight-year-old domestic working at her middle-class home "as was the norm" (00:02:50) in Nigeria in the 1980s. Although Adichie's mother reduced Fide's family to poverty and pity, Adichie's visit to his family taught her that they had things they "could actually make," including "a beautifully [homemade] patterned basket" (00:03:35). This anecdote illustrates the danger "of having partial and inadequate information or accessing solely a single story" (Brooks 22) about people as it steals their dignity and, "emphasiz[ing] how we are different rather than how we are similar" (Adichie 00:13:36). In learning stories about Fide that were different from her mother's reductive dangerous single one, not only did Adichie prove her wrong; but, she also contributed to reestablish the truth about his family.

This anecdote sheds light on Adichie's conceptualization of the "danger of a single story," a method previously analyzed by Robin Brooks, in "A Dangerous Single Story: Dispelling Stereotypes through African Literature." Studying two novels written by African women writers, Brooks shows that these authors first "utilize the idea of a 'single story' by exposing popular stereotypes about African people [...] as a way to disrupt these stereotypes" (23). Before writing her novel, *Americanah* (2013), analyzed by Brooks, Adichie's TED talk, indeed, already demonstrated a similar argumentative pattern. Adichie begins her talk by telling the stereotypical story of John Lok (1632-1704), a British sailor and an early figure of the

Transatlantic Slave Trade who described Africans as “people without heads, having their mouth and eyes in their breasts,” too deformed to be fully human. In the ninth chapter of *La femme aux pieds nus* (*The Barefoot Woman*) entitled “Le pays des contes” (“The Land of Stories”), Scholastique Mukasonga defines these types of narratives as “stories that weren’t ours [...] stories heavy with hatred, heavy with death. The stories told by the white people, the Bazungu” (112). Then, Adichie offers to repair these dangerous single stories about Africans by drawing on Black American writer, Alice Walker’s book, *In Search of Our Mother’s Garden* (1983). Walker similarly retells the racist story of English poet, John Milton (1608-1674), who, in *Paradise Lost* (1667), endorses enslavement by describing Black Africans as being of “a vicious race” (651). By “introduc[ing] [“her Southern relatives who had moved to the North”] to a book about the Southern life they had left behind [writing that] ‘a kind of paradise was regained’” (Adichie 00:17:47), Walker, thus, corrects Milton’s dangerous single story by reappropriating it from the perspectives of her Black Southern American migrant family (part one). This method of speaking back then allows Adichie to “regain” what was “lost,” i.e., the multiplicity of stories about narrated people and regions.

A similar project is at work in Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s novel, *Tous tes enfants dispersés* (*All Your Children, Scattered*). Refugee protagonist, Blanche, defines her complex history in movement in an address to her mother, Immaculata, confessing: “[y]ou left your hill, I left my country. And here we are today, our horizons have shrunk, the map is creased, worn, but what remains can always be used to show Samora [Blanche’s son] a history, a yarn to be re-woven,” adding that “[they]’ll also leave him a history that [they]’ve written [them]selves, for the very first time, a history of change and pride” (148). As a result, “a kind of paradise was regained” since Samora, “has fallen in love with Rwanda” (133). Similarly, drawing on Walker empowers Adichie to “re-weave the yarn,” making an argument for storytelling in movement to repair the fixity of dangerous single stories and the holes they leave on the dignity of the people narrated. By starting her intervention with a negative story about the Transatlantic Slave Trade in Africa and ending it with a positive reconstructive one from a Black Southern American writer whose family was enslaved in the United States, Adichie applies Walker’s relevant method to complexify stereotypical narratives.

A scholar of postcolonial feminist theory, Adichie’s “dangerous single story” argument continues the intellectual effort to “assess the West’s role in the horrid

portrayals of Africans” (Brooks 24) by additionally producing “exemplary scholarship on African women writers” in the same vein as “scholars such as Carole Boyce Davies, Esi Sutherland-Abby, Irene Assiba D’Almeida, and Marie Umeh” (Brooks 23). Before Adichie, Carole Boyce Davies also drew on Alice Walker, borrowing her concept of “Womanism” to help define “Black women’s feminism and [recognize] the limitation of the term ‘feminism’ for [their] purposes” (Brooks 12) and to operate a theoretical move framed as a “balancing act” (Brooks 12). This paves the way to the “balance of stories” (Adichie 00:14:00) argued by Chinua Achebe to allow for a productive “mental shift” (Adichie 00:02:07), a first step to dismantle dangerous stereotypical single stories. Thus, referring to popular authors, like Alice Walker, but also Chinua Achebe and Camara Laye, not only allows Adichie to address her broad Western audience by unpacking important concepts of postcolonial theory for it; it also allows her to do so through literature by making an additional argument for it.

To that end, Adichie explains that the “nkali” complex, the Igbo noun that “loosely translates to ‘to be greater than another’” (00:09:29), dictates the production of political powers’ narratives. Their numerous and diverse nature makes them expansive, while those of the others are reduced to “definitive” stereotypes (Adichie 00:10:03). For example, Adichie’s anecdotes about the Western stories of Africans show that these generalizations have historically exposed them to prejudices; hence, the “dangerous” nature of these narratives at the heart of her critique. Therefore, Adichie’s “danger of a single story” theory allows for a reexamination of the narrative methods used to tell the Rwandan genocide. Indeed, Rwandan scholars have shown how local research is still “broadly overlooked” in academia worldwide (my trans.; Rutayisire et al. 258). As highlighted by Mairesse’s recent essay, *Le Convoi (The Convoy)*, the Rwandan genocide was “like other African historical facts, mainly told to the world through Western images and interpretations, which sometimes made the victims play a minor role in their own story” (my trans.; back cover). Consequently, the voices of Western white men writers circulated more widely than those of local Rwandan people in the documentation of the genocide.

The statistical scope of these external interpretations additionally overshadows the individual stories of the people that the genocide has affected by reducing their narratives to sheer numerical measures. Consequently, the voyeuristic exposition of death leads to two major pitfalls: 1) perpetuating the stereotypes of African countries,

here Rwanda, as a dangerous and violent place; 2) “rob[bing] [the victims] of dignity” (Adichie 00:13:36), especially since the analytical focus on their mutilations emphasizes their difference over their “equal humanity” (Adichie 00:13:36). This pitfall of dehumanization is exemplified by the colonial racial images and interpretations targeting the Tutsis, including Tutsi women. Recycled by the *génocidaires*, the genocide perpetrators, these stereotypes depict, for example, Tutsi women as “arrogant [,] deceptive [,] sexually special,” thus, justifying parts of their “supposedly ‘European’ physiology [being] singled out for mutilations” (Flanders 97). Liberata Gahongayire’s work sheds a light on these gender-based stereotypes targeting Tutsi women. Gahongayire shows how dangerous single stories of Tutsi women depicted for example as “prostitutes,” “bad employees” and “spies,” along with “mothers of cockroaches” (my trans.; 376) fueled the elaboration of the genocide. These stereotypes further justified gender-based violences, including rapes and tortures, affecting Tutsi women’s own lived experiences of the genocide. Thus, the cruelty characterizing the Rwandan genocide questions the “right” method to tell it, particularly from an external point of view. The total avoidance of macabre perspectives might as well lead to the revision, or worse, to the negation of this historical fact. Therefore, the problem with these archives is not that they are macabre, but rather exclusive of the victims’ perspectives, making the overall library of the Rwandan genocide incomplete.

In this regard, recent scholarship has shown the historical underrepresentation of the personal experiences of Tutsi women survivors in these archives. For example, when they “came to testify [...] at the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda [“ICTR”, located in Arusha, northern Tanzania], [they] were objectified and instrumentalized for the cause of international justice” (Schimmel 354) as illustrated by the administrative preference for legal protocolar proceedings over concrete support (such as HIV medications and lawyers) for genocide survivor women during that time. In this context, Scholastique Mukasonga and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s respective literary texts feature Tutsi women witnesses directly narrating the Rwandan genocide. Specifically, these authors tell their stories in the form of a memoir (Mukasonga) and of a non-traditional blend of semi-autobiographical and semi-epistolary literary genres written as a multi-perspective novel narrated by four different narrators (Mairesse). These literary genres favor the

personal over the general to tell the Rwandan genocide by exploring what it has done and has not done to mother-daughter relationships.

Mukasonga's text, *La femme aux pieds nus* (*The Barefoot Woman*), originally published in 2008, illustrates Adichie's theory of 2009. While Adichie denounces the homogeneous nature of narratives coming from the West particularly, Mukasonga, with similar methods, fights the *génocidaires*' dehumanizing stereotypes of the Tutsis originating from "the white people, the Bazungu, [who] had unleashed all the insatiable monsters of nightmares on the Tutsis" (112). By sharing her stories of her mother, Stefania's life tips and crafts, Mukasonga contributes to correct the *génocidaires*' stories. But, "correcting" these stories does not mean negating the existence of the genocide or being in denial about the victims' death. Rather, Mukasonga's metaphorical description of words used as the "shroud" to cover her deceased mother, Stefania, with demonstrates the use of the literary memoir genre to perform post-mortem care. Specifically, in focusing her writing on the liveliest memories of Stefania to avoid sharing explicit details reminiscent of her death, Mukasonga avoids the pitfall of making it graphic in order to fulfil her mother's wish to cover her dead body rapidly. Yet, to Stefania's request, Mukasonga answers that "all [she] ha[s] left is words" (9) as upon her return to Rwanda in 2004, more than thirty years after fleeing the country in 1973, she explains that "bushes had covered everything" ("Scholastique Mukasonga, 'After Genocide: Writing as Survival'") including Stefania's body.

By rewriting the story the *génocidaires* told, Mukasonga's book, *The Barefoot Woman*, not only frustrates their project, but also reverses it. Part of this plan was the intent to destroy the integrity of the victims' body through mutilations, rapes, and tortures. Stefania's story, here, inversely depicts her as alive and well-taken care of, regardless of the precarious and polluted environment in Nyamata where she was displaced with her family in 1960. Healing her body with, for example, "grasses, tubers, roots, and tree leaves of the savannah" (56), Stefania has an "encyclopedic" knowledge of her body and of its care. Her homemade vegetal "prescriptions" for wounds includes a variety of remedies (fresh moist dirt; the "nkuyimwonga" plant "with mauve flowers;" or, in case of infection, "kalifuma," a yellow powder from Zanzibar, "muriro," or "fire," a ground blue stone), depending on the severity of the injury (59). As walking barefoot leads to a variety of cuts and wounds, Scholastique Mukasonga describes "constantly stubbing [her] toes on small rocks [...] [b]y the

time [she] got home, [her] feet were bleeding” (57). To her daughter’s complaints, Stefania answers: “your toes are blind, but I’ll teach them to see” (57). In Mukasonga’s book, the feet are synecdoche of wisdom since the danger of walking without shoes taught Stefania the secrets of her natural environment, connecting with it to continue caring for herself and for her children, even in extremely precarious times. In this way, Mukasonga’s storytelling method transcends the stereotype of the “woman as victim” character (Davies 14) as she does not depict Stefania and her children as either “passive” or “starving.” Instead, Stefania actively finds ways to do things to help herself and her children. By highlighting her mother’s stories of resilience, Mukasonga pushes back against the dangerous dehumanizing story of the Rwandan genocide.

Similarly, in Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse’s novel, *All Your Children, Scattered*, the act of writing also allows repair of broken dignity. The poem of first-person subjective narrator, Immaculata, to her grandson, Stokely, mirrors Mukasonga’s use of writing to grieve and posthumously care for her mother Stefania. Described “as a legacy” (168) left before her death at the end of the novel, Immaculata advises Stokely to study the books that she, herself, read to understand his family history and to draw on them to tell her story:

My little comma storyteller, all these books tell better than I ever could of the bitter-sweet smell of eternity. And if one day you feel alone, because we’re all gone, you’ll be able to find a certain kinship preserved here among them. Between words and the dead, there is only a breath, all you have to do is capture it with your lips and be sure every day to make up a bouquet of remembrance. (168)

Immaculata’s discovery of African writers and authors of African descent during her stay at her daughter’s place in France echoes one of the anecdotes Adichie shares at the beginning of her speech, stating that she “didn’t know that people like [her] could exist in literature” (00:02:28). Indeed, books and stories facilitate “kinship” (168) as “[s]torytellers never really die” (153) according to Stokely. In this context, Immaculata and her daughter, Blanche, as genocide survivors and narrators, tell most of the book’s story through their respective viewpoints. Although *All Your Children, Scattered* has fourteen chapters, each narrated by four different narrators

(Immaculata, Blanche, Stokely and an external omniscient narrator) in a non-linear order; Blanche and her mother, Immaculata, ultimately have the most control over the story.

Like Mukasonga's book, Tutsi women take advantage of the literary space to speak and to respond to the language the *génocidaires* used to dehumanize and to eradicate them. Immaculata echoes Mukasonga's metaphorical use of "words," comparing them to "spear[s]" and "studded truncheons the killers used to smash [their] skulls [with] in the spring of 1994:" they are "sharp [and] pierce brutally" (*The Barefoot Woman* 47). Therefore, Tutsi women fight back with words, as illustrated by Mairesse's novel highlighting the importance of expanding incomplete library collections in Africa. This is a way to complexify dangerous singular stories of what Valentin-Yves Mudimbe calls the "colonial library," i.e., Western-inspired texts representing Africa and Africans with stereotypes, historically forming definitive knowledge about the African continent, including about the Rwandan genocide. To this effect, Blanche resolves the narrative tension by opening a library in Butare, Rwanda, after the closure of the "university bookstore, where [Immaculata hid and] survived in 1994" (*All Your Children, Scattered* 133). In the basement of this "building from the Belgian era [that] continued below the ground" (113), deep-rooted in Rwandan history, Immaculata was falling apart.

In contrast, Blanche's library, connects authors and texts scattered across the globe such as "Zora Neale Hurston, Chinua Achebe, Bessie Head, *Beloved*, Mariama Bâ, Nadine Gordimer, and *Masters of the Dew*" (*All Your Children, Scattered* 147). All these references commonly tell a plurality of African stories, bringing relief from the colonial library and subsequently "such deep consolation" (151) to Immaculata. Thus, Blanche's project breaks from what Adichie (born in 1977), an author of the same generation as Mairesse (born in 1979), experienced in her childhood: reading books that "had to have foreigners in them and had to be about things with which [Nigerian children] could not personally identify" (00:01:35). In Mairesse's novel, Blanche retells her mother's story by rebuilding her Rwandan bookstore-shelter. Although her mother hid in the colonial library, Blanche managed to preserve her story through the reconstruction of this place of knowledge. Thus, by being in charge of the library, genocide survivor women actively decolonize it by showing that intimate stories about African historical facts expand the dangerous single story of them.

II. Violence Confronting Tutsi Women Narrators & Healing

In their respective texts, Mukasonga and Mairesse do not narrate their mother protagonists the same way. Mukasonga details her memories of her mother's daily life, including multiple moments of joy despite the narrative focus on her family's time in Nyamata and then Gitagata, "the deportees' village[s]" (*The Barefoot Woman* 39). Mukasonga spent the largest part of her childhood there after the Hutu government forcibly displaced her family during the Rwandan revolution (1959-1961, also known as the "Hutu revolution"). In Mairesse's text, two mothers, Immaculata and Blanche, narrate their memories, addressing the same family member in all their respective chapters. Blanche always writes to Immaculata; but, she ignores her, replying to her son, Bosco, instead. This epistolary approach mirrors that of a diary, as exemplified by Blanche's confessions to her mother in the first chapter. She "bitterly" regrets that "[a]n invisible, insidious border went up again between [Immaculata] and [her]" (*All Your Children, Scattered* 11). Right after Blanche's opening chapter, Immaculata starts her's by not listening to her daughter, but recalling her pain of her son's birth instead, writing: "[t]he day of your birth, Bosco, I wept every tear in my body" (23). It is only at the end of the novel that Blanche and Immaculata will listen to each other by finding a peaceful resolution.

In Mukasonga's text, motherhood, womanhood, and care are Stefania's strategies to confront an extremely hostile environment. And to avoid the pitfall of reducing Stefania to her mother's role, Mukasonga often refers to her by her first name, regardless of the context of the family story she shares. It is not because women are forced to live in an environment designed to restrict their freedom of circulation and to await their death that they passively accept such a determination of their fate. For example, Mukasonga dedicates a whole chapter to "Stefania's house" where she actively does and creates things regardless of the precarious environment of the displacement settlements:

Stefania's house, the house where she could live the life of a real wife, a real mother, was a house made of straw woven like a basket, it was an *inzu* (and I'll keep its name in Kinyarwanda, because the only words French gives me to describe it sound contemptuous: hut, shanty, shack...). There are precious few houses like Stefania's left in Rwanda

today. Now they're in museums, like the skeletons of huge beasts dead for millions of years. But in my memory the *inzu* is not that empty carcass, it's a house full of life, of children's laughter, of the young girls' lively chatter, the quiet singsong of storytelling, the scrape of the grinding stone on the sorghum grains, the bubbling of the jugs full of fermenting beer, and just by the front door, the rhythmic pounding of the pestle in the mortar. How I wish the lines I write on this page could be the path that leads me back to Stefania's house! (*The Barefoot Woman* 30-31)

In contrast to Stefania, Mairesse's protagonist, Immaculata, has a different outlook on motherhood. She does not want to procreate, seeing this as a "tragic farce:" "[a]nd what on earth am I supposed to do if I don't want that power [of giving life], if in my guts I reject it?" (*All Your Children, Scattered* 24). While Stefania is depicted as a woman caring for traditions, Immaculata wishes she could subvert them. In addition, at the beginning of Mairesse's novel, Blanche summarizes Immaculata's "whole long" life as being "against men, against her progeny, against herself. It's a prison without walls" (24). Blanche diagnoses her mother with depression resulting from her freedom being deprived by her relationships with men and the children she has had with them. But, Blanche's conclusion resembles more self-loathing as she immediately starts to tell the story by identifying herself as her mother's mistake. This self-critique echoes similar feelings and emotions of genocide survivor's guilt.

For example, Mukasonga describes the words used to wrap her mother with as "poor" (*The Barefoot Woman* 9) since "over and over, [they] weave a shroud for [Stefania]'s missing body" (9) to be buried in a "paper grave" (*Cockroaches* 166); but, to no avail. The fragile nature of the literary medium restricts Mukasonga's ability to grieve properly, translating her emotional vulnerability as she has "nothing left of [her] family and all the others who died in Nyamata but that paper grave" (166). Her guilt about her exile from Rwanda while Stefania stayed is at the heart of her narrative focus. Although Mukasonga's *La femme aux pieds nus* demonstrates a shift in the narrative method used, guilt is still very present, making this second memoir reads like a sequel of her previous and first work, *Inyenzi ou les Cafards* (*Cockroaches*), which is also a memoir. In addition to being dedicated in part to "the few who have the sorrow of surviving" (8), *Cockroaches'* first words describe recurring "same nightmares" (9) about being murdered and about the inability to bury the dead as

major symptoms of survivor's guilt: "[e]very night [...] I'm being chased [...] I don't want to feel the cold blade on my neck, I... I wake up. I'm in France [...] This will be another sleepless night. I have so many dead to sit up with" (9-10). Mukasonga's mention of her French shelter allows for a specification of the guilt that refugees experience.

For example, in Mairesse's text, Blanche's regretful tone, in most of her narration, translates her sense of self-blame, making her narrative reliability questionable. Blanche often implies that her mother prefers her half-brother, Bosco, over her, as illustrated by her address to her at the beginning of the text: "[y]ou never stopped thinking about your son even when, [...] you granted me a moment of closeness" (*All Your Children, Scattered* 10). Throughout the novel, Blanche's "correspondence" with Immaculata furthers this intuition. When Blanche addresses her mother, Immaculata continues replying to Bosco, indicating a reluctance or an inability to listen to her daughter's concerns. Immaculata seems to blame Blanche for her better life after escaping the genocide she and Bosco had to face at home in Rwanda. Addressing her mother, Blanche explains this feeling of "privilege" as another symptom of refugee guilt: "what you and Bosco had been through was incommensurable" (94) because in Mairesse's text, protagonists and narrators either survived (Blanche and Immaculata) or were born after the genocide (Blanche's son Stokely).

Indeed, this novel starts with the exiled daughter, Blanche, narrating her return to her native country in an introductory chapter additionally entitled after this specific protagonist. Although a multi-perspective novel at first glance, Blanche's narration spans five chapters, the largest amount of the whole book, while her mother, Immaculata, is given four chapters to narrate her story. Therefore, this subtle narrative advantage ultimately questions the equal validity given to the different narrators of the book by reinforcing the semi-autobiographical extent of Mairesse's text which seems to favor Blanche's voice more. This is particularly striking considering the number of similarities between Mairesse's story and that of her protagonist, Blanche. In addition, Immaculata named her son "Bosco," a French marine term which means "master of maneuver," i.e., someone with the ability to perform complex actions for their community's benefit (*All Your Children, Scattered* 52). In contrast, she had named Bosco's older half-sister "Blanche," the French feminine of "blanc" ("white"). This first name keeps reminding Blanche of the "whiteness in

[her] lineage” (42) by reinforcing the “queasy sensation that [she] was a stranger in [her] own [Rwandan] home” (12) as much as in her French host country where she “realized how strange people found it for a [B]lack woman to be called Blanche, so [she] had everyone call [her] Barbara” (76). “Refugee guilt” involves refugees’ feelings of obligation towards their host country, complicating their ability to settle and belong: “all my struggles in France” (94). Although Immaculata justifies naming her daughter “Blanche” by its “pretty” nature (52), she explains this name with two other different reasons. First, she wishes her daughter was white “to liberate [her] from her Africanness” (104). Taught the dangerous single stories of Blackness during her time at a Belgian-run Catholic boarding school in Rwanda, Immaculata, born in 1949 (170), initially considered her skin color a “damnation” (105). She thought that Blackness stopped social mobility that only more miscegenation could facilitate: “to [Immaculata’s] great delight, [Blanche] would conceive descendants [...] who would be increasingly diluted” (105), supposedly bringing “eternal peace” to the family (106).

Second, she “hadn’t loved [Blanche’s] father as much as [...] [her] brother’s father” (*All Your Children Scattered* 11), stating that she “would have waited for Damascène [Bosco’s father who abandoned her] instead of marrying Blanche’s father” (29). While the name “Immaculata” refers to a perfectly clean state, “blanc(he)” (“white”) is a color that can be “stained” by darker tones, mirroring the potential social effects of a biracial heritage on a woman’s life, wherever she is, including at her African home. As Blanche’s white, French father asks: “[s]he’s only half white, you think by calling her that it’ll make her a little whiter?” (52). As explained by Blanche at the beginning of the novel, this first name foreshadows the conflicted relationship she has with her mother and, subsequently, with herself.

Blanche’s narration translates this mixed heritage as a flaw as soon as the novel starts with her return to Rwanda in 1997, three years after leaving the country. Her skin color and Western look make her pass for a foreigner in the country she was born in. In addition to exile, race represents an excluding factor that keeps daughter protagonist, Blanche, away from her mother, furthering her differentiation from her. The comparison with Blanche’s younger half-brother, Bosco, the son of two Black parents, reinforces Blanche’s filial isolation, especially because both Blanche and Bosco exiled to Burundi, but for different reasons. While Blanche left for her personal safety, ultimately landing in France; Bosco actively took part in the conflict. He

joined the Rwandan Patriotic Front “inkotyani,” the “warriors” of the rebel army, to actively fight the *génocidaires* (*All Your Children Scattered* 117), further increasing Blanche’s guilt. She even interprets her exile as desertion, implying that refugees fleeing their country at war are joining the enemy: “his two wars, first in Rwanda then in Zaire; my *defection* to France” (97; my emphasis), additionally describing her host country as “incompatible with its honor” (145) due to its “responsibility [in the Rwandan genocide]” (145), letting the genocide happen.

Thus, the beginning of Mairesse’s text exemplifies the unclear nature of Blanche’s narrative reliability. During her return trip to Butare, Blanche deems a local Rwandan bus driver “too bold” (*All Your Children Scattered* 17), suspecting him of peering at her (16). When he asks her where she is from, Blanche defensively answers: “[o]f course, I’m from here, do you think I could have learned our language [Kinyarwanda] this well anywhere else?” (17). The prevalence of guilt affecting Blanche’s judgement of daily situations blurs her narration from the very beginning of the novel; therefore, preparing the readers for a text about an exiled child’s anxieties and self-blame. As opposed to men who are more prone to develop “externalizing disorders” (Seedat et al. 785), such as aggressive actions directed towards others and towards their environment; women tend to internalize the symptoms of their exposure to trauma more (Seedat et al. 785). As Immaculata explains, if women tend to “kill less [...] it’s because they’ve had their fill of repressed violence, the one that inhabits the hollows of their fecund bodies” (*All Your Children Scattered* 24), further reinforcing the transgenerational scope of these post-traumatic internal disorders.

When meeting Immaculata after years without seeing her, in the middle of what is supposed to be an informal conversion, Blanche describes Immaculata as “f[alling] silent for a moment, [making] an incongruous pause in the middle of a sentence...” (*All Your Children Scattered* 9-10). Blanche interprets this silence as “some memory [her mother] might not be able to suppress anymore” (9-10). Medical studies looking at the intergenerational transmission of trauma in post-genocide Rwanda explain, for example, that parenting “marked by silence and social and emotional withdrawal” (Kagoyire et al. 12) feeds the filial transmission of trauma. In contrast, Stokely, Blanche’s son and Immaculata’s grandson, has grown up in “a supportive family environment that encourages more adaptive coping patterns such as perseverance and self-esteem/confidence among children” (Kagoyire et al. 12).

As opposed to his mother, Stokely fully accepts and embraces his mixed heritage, becoming a storyteller inspired by it. Through his self-love, Stokely, born in 1997, therefore “solves” the conflicts between his mother and his grandmother. Stokely’s interest in diverse stories of race motivates Blanche to make peace with her past self and with her mother by opening a library, additionally providing a model for national recovery. Thus, the book’s ending allows the featured family to engage in a balanced conversation, thereby reconciling and managing the consequences of the genocide on their filial relationships.

Similarly, this notion of “balance of stories” (Adichie 00:14:00) appears in *The Barefoot Woman* as a matter of life and death. Mukasonga recalls Stefania telling her daughters to care for her dead body, phrasing this instruction as a reversal of a curse:

When I die, when you see me lying dead before you, you’ll have to cover my body. No one must see me. A mother’s dead body is not to be seen. You’ll have to cover me, my daughters, that’s your job and no one else’s. No one must see a mother’s corpse. Otherwise it will follow you, it will chase you...it will haunt you until it’s your turn to die, when you too will need someone to cover your body. (8)

If Mukasonga does not write to complexify the dangerous single story of the genocide by “covering” the victims’ bodies, reporting their stories, her own life is at stake. Not only is the reversal of this curse filial; but, it is also gendered, based on mother-daughter relationship since Stefania specifically asks her daughters, not her sons, to cover her dead body. Thus, while Mairesse’s story focuses on a daughter repairing her relationship with her mother after the genocide, Mukasonga’s narrative is centered on preserving this bond.

Ultimately, through mother-daughter care, and vice versa, both texts commonly destroy the intentions of the *génocidaires* to eradicate the mothers, victims, and survivors. As Mukasonga explains: “[t]hey wanted to tell us Tutsi women, ‘Don’t bear any children, because when you bring them into this world you’re giving them death. You’re not bearers of life anymore, you’re bearers of death’” (*The Barefoot Woman* 22). Not only did Mukasonga and Mairesse’s protagonist, Blanche, both as daughters of Tutsi mothers, survive; but, they also became mothers themselves. Because “[women] give life more often than [they] take it, [they] owe it to [themselves] to offer the human solution to the violence of men” (*All Your Children*,

Scattered 23). Although these stories cannot reverse (post)-colonial violent history, their featured mothers are remembered wholly. This way, these women writers' narratives contribute to providing a remedy to heal from trauma and guilt. Mairesse's novel ends with the peaceful reconciliation between Blanche and her mother, Immaculata, who was eventually able to "gather to [herself] all her children scattered throughout the world" (130), referring to the Catholic liturgy. Also, reworking Catholic stories, Mukasonga metaphorically draws on African women's bare feet to make an argument for the historical recovery of Africa. The epistemologies of Stefania, the memoir's eponymous "barefoot woman" protagonist, retell the continent's history. To show her gratitude, Mukasonga "might well kiss [...] [her] Mama's [feet], and the feet of all those women who'd served as foster mothers to Africa" (*The Barefoot Woman* 98), connecting with the African land, showing reverence "for the place on which [they are] standing is holy ground" (*Holy Bible*, Exod. 3.5).

Conclusion

The goal of this essay has been to create a dialogue between Scholastique Mukasonga's memoir, *La femme aux pieds nus*, and Beata Umubyeyi Mairesse's multi-genre novel, *Tous tes enfants dispersés*, in the light of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "dangerous single story" theory. The dangerous Western single stories of the Rwandan genocide historically dominated its archives, overshadowing the victims' perspectives, including those of women. Therefore, this essay has demonstrated that to remediate this problem, Mukasonga and Mairesse intervene in three ways. First, they choose the literary medium to create a methodological shock from more traditional statistical archives of the genocide. Second, they have their texts narrated by women witnesses and survivors. Third, these women narrators reverse the *génocidaires'* project through different manners. Most of Mukasonga's narrative content focuses on honoring her mother, Stefania's motherhood and womanhood, sharing what she has done to fight the precarious environment of the deportation camps. In this way, Mukasonga discusses with Adichie: by decentering the macabre from narratives about Rwanda, Mukasonga's memoir exemplifies the call for complexifying Western stories about Africa. Further, Mairesse, too, enters a conversation with Adichie, mirroring her project of decolonizing the places of knowledge in and about Africa. Her daughter protagonist, Blanche, resolves the novel's narrative tension by building a library where her mother hid from the

génocidaires, showing that decolonizing the library is also a woman's project. Yet, this essay has additionally intended to show that the permeation of guilt in the daughters' respective narratives disrupts their efforts to fully decenter the macabre and the extreme violence in post-genocide life. Overall, the inclusion of these women writers' literary works in the archives of the Rwandan genocide compliment not only the dangerous single stories, but the knowledge of the country.

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