

# The meta-logic of pain in storytelling: comparing diop and sontag



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At a glance, Boubacar Boris Diop's *Murambi, the Book of Bones* and Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* might not seem to have much in common. Diop's work recounts the Rwandan genocide through multiple perspectives and storytelling/fiction while Sontag dissects the moral and ethical issues of addressing another person's pain or trauma using real world examples. However, when these two pieces are put into conversation with each other, they reveal that they are quite similar in the way they approach addressing the pain of others. With Diop put into the context and looked at through the scope of Sontag, it becomes clear that there are deliberate stylistic and narrative choices present in the novel that relate to Sontag. Similarly, with Sontag put into the context of Diop, it becomes evident that the issues she discusses echo that of narratives and storytelling. With Diop and Sontag in conversation with each other, the two pieces make a case about how "meta" storytelling as well as the logic behind it really is.

Firstly, the title alone of *Murambi, the Book of Bones* is incredibly self-aware. The title refers to the work as a book, drawing the reader's attention to this fact and perhaps even calling itself out on simply being the very thing that it is. One might even go so far to say that it is, in a way, "call[ing] a monster by its name" since the title seems to be an open admittance stating exactly what the work is (Diop 179). This isn't to say the work is calling itself a monster, but rather that the work is calling itself by what it knows it is. Additionally, the title is self-aware in a different way in that it draws attention to the paradox that it encompasses - a book cannot literally be "of bones" in the sense that it cannot encompass them or be made out of them because it is a book. This impossibility draws attention to itself, which in turn draws

attention to the impossibility that everyone's stories and trauma cannot actually be captured within its pages. This then connects with the idea of the shortcomings that exist in telling a story, particularly the fact that a person cannot fully understand and know another's pain.

These shortcomings can even be expressed through a couple phrases presented in the work - "there are no words to speak to the dead" (Diop 167) and "even words aren't enough. Even words don't know any more what to say" (Diop 96). The fact that the title refers to bones and the photograph is of bones (that transcend the frame, of the photograph nonetheless) echoes the idea that the work is aware that it is simply not enough to fully encompass the atrocities that it discusses. To add, Sontag mentions that "remembering is an ethical act, has ethical value in and of itself. Memory is, achingly, the only relation we can have with the dead," which resonates with the idea that memory and acknowledging atrocities and the shortcomings of telling stories about them is at least an effort to understand what cannot be fully understood (Sontag 115). Saturated in death and bones, things that are pretty inaccessible to our own understanding and comprehension, there is an implication that the stories and narratives included transcend the work itself because they cannot be contained - they are simply too large and complex, and it would be unethical to pretend to fully understand things that are quite incomprehensible.

Along with the title, the photograph on the cover of *Murambi, the Book of Bones* works in conjunction with it to draw attention to itself. The photograph is deliberate, framed so that one whole skeleton is seen juxtaposed next to another skeleton that transcends the photo - it is too large for the small

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photo to contain. This is similar to how the title implies that a book cannot contain actual bones, and the true understanding of another's pain is simply impossible because pain and trauma are so complex that they transcend the medium through which they are portrayed - a book cannot truly know or describe the pain of a person and by default the reader can't either. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag discusses photographs at great length, particularly in the framing of photographs. There is always a "point of view" regarding photographs, and the viewer is essentially forced to have this perspective. Sontag says photographs "[bear] witness to the real - since a person had been there to take them" (Sontag 26). The photograph on the cover of Diop's work is a real photograph that somebody took, in that particular frame and in that particular perspective - portraying the impossibility of capturing the entirety of the environment and situation. Functioning together, the title and the photograph seem to echo one another by implying the impossibilities that each one represents - those being that a photograph cannot include everything within a shot, and a book cannot contain every narrative and life involved regarding the issues it discusses.

Similarly, Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* seems a bit self-aware as well. In conjunction with the title, the cover of the work is, almost ironically, *Distasters of War* by Francisco de Goya, which depicts a man literally being a spectator of somebody else's pain - and enjoying it, no less. Sontag mentions continuously throughout her piece that there is an issue with spectatorship when it comes to pain because there can be no innocent bystander for many reasons, a main one being the ethical issues behind knowing about or regarding another's pain. Watching up close or at a

distance is still merely watching, and this raises issues on what is attempting to understand a person's suffering and what is spectacle. Barbara Korte discusses Sontag in her own article regarding co-spectatorship and mentions, "confrontation with the suffering is impossible to avoid and calls for some kind of reaction, even though people may be uncertain what reaction is appropriate" (Korte 184). Because confrontation is impossible to avoid, each individual is going to respond to portrayals of trauma (as well as trauma itself) differently, and there is no way to predict nor control responses. What makes this even more difficult is that this could lead to perhaps inappropriate responses and even people seeing pain and trauma as spectacle. That being said, Sontag mentions the issue of co-spectatorship that occurs in photographs and how reproduction of them allows numbers of people to become "witness" to another's pain or trauma (Sontag 59-60). Put into context with Diop, a published book seems to have the same issue - a book will reach an audience, and that audience will be "witness" to whatever stories are told within it, and there will then be a co-spectatorship of the narrative that is out of the realm of the author's control, which places awareness and responsibility on the viewer or reader (which I will discuss later).

In Diop's work, the character of Cornelius presents extreme self-awareness within the work. As both a victim and the son of the perpetrator, he serves two different roles in the narrative while also serving what seems to be a third role in acknowledging the shortcomings of storytelling through self-awareness. Throughout the work, Cornelius continually expresses his desire to write a play about the Rwandan genocide, which is self-aware in itself

because the reader is literally reading a book about the genocide. This calls attention to this fact, making the work acknowledge and the reader realize that the work is not sufficient enough to encompass the entirety of the genocide. Additionally, Cornelius is juxtaposed with Siméon, who in the novel was present for the genocide and has the authority to discuss it. This causes Cornelius to admit he feels “ashamed for having entertained the idea of a play” or create a narrative about something he simply cannot (Diop 179). This juxtaposition generates a meta-logic in itself by portraying a rather explicit distinction between the two in that Siméon has the authority to talk about the genocide whereas Cornelius, though indirectly involved in the genocide through his father, was not present for it and therefore cannot authoritatively tell a story about it. In addition to this, it seems as if Diop forces readers to be aware of themselves by keeping them in close proximity to Cornelius. By positioning the reader in such a way, it would seem that the reader has to realize that he or she also does not have the authority to discuss the pain of other people when they cannot fully understand it themselves.

It's incredibly important to note that there is a deliberate logical structure in creating a story. Kathleen Gilbert mentions in her article that each story has a number of particular elements (a sort of logical framework) present that make a story such as a beginning, middle, end, characters, intentionality, thematic organization, and others as well as what might be the most significant here - perspective (227). Undoubtedly, a story must be organized by the author and is thus framed in a way that the author sees fit. The framing of the story corners the reader into having a certain perspective

(note that perspective is not synonymous to interpretation) that provides limited access to information based upon the position the reader has been given to follow throughout the story. Diop seems to do exactly this by presenting the narrative through many different (and rather diverse) perspectives.

The first and third sections of Diop's work feature these multiple perspectives and juxtapose them with the second and fourth sections that feature the narrative of Cornelius. In doing this, the reader is forced to acknowledge that there is no one way to tell a story, and the reader is, in a way, sandwiched into the narrative - aware of itself in its own structural frame. Additionally, these multiple perspectives (particularly Cornelius') put the reader into close proximity of many different views and versions of a story - which is rather "meta" in itself because the reader is unable to choose a single story which indirectly generates an awareness of reader responsibility to attempt to understand each perspective. Additionally, this corners the reader into their own self-awareness through implying the notion that the reader cannot possibly understand the scope of the entire occurrence, all the possible narratives, or (most importantly) the experience of another person's pain.

Sontag even discusses some issues with framing when she mentions that "every picture is seen in some setting" (120). In this, it can be inferred that the frame is framed - the framed photograph is presented in a constructed setting. This is similar to narrative structures because somebody had to obtain the information or generate the ideas, decide what was important, and then craft/frame the narrative in a way that would be logical for readers.

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Gilbert mentions something interesting as well regarding the construction of stories when she says “ We may ask others to tell us stories, and we construct meta-stories to explain what we have found that transcends and yet binds together individual stories. As has been alluded to before, a narrative is not “ the” truth, there may be multiple views on the same event and each one has an element of truth to it” (Gilbert 228). Gilbert then goes on to mention that in the creation of stories, something is both gained and lost because of processes such as research, interpretation, and filtering information. The final product of a work is then a frame within a frame, similar to what Sontag discusses. The narrative created by the writer has come from research and narratives of others, and the frame, in a way, must be aware of itself in order to create another frame.

Sontag mentions something similar to Gilbert when she says “ it is always the image that someone chose; to photograph is to frame, and to frame is to exclude” (Sontag 46). The same argument can be said in regards to stories. Information is filtered out based on what the author believes to be significant, and this information is then organized in a logical way, and that logical organization is framed within a setting, construction, or work, such as in Diop’s case. In Sontag’s case, she discusses how the photographer chooses what to photograph (or what not to), and then decides how to present this photograph (or not) to the public. This brings attention to the fact that photographs and novels are constructions, perhaps being even staged (as photographs might be) or existing as fiction. With both being framed in such a way, there first has to be an awareness that one is not and



can never be the original, which relates back to the idea that a person cannot fully comprehend the original and individual pain of another person.

What's also interesting is that Diop's work mentions that " genocide is not just any kind of story with a beginning and an end between which more or less ordinary events take place" (Diop 179). (It's worth noting that none other than Siméon brings this up). Relating back to Gilbert's list of elements that create a story, this addresses the fact that there is a narrative structure that this work follows simply because that is how stories are created, but in the same moment it throws this notion of structure out the window by acknowledging the fact that structure, even when necessary, is inadequate when discussing pain and trauma of other people - particularly on the large scale of genocide. This acknowledges the fact that narratives and stories have a beginning, end, and a logical structure to them, and the actual events, pain, and trauma, don't necessarily have a clear cut beginning or end. The Nieman article expresses something similar by mentioning that " stories construct a position for the viewer, which enables the viewer to take responsibility" (" Art" 84). This relates back to Sontag's discussion about framing, but the interesting part of this is that it mentions the responsibility of the viewer that is made, whether noticed or not, that they must first be aware that they are no longer looking through the scope of themselves but rather through the scope of another person - or in the context of Sontag, perhaps the lens of a camera.

Though seemingly different, Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* and

Diop's *Murambi, the Book of Bones* aim for the heart of the same

fundamental issue of how to responsibly acknowledge another person's

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trauma and suffering. The arguments Sontag makes paired with the elements of Diop's work (title/photo, character, and narrative frame), these pieces are revealed to be much more self-aware than one might have originally thought. Alone, they function as instruments for discussing the issues of spectatorship and storytelling with regards to pain and trauma, but when put in conversation with each other, they emphasize the meta-ness required to understand the complexities of pain and how we acknowledge and portray it, especially the pain of another individual.

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