“A Journey Without Destination: The Meaningless Experience of Migration in Dirty Feet of Edem Awumey”

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- Daniel Chartier, the “migrant Literature” is different from immigrant Literature or from autochthonous Literature (Chartier, 2002). Frequent use of hybridity with autobiographical fragments.
- The concept of “migrant Literature” appeared in Québec during the 1980s.
Writing a journey

- *Memory studies*. The idea of a re-membering process (remembrance). Pierre Nora (site of memory). I use the expression literary site of memory (a symbolic place that illustrates a journey)
- Clash of cultural fragments: a litterary understanding of the globalization?
- Castoriadis, the notion of social imaginary.
- *The imaginary institution of society* (1975)
Writing a journey

• The reader tries to recollect the different steps of the journey (the members of the texts). There is an investigative part in order to seize the meaning of the novel. The reader is as a bystander (a witness of a traumatic past)

• The experience of a meaningless experience (*Paris Texas*) where the investigation does not succeed.
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Plan of the presentation

• 1) Short presentation of *Dirty Feet*
• 2) The nomadic life of the characters
• 3) The time process
Edem Awumey

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1) Short presentation of *Dirty Feet*

- *Dirty feet* is a short, dense novel which consists of 43 chapters and a main protagonist Askia “he” – external focal point. Askia arrives in Paris (2005) as the bodyguard of an African diplomat (he has been an executioner too), takes the opportunity to disappear into the city of light. He works as a taxi driver and roams the streets of Paris.
Edem Awumey

• In 2011, he dealt with the notion of space.
• “I must say that’s one among the smaller shocks I experienced when I arrived there. I think that spaces are less definite there than here for instance. You know, Paris is really keeping with market principles. It is very expensive to find a place to live in Paris *intra muros*. An apartment is sold by the square meter, so those who have the lowest salaries are outside in the periphery. (Awumey and Premat)
1) Short presentation of *Dirty Feet*

- In the early seventies, Askia’s father Sidi Ben Sylla Mohammed left his family to get to Paris. Now, Askia while driving his cab, is searching for some sign of his missing father. He likens himself to the son of Odysseus “some obscure, obsessed Telemachus” (Awumey, 22), hidden from others in his taxi.
1) Short presentation of *Dirty Feet*

- One night, Askia drives a young woman Olia, a Bulgarian fashion photographer who claims that she has photographed Askias’ father and offers to help locate the missing man, the man with a white turban. No happy ending... Askia will move along like his ancestors in Sahel called “the dirty feet”.

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2) The nomadic life of characters

- Awumey condemns artificial colonial borders and thus he refers to Africa in terms of cities, such as Bobo-Dioulasso, Ouagadougou, Lomé or Accra. In Awumey’s work, Africa does not exist as a continent; Africas exist as a plurality of spaces (Awumey and Premat).
- The cities are wandering characters
2) The nomadic life of the characters

- Olia and Askia will indirectly confront some memories through photography. Photography acts as a way of structuring memory, by taking pictures for a better understanding and explanation of what happened; the juxtaposition of collages, the balance between light and dark colours.
2) The nomadic life of characters

- Askia and Olia are the main characters, and the exile experience is omnipresent in their lives. Askia is a wandering character and he wants to meet Olia, who is a photographer who pretends to have taken pictures of Askia’s father.
- Use of direct speech, no last names for the main characters.
2) The nomadic life of characters

- I have an appointment with Mademoiselle Olia” Askia said
- What’s the full name?
- Olia
- A given name doesn’t tell me very much
- She has brown hair. (Awumey, Dirty Feet 13)
2) The nomadic life of characters

- “Who are you? Who are you? – kindled a scattering of reluctant images in the haze of Askia’s memories” (3). The memories of Askia are expressed through the use of free direct speech, where the narrative is like a dialogue of memories. The question “Who are you?” is recurrent: “Who are you? Askia read in the photographer’s eyes and camera lens.
2) The nomadic life of characters

• *Les pieds sales / dirty feet* is the name given to Askia’s family, who were condemned to a nomadic life, unable to settle long enough to rest and clean their feet.
2) The nomadic life of characters

- There was one, Tété-Michel Kpomassie, who had gone even farther, towards Greenland and the lands of the Inuit back in the seventies, his black feet sinking into the powdered snow up to the intangible limits of his curiosity while the compact people of the polar latitudes watched in amusement. (Awumey, *Dirty Feet* 21)
2) The nomadic life of characters

- Tété-Michel Kpomassie is a writer and adventurer from Togo, who has travelled in the North and in Greenland and who becomes a symbol for the nomadic quest. He explores the limits of the world, and the encounter between people from opposite worlds is highlighted in the novel. The amusement of the “compact people” (Inuit) echoes the scientific curiosity of Tété-Michel Kpomassie.
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2) The nomadic life of characters

- Askia will move along like his ancestors in Sahel called “the dirty feet”: “He thought their departure had been because of that rain and the earth dying under their feet. He recalled those days spent crossing other arid lands, ravaged plains where a few souls hung on, resigned or reckless, full of hope or outright scorn” (Awumey, *Dirty Feet* 12).
2) The nomadic life of characters

- The idea of “earth dying” underfoot suggests the absence of world. The world, understood as a physical relation, is absent, and the characters have to flee the past, but at the same time recreate a new world (Apter, 2009). It is in a sense something different from what the philosopher Husserl writes about Earth that does not move (Husserl 313).
2) The nomadic life of characters

- Askia and Olia will indirectly confront memories through photography. This acts as a way of structuring memory, by taking pictures for a better understanding and explanation of what has happened. The juxtaposition of collages, and the balance between light and dark colours suggest a technique similar to that used by Chris Marker in the movie *Level 5* (1996), when a voice is used to work with digital pieces of archives about what happened in Okinawa during the Second World War (Lupton, 2005).
A film by **CHRIS MARKER**

**LEVEL FIVE**

With **CATHERINE BELKHOUDA**

“Should rightly take its place among the late director’s best work.”
—The Los Angeles Times
3) The time-process

• In *Dirty Feet* the reader knows that something horrible has happened, and this is why the re-rooting process is impossible. Some pictures are suggested to help the reader figure out who the characters are.

• The characters wander and wonder where they are, the end is not clear, and the reader has no clues about the origin. Did a genocide or a mass-murder occur? The reader wonders what happened before the journey undertaken by the characters.

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3) The time-process

- Re-membering as a time process
- “He would have to replay the scene with the dead trees, the dry brushland, and the silence that had enveloped their migration. His mother would later inform him that it had been during the terrible Sahelian Harmattan of 1967. Judging from his birth certificate, dated February 12, 1962, he must have been going on five years old, just as his scattered memories led him to believe”. (Awumey, *Dirty Feet* 50)
3) The time-process

- *Dirty Feet* describes wanderings without a goal. There has been a trauma in the past, which the protagonist, Askia, finds difficult to overcome, and the novel tries to structure past experiences and pictures in order to recollect memories and construct a narrative.
Conclusion

• The past is painful and the novel re-memories a narrative in order to use the fragments of the past in the present. The reader does not know exactly when the traumatic experience happened. There was a war, maybe a genocide.

• The magic realism of migration (Quayson, 2006). World-Literature and a memory ecosystem (Apter, 2009).
References

References


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References
