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# Still about ghosts: temporality, archives, and the future in Sarr's novel

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### Abstract

The paper analyses the novel *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* focusing on the relationship between the representation of time and historical experience. The novel refutes both the universality of both analytical and normative categories and historical representation through a hybrid novel in which the figure of the archive is emphasized. This article also intends to emphasize that postcolonial, or decolonial, criticism manifests itself in a constative rather than a performative way, limiting the effectiveness of the treatment of sensitive themes beyond the conceptual architecture of traumatic studies. The effectiveness of novels creates a space where the limits of knowledge can be questioned, especially when the concepts of history and modernity are criticized by the contemporary theories of history.

### Keywords

Future. Temporality. Novel. Racism. Coloniality.

For a while, Criticism travels side by side with the Work, then Criticism vanishes and it's the readers who keep pace. The journey can be long or short. Then the readers die one by one, and a work, continues on alone, although a new Criticism and a new Readers gradually fall into step with it along its path. The Criticism dies again, the Readers die again, and the Work passes over a trail of bones on its journey toward solitude. To come near the work, to sail in her wake, is a sign of certain death, but new Criticism and new Readers approach her tirelessly and relentlessly and are devoured by time and speed. Finally, the Work journeys irremediably alone in the Great Vastness. And one day the work dies, as all things must die and come to an end, the Sun and the Earth and the Solar System and the Galaxy and the farthest reaches of man's memory.

(Roberto Bolaño, *Savage Detectives*, 2007, 483)

Beyond the beauty of this passage, there are two other reasons behind its inclusion here: the reiterated localisation as an epigraph, given that it also played this role in the book that this essay dedicates its analysis, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, and for how it entwines time, memory and narrative when it evokes the inconstancy of everything in the world. Should we leave the epigraph and start to examine the narrative, the tone becomes less resounding, at times bordering on silent, creating space so that the ghosts that wreak havoc in the narrator's head can also haunt us. Ghosts, that are also mentioned in books of some History researchers, like Trouillot, where the mix of time periods is used to criticise the historicist perspective's use of chronology to establish a relation of irreversible distance to the past. Trouillot also reminds us how time and time again silence pays a part in the construction of historic knowledge, reminding us that it has become increasingly notorious in societies endeavouring to deal with colonial wounds: there are silences, some of which are even more silenced, a kind of silence within another silence, as he indicates. "We now know that narratives are made of silences, not all of which are deliberate or even perceptible as such within the time of their production" (TROUILLOT, 1995, p. 152). We can also argue with Trouillot that "[s]ilences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)" (TROUILLOT, 1995, p. 26).



The combination of the concepts of archive, sources and narratives in relation to historical fact, allows for the perception not only of how the historiographic undertaking can intentionally induce silence, but moreover how we play a role in the perpetration of these very actions intended to inhibit the plurality of narratives. It is not the case of believing in the possibility of “giv[ing] voice to those who have never had it” or, what would be even more naïve, to be capable of “bringing back the dead”, but acknowledging our involvement in these acts of silencing engendered by the field of History. It seems fit, therefore, to think about narratives that value a plurality of voices and a multiplicity of perspectives about the past, especially those that are critical of the modern concept of history, according to Reinhardt Koselleck’s (2013) research. Moreover, we should recognise that the Theory of History field, during the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, emphasised that historians, in taking as tacit the rupture between past and present, considered very little the performative character of the differentiation between past, present and future (BEVERNAGE; LORENZ, 2013, p. 33). This agenda can be handled in several ways; I have included this article to the vast debates, hoping to contribute to the studies about temporality, emphasizing the relation between time and narrative.

Novels both explore and criticise the methodological foundations of History as a subject, chiefly the relationship between document, archive, and proof. The fecundity of this relationship in order to think about the correlation between the fields of History and Literature has already been considered by Dominick LaCapra, notably in its connection with the historicity of the novel in modernity (LACAPRA, 1987). This type of prose can be aligned to what Hayden White considers the post-modern impulse in fiction: the desire for History. He understands that the post-modern novel is not anti-historic, but instead averse to the milestones on which History as an academic subject was erected (WHITE, 2005). This type of novel, however, distances itself from post-modern rubric, making it difficult to stay completely true to its definition. Rejecting the post-modern term means that the novel associates itself more to late modernism, especially through the admiration for Proust, than a careful reading of Thomas Pynchon or William Gaddis. Moreover, they reject pastiche, which Fredrich Jameson identifies as the most characteristically post-modern of the stylistic options, by collecting decontextualized fragments of earlier productions in the narrative.

Some of these themes and writing styles are in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes*, especially the impossibility to overcome the past, conducing him to search in archives, both private and public, which provides retroactive meaning to the narrative. It’s as if it was the author’s intention to write a novel in which the milestones of the historiographic undertaking were being mobilised with a special concern for the interrelation between time and narrative. One aspect must be highlighted: as a work of art, novels are not merely dedicated to tackle time through constative resources, but also through performative resources. This provides the means to present

the relation between time and narrative in a broader and more plural way than the affirmations of many post colonials and de-colonials about power and coloniality. Names like Mignolo (2017) or Quijano (2009), in general, paid little attention to the issue of temporality, even with the frequent appearance of figures, like ghosts, that represent the impossibility of overcoming the past, in the narratives of the authors from what we conventionally call the Global South: in the Hispanic-American context, we can find Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, or Garcia Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; or in African countries, we can find examples like Mia Couto in *Terra Sonâmbula*, to mention writers admired by Mohamed Mbougar Sarr, the author of the novel studied. Regarding the relation between history and ghosts, Ethan Kleinberg considers that what they have in common is the past, "a past that we do not touch, but even so touches us" (KLEINBERG, 2017, p. 142). His argument originates from a dialogue about the philosophy of destruction and the history of historiography, from one of Derrida's most renowned books in Brazil, *Spectres of Marx* (1994).<sup>1</sup>

This article, therefore, will follow an alternative route, choosing an analysis of this novel that emphasises the representation of ghosts through history and literary criticism, mobilising elements of historiography to handle the issue of the colonial wound, and of the rituals that legitimise literary canon. Sarr's novel mobilises several topics raised by post-colonials, like the relation between archive and violence, to think about racism. His hybrid prose also resorts to essays, literary criticism, and literary history to think about daily exclusion and the weight of History for non-hegemonic writers. Sarr's novel criticises linear and evolutive historical time and the rupture with the historicist past, whilst insisting on other means of understanding time that do not present the future as redemptory, the novel however, encourages us, even with the context of global warming, failure and ruin and the awareness surrounding the end of our species, to think about the future. It incorporates the stalemate surrounding the notion of endings, the end of short individual stories and characters that become endings that can be shared and that make us think about historiographic practice now.

## History of phantoms and failures

*La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* tells the story of a young Senegalese writer, Diégane Latyr Faye, who discovers a strange book: *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* (*The Inhumane Maze*). The unconventional issues that this book raises and the questions about human impasses captivate Diégane, so much so that he endeavours to find out more about its story: he discovers that it was written by a Black author and that this same book brings the writer both recognition,

<sup>1</sup>A suggestive way to look at this idea can be found in Ramos (2019).



and soon after, humiliation. The reason being an accusation of the author T.C. Elimane of fraud and plagiarism. Born in Senegal, Elimane later lives in Paris where he writes this book that would later bring him public disgrace. The book tells the story of a bloodthirsty king, willing to commit any atrocity to obtain power, who discovers, however, that even his misdeeds bring him back to humanity. Diégane, therefore, begins to follow the steps of the unknown writer T.C. Elimane, his publisher and family. His search will lead him through fortuitous encounters and intuitions, to find eyewitnesses of the period, a black female poet, literary critics, dead people, the living and members of the francophone literary diaspora in Europe. What we have from then on, are memory gaps, deadlocks in time, testimonials, imagined and lived love affairs, which lead him on a journey over seventy years of the history of the relation between the Europe and the African and Latin American countries.

The invention of books and the narrative of writers from outside European and North American centres are the thematic focus of this novel. Specifically, the situation of African or Latin American writers, haunted by writing, and the choice between writing or keeping quiet once and for all, whilst, the relation between characters, books, history and literature is also debated. Through showing admiration for Bolaño and his *Savage Detectives*, and the written passages inspired by other authors, like Yambo Ouologuem, Malian, and Ken Bugul, Senegalese, the book seems to be a tribute to the writing of non-Europeans and the importance of recognising difference in relation to those who move around the world<sup>2</sup>. I argue that, to achieve this objective this fiction presents an exceptional perspective on the representation of time and history in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. I stress that the book proposes a politicisation of time as an indissociable part of the relation between colonialism and power, intensified by the various strategies for its representation, distancing it from post-colonial and de-colonial approaches, placing it within other written references.

The book starts with a date, as if it was a diary, like in *Savage Detectives*, with the following statement: "of a writer and of their work, we can at least know the following: they journey together in the most perfect maze that we can imagine, a long circular road, whose destination is confused with its origin: loneliness" (SARR, 2021, p. 12, our translation). The circularity mentioned in the passage seems not only to refer directly to the circularity of the admired book, but also to that the narrator and the main character Diégane Latyr Faye, who introduces us to a fictitious book *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* that haunts him, which has as its reference *Le devoir de la violence*, a novel by Ouologuem. Not only the book, we could say, but also the story accompanies

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<sup>2</sup> A reading of Sarr's novel associating it with civilizational discontent using the theoretical support of both Freud and Fanon to think about non-western curatorship can be found in Thuin (2022).



everything that happened to Yambo Ouologuem who, after becoming the first African novelist to be crowned with a literary award, the *Renaudot*, for *Le devoir de la violence*, disappeared in 1968 after accusations of plagiarism. When accused of imposture, he disappears from the literary scene during the 1970s, taking refuge in his homeland, in total anonymity. Mohamed Mbougar Sarr takes on the story of this forgotten writer and, simultaneously, raises questions about the relation between copy/original and trial/verdict, especially using works of other writers that have questioned these tensions, like "Pierre Menard" by Borges (BORGES, 2007).

It is the story of a criticised and cursed book because of its trajectory, with a sequence that never existed, and never published. From encounter to encounter, from Senegal to all over France, Amsterdam, and Buenos Aires, Diégane discovers aspects of the phantom that T.C. Elimane became. While travelling around, he explores Western History: from the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to 2018, from colonisation to the present day, the trenches of the Great War, from the violence in Senegal to Shoah, from the Argentinian dictatorship to the revolts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Africa, several characters emerge from collected documents and newspaper clippings. Unlike his brother, that lived his whole life in Senegal, it was his passion for French culture that allowed T.C. Elimane to later come to challenge the French bourgeoisie in the French universities, as Diégane discovered. Elimane follows the footsteps of his father who disappeared during the First World War. Considered exotic, not recognised for his talent, he dedicates himself to what was meant to be his life's work – writing - rejecting all higher education.

This isn't a lone quest for Diégane. The haunting of ghosts converges with the paths of other characters in the book. For this integration to be well implemented, Sarr invests in the multiplicity of voices using several different resources, among which interesting connections between historic documents, guided by the relation between fiction and non-fiction, and the incorporation of other authors and passages from other books. The style of writing changes according to who is speaking, Elimane, Siga, Musimbwa, Diégane, all have their say at some point, exemplifying the issue that permeates the book, the admiration for writing, Western and non-Western History. Africa, here, enters as a plurality of possibilities and of pasts that doesn't limit itself within the continent's borders, but opens itself up through its disputes, also making us question what Latin America and Brazil are, and the limitations of the use of these concepts. From the outset, in a similar way to *Le devoir de la violence*, by Ouologuem, other books are cited; other voices emerge from the pages as if they were used to underscore the incongruences in the relation between colonialism and power, especially to deal with works of art.

The narrative's driving force is Diégane's quest to solve the enigma of the reasons behind accusations of plagiarism in *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, of T.C. Elimane's perpetual



silence and the system of power that generates judicial trials against some authors and not others. The discussion regarding the relation between original/copy, and of possible repercussions surrounding the volubility of what is considered plagiarism, brings Sarr's novel closer to those who write in what we call Latin America. Among the various scenes concerning the debate about a literary text as private property, one deserves closer attention due to the reuse of previous essays that debate writing and authorship. When he arrives at home, the narrator says,

I then opened my computer and started typing *The Labyrinth of the Inhuman*. I tracked the words, like a hound, a detective, a jealous person. My tailing as a scribe took place at the molecular heart of Elimane's sentence. I did not copy this text. I wrote it; I am its author, as Pierre Ménard from Borges was the author of Quixote. Four hours later I had finished. I emailed the file to Musimbwa with these words: "for the road". He replied immediately: "You are crazy, man, but thank you". I then went to eat in the African restaurant. The *koriste* played fashionable hits. This saddened and surprised me, whilst I ate my *mafé*, missing the old and monotonous Mandinka ballad. (SARR, 2021, p. 101, our translation)

There is reason behind using Pierre Menard, connecting it to the discussion about artistic composition in order to legitimise the rewriting of the book that moves him so. This scene will be fundamental for the novel, as one of the main accusations directed at Elimane is that his disrepute had been caused by plagiarism. The inclusion of this scene will be the first to contribute towards dismantling the argument that Elimane was guilty of having taken the novel from some known European author. It resumes the whole discussion regarding invention in nonhegemonic countries, as well as the relationship between the writer and tradition, but now also adding racism as one of the reasons behind his persecution and the accusations of plagiarism, showing originality in Sarr's undertaking (2021).

Moreover, I consider that there is a further ingredient: the novel is able to argue that the accusations related to plagiarism are connected to modern temporality and to the specific way of dealing with the categories of past, present and future. Racism, that impedes the circulation of the writing of African writer's – or Latin American writer's as Sarr insists – if they do not pass through the European centres of power, is also founded on these categories developed in Western modernity. Hence, the dismantling should happen through attacking one of its pillars: the temporality of stories. The elaboration of a ghost story, Sarr's intention, indicates that we have not overcome the past and that, furthermore, we are still haunted by the violence of other eras. The

ghostliness of the past can influence the present, providing an opportunity to deal with the dead, returning to the ancient definition of History.

Moreover, seeing the narrative in the light of a ghost story expands the associations that the author, and a lot of the time the narrator, makes with Latin American works. A unique novel in the bibliography of Hispanic American novels is *Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo. "Maybe you will find some living being" (RULFO, 2008, p. 18, our translation), a phrase that echoes for many of the readers of Rulfo's novel, where the issue of the spectrality of the past is the plot's main theme. The novel starts when Dolores, in her deathbed, asks her son, Juan Preciado, to return to the town of Comala to meet his father, Pedro Páramo, who had abandoned him. "The only thing that makes one try is the hope that, when you die, they will take you to a different place" (RULFO, 2008, p. 53, our translation). This quotation of Juan Rulfo is also embraced in the character Diégane's intention to reread Elimane's book. Like Diégane does with *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, we read old books, with the intention to be able to find a new meaning for old words written by a dead man. In the case of Sarr's proposal, it is about encapsulating the stalemates of a historic episode, the decline of Ouologuem due to the accusations of plagiarism in *Le devor de la violence*, and denounces his ostracism through debating colonialism and power.

The presence of ghosts throughout Sarr's book emphasises that it is the unfeasibility of totally overcoming the past and the influence of political violence on the elaboration of literary canons, as well as shaping our perception of History, with a capital H, as a history of ruins. Elimane and his wretched book are merely one of many phantoms that haunt the novel and reiterate Sarr's choice for disruptive pasts that challenge the stability of the present and the progress of History in its modern matrix. Giving the impression that these phantoms leave their tombs when a history that serves as a reference to the author, Ouologuem, is evoked, expresses the vulnerability of those that were forgotten and suffocated by oppression, especially those from countries that suffered the historic process of slavery. Narrating a forgotten story by playing with fiction and non-fiction, emphasising the voluntarism in the elaboration of the criteria of artistic evaluation, embarking on a story in which failure is the driving force, associated to the spectral theme and to the undesirable presence of the past, underpins the criticism of the modern concept of History. Believing in a future as an outcome of progress is to endorse the silence assigned to some and, telling ghost stories influences the way we perceive the concatenation of the temporal categories of present, past, and future.

The presence of both an experience of an illogical world and one in catastrophe in the novel, not only fractures it, but brings to the narrative a participation of voices guided by a peripheral perspective, and which always come up against the voids left behind by the historic



process of ruins and by the silencing generated by the criteria of value guided by the supposed autonomy of art. The use of Borge's short story *Pierre Menard* serves to question what an author is, and the issues involved in the relation between original/copy, as well as serving the purpose to emphaticise the historicity of the novel in its non-hegemonic circumstance. The author writes a novel where both the hybrid narrative and historic research are at the service of a plot steered by a mystery, uncovering a history forgotten by central spaces. It explicitly states the relationship between coloniality and power, not in a constative way, like post-colonials like Mignolo and Trouillet, but through a plot in which the performative potential aids the representation of temporality, confirming that telling a story that follows modern temporality provokes ruin. I also believe that the overcoming of this impasse allows us to walk, to go forward, with new possibilities to overcome what still binds us to the concept of History itself.

It can be argued that the production of post colonials and, especially, de-colonials, is multifaceted, even if the majority have expressed themselves through the use of constative content. Some 21<sup>st</sup> century works venture on relativizing this investment, as we can see in the works of Paul Gilroy (2001), Saidiya Hartman (2021) and Grada Kilomba (2019). Gilroy, through the description of the life and work of Frederick Douglas ponders on the use of autobiography as a process of self-emancipation where the relation established between place and body give the story's testimonial force. In Saidiya Hatman's books, choosing the autobiographical style is associated with the investment in a self-diegetic narrative that intends to dismantle the Eurocentric episteme regimes of truth, whilst she suggests the inclusion of other modalities to expand what can be accepted as truth. Through an involving narrative, the slave trade, and the whole issue of dislocation at the heart of Western Modernity, not as a freak event, but a pillar of modernity, are included. The discussion as a whole exposes the connections between Modernity and violence and the need to "consider more deeply the relation between terror and racial subordination as the very internal nature of Modernity" (GILROY, 2001, p. 154, our translation). An argument that is also followed by Achille Mbembe (2018) when considering becoming-black in the world.

There are different stances, however, among the group of authors included here. Grada Kilomba, like Saidiya Hartman, makes different choices to Paul Gilroy and Achille Mbembe, especially in relation to investing in the self-diegetic narrative that, a lot of the time, ends up producing autobiographical narratives. There are differences between these works, like the example of Hartman (2021), a collection of forgotten stories of women and transwomen, with a

change of narrative voices and considerate archival research to critically rethink the normative western standard of behaviour towards the suffocation of Black people in the USA. These options complexify the author's writing in comparison to other more autobiographical works like in Hartman (2019). Like Hartman, Kilomba (2019) also curates stories that come to have a testimonial role in the book with the aim to critically rethink coloniality, particularly by using body and place to demonstrate a criticism to Western epistemology. The relation with performance is more precise and complex in "CONAKRY" (2017), a performance that took place in the House of World Cultures in Berlin from archival research showing the counter memory of Amilcar Cabral making the creation of a film an act of decolonisation. Kilomba (2017; 2019) and Harman (2021) invest in narrating their own stories, through the perception of memory and otherness, associated to dislocation and diaspora, as intensifiers of this relation between literature and history as a criticism of the present, formulated whilst also supported by White and Eurocentric references.

I believe that, despite the variations with the works of Hartman and Kilomba, Sarr's novel, through the investment in hybrid narrative and the criticism of how works of art are consecrated, contributes to the deepening of the complexity of the variation of voices. The author tells a good story, tensioned by the relation between fiction and non-fiction, and invests in the novel tradition in order to develop a narrative where different voices and a multiplicity of perspectives are emphasized. Writing a book that thematizes the act of writing through the investment in hybridism of textual genres as a criticism to literariness broadens the reach of a story that could be of many. Inventive, he comments on the criteria that legitimise works-of-art through a novel that broadens debates about the relation between writing and life when they are associated with the connections between racism and power, investing in the literary force of telling stories that oscillate between fiction and non-fiction without necessarily resorting to biographical narrative and forgetting themes of the novel like realism and the shifting between narrative voices. To write a multifaceted and polyphonic novel, crossing several continents (Africa, Europe, Latin America) and periods (from the first era of colonisation to the struggles for independence, from the First to the Second World War, of the period between wars and resistance, of exile, like that of Gombrowicz, from the 1980s in France until the rallies in Dakar and Algiers) avoids a self-centred narrative, providing instead an amplitude of identifications and despite not knowing the story previously, this is maybe why it captivates us.



## Archives and temporality

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 2018, keeping with the diary format, faithful to the major part of the book, we read: "France won the World Cup and the country celebrates its second star in the boundless sky" (SARR, 2021, p. 45, our translation) The first chapters of the novel are written as a narrative anticipation that will be taken up again in future moments, playing with prolepsis and analepsis, making the present an object of a future memory. Less common than the deliberate use of analepsis or the option to suspend the narrative evoking a memory, an explicit anticipation of a tension between the narrative time and the narrated time, normally called a flashback. This tension is considered by Genette (1987) as the main referential framework for the study of fictional time. This time also refers to the writer's choice to engage in an intimate connection with the present, even mentioning historic facts, as part of a performative movement towards a polyphonic space to be together and to share experiences. It is not merely about the shifting between voices or the hybridism of the book, but also the recognition that this theme is the result of a historic construct, with the incorporation or refutation of Western historical events in relation to other times that are now intertwined. The written work emphasises the temporal multiplicity that plays a part in the present and the fluidity and corruptions that memory is subject to.

The figure of the archive appears throughout the book in connection with this opening towards the present's temporal multiplicity<sup>3</sup>. *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is a broad archival exploration: collections, newspaper clippings and bookshops are motifs in the book. We can see that, Sarr is interested in the relationship between archive and modernity as a subtle theme for the development of the narrative. The author does not abandon the novel format; he ventures in the narrative hybridism and centralises the figure of the archive in the story making the articulation between present, past and future possible. The clear expression of the discursive plot happens through the insertion of the elements that provoke discontinuity in linear time, exposing the diverse layers of time that make up the present, showing meanings not seen before. The newspaper clippings from the 1930s, the documents about literary awards, the mentions in literary journals with reports about Yambo Ouologem's plagiarism case are arranged in a collage within a diary that at the beginning of the book unravels as a narrative of the last years of French and world politics.

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<sup>3</sup> This tendency can also be found in recent novels. A possible reference is *El Material Humano* by Rodrigo Rey Rosa. On Rey Rosa see Rodrigues Leite (2018).

The archive plays a double role in Sarr's novel: the main character does not only carry out research in the archive but is also puts together his own archive and shows it to the reader. This can be observed in the second subchapter of the first book of the novel "Estival Newspaper, "summer diary". In several diary entries there is a shift between commentaries about what happened during the day at hand with passages from each of several newspapers where information about T.C. Elimane's books and his life can be found. Passages found during the supposed research carried out from *La Revue des deux mondes*, *L'Humanité*, *Le Figaro*, *La Revue de Paris e Mercure de France* are also presented. In the entry for the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2018 he writes: "I spent the day at the press archives where an influential colleague from Musimbwa got me a pass." (SARR, 2021, 78, our translation). He keeps repeating that his phone made it difficult for him to concentrate and that he found a small investigation carried out by B. Bollème in a passage that was available in the French newspaper archives, even though it is not immediately disclosed where this research took place. The narrator, and character Diégane Latyr Faye, comment about the day of research: "I reread *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* in the light of what the critics of the era and the investigation of this journalist taught me." (SARR, 2021, 79, our translation) The novel ventures in creating a collage of diverse newspaper clippings in the narrator's diary, playing with fiction and non-fiction, through the temporal comparison between a document written in 1938, the year of T.C. Elimane's publication, and the diary notes written presently in 2018.

What stands out is the use of a collage of diverse periods of time, which exacerbates the typical temporal multiplicity of the first modernists that ventured in this strategy of formulating stories, not forgetting that there is an intimate relationship between collage and montage, as a typical procedure of modernist writers. The juxtaposition of periods, the year 2018 which always supplicates 1938, happens as a criticism of the temporal linearity typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel, creating a novel that has the archive as an element of intelligibility. Between the diary entries of the 10<sup>th</sup> of August and the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 2018, we can find entries that include newspaper clippings from 1938. Exactly in this periodization there is an entry on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August in which there is a newspaper clipping from 1938 with the title "The Inhumane Maze or the true source of a fraud." (SARR, 2021, p. 96, our translation) Further on in this entry there is a verdict about the book with opinions that would lead it to be banned, leading the author to be forgotten.



The use of the archive happens to initiate a discussion about the relation between archive and violence, particularly thinking in terms of a practice of historical research, an argument already raised by Trouillot (2016) and expressed by Sarr through playing with the oscillation between fiction and nonfiction, whilst also includes his novel in some of the more recent discussions within contemporary art about the reiteration of the archival practice (FOSTER, 2014). I affirm, therefore, that the book mobilises the “archival impulse” (FOSTER, 2004) in several dimensions. First, the narrator mobilises the archives through a desire of systematization and completeness. The fantasy of a comprehensive and all-embracing knowledge was one of the epistemological pillars of archival practice in the 19th Century, as Foucault (2004) mentions. These epistemological assumptions emerge when we perceive that throughout the book the narrator plays the role of a genealogist, always mentioning the archive as a *locus* where the book's characters go to carry out historical research in order to uncover what really happened with T.C. Elimane and, consequently, it is through the collected documents that he discovers that the book *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain* was a supposed case of plagiarism. It is historical research and the use of documents that allows the narrator to systematize the information about what happened to Elimane's book, as well as making it possible for the narrator to start to sustain a certain perspective about the reality of the past, and as a result, find ways to question it. The research to discover what happened to the book that so enchanted the narrator happens during the course of the whole of the first book, the archival research becomes more explicit with the presentation of the news clippings that tension the relation between fiction and non-fiction. As an important second aspect in relation to the archive, however, it is fair to consider that the archive also has a subjective dimension, as it mixes personal memories and present-day accounts, exploring the dimension of writing in the now typical of diaries. The third aspect that deserves to be pointed out is the use of propaedeutic that remains incomplete, especially because he does not make judgements after reading the arguments and explanations written against the book that enraptured the narrator. Quite the opposite, through the use of the documents, there is a slow and gradual process of discovering Elimane's journey and the complexification of the accusations that he suffered. An archive is produced that ends up only outlining, in a fragmented way, a story.

The archive that is being constructed does not work simply as memory; on the contrary, it also challenges the present, like in the expression of the repeated use of the collage of diverse time periods. All of this occurs after the historical research is carried out in the French press archives hoping to discover who Elimane was and the motive behind the decline of *Le Labyrinthe*



*de l'inhumain*. He collects newspaper clippings, footnotes about the book, and commentaries and legal documents about Elimane's imposture. Even if he has a desire for totality and historic understanding of the past, and of European History, - typical of the archival desire of modernity - the archive that is produced becomes self-referential and its completion is permanently postponed. These options influence the narrative's temporality: as Derrida argues, every archive is both a record of the past and, moreover, a promise for the future. The archivist produces increasingly more material for the archive, and as a result, he comments, that an archive would never close and would stay perpetually open towards the future. The narrative in which montage strategy stands out facilitates the elision as that which is placed between a record of the past and a projection of the future towards which the archivist impelled to in the present. In the case of Sarr's novel, the thematic presence and the emphasis on the montage of the story makes this elision include a distant past, of the publications from the beginning of the 1930s, the events of the daily life of the narrator and the future that in some way considers itself Elimane's book's redemption. Through this narrative choice, a structure begins to be constructed in *La plus secrète mémoire des homes*, a framework in which the archival research, and the newspaper clippings included in the diary entries create a new personal archive, even if this increases the tension between fiction and non-fiction because as readers, we are not certain about the origin of the presented sources. The research produces a new archive with a particular role in the narrative: it is not confined only to the past, but projects itself as an opening towards the future.

Therefore, *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* is not a historicist project, because it does not reiterate an empty and homogenous time expressed by the continuity between the past and the present in an abstract and chronological form of modernity. It seems to be exactly the opposite: to brush history against the grain seems to be the most immediate objective. Sarr intends to do this stating explicitly the temporal complexity of the present, which involves, rather, a discontinuous form of temporality that is diametrically opposed to the homogenizing impulses that are usually attributed to the scientific and historical work of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The collages created by the character Diégane Latyr Faye play a part in his efforts to resist the power of linear time, underlying the relative nature of temporality. The practice of relating memory with archival knowledge reveals a framework of temporality in which the movement to the future involves the growing accumulation of remnants of the 1930s, of the process occurring at the time, whilst the recent past of the latest European events is covered like an intermission until the encounter with the book that arouses his interest.



Therefore, it is considered that the historicity of language, through the perception that performance typical of a text like this one, should be understood as a processual art form that exposes the precariousness of the present. The novel emphasises the temporal layers present in all stories and, as we argue, opens itself towards the future. Like all performances, there is a relation with the now of the event and it evokes a past that cannot be overcome, because of the presence of ghosts, and with the portrayal of the archive, opens itself towards the future. On one hand, it breaks away from the conception of linear and theological history instituted by modernity; on the other hand, associations with other times in the process of the production of the novel are established, evoking new meanings during the reading. The portrayal of the archive expresses the multiplicity of times expressed at the present moment, as if it were a palimpsest where varied times with a particular predilection for the future. The novel as a performative act of memory, expressed by the narrative, claims for itself both the research carried out with the material remainders, and the research done in "press archives" (SARR, 2021, p. 79, our translation), and also the novel's evocation of immaterial vestiges and remains that will be processed through the imagination, essential aspects to show that a comprehensive totality of knowledge cannot be achieved, as Jacques Derrida in *Archive Fever* and *Specters of Marx* considers. A reading of the book as a diary about the clash between generations can also be proposed – the author uses both the device as an investigation journal and personal journal of 2018. They are both generations united by failure and they formulate a memory through a narrative steered by the incompleteness and hybridity of genres stimulating all the more so the mix between the temporal categories of past, present and future.

### Nostalgia of the future

The prose seeks to elaborate on particular configurations of visible and invisible, speakable and unspeakable dimensions of experience to elicit the illusory character of the idea of a totality of life through a fictional exercise of textualization, interpretation and exposure of facts. Through the creation and fictionalisation of experience, what we call *real* is expressed in the novel through voices that diverge and converge around an absent history – related to the deadlocks in the formation of a canon and the silencing of literary history, especially regarding racism as a constitutive practice of modernity – which in narrative terms, comes into effect, through the existing tensions and disagreement between the narrative voices that present a dissent in favour of the maintenance of the difference that ensures the existence of a multiplicity of voices, despite their singularities and whether they are in conflict or not. The absent history that deserves to be

remembered, T.C. Elimane's case and his disappearance, is also inapprehensible and demarcates difference to historical events or to any possibility of judgement about the past, or even of the creation of a univocal image about this past – this is why there are so many collages throughout the narrative – making the novel go beyond its limits and both questions language's representative character and permits that historic reality be represented in its inherent complexity through the choice of the combination of the chorus of voices and the fragmentary character of the novel. I believe that the whole of this architecture is intensified with the choice to, from the beginning, play with temporal shifts and deny modernity temporality, and write a story with a calling towards the future.

*La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* defends a literature that is configured through a poetical process that supposes availability and attention to the body, especially the black body, in relation to the world that surrounds it, subjecting it to influences of imagination and of coloniality of power with the aim to involve the real, in its unspeakableness, in a work of art. Throughout the book, this practice is demonstrated through its spreading out over the most diverse of fields, especially the links, choices and agreements that form the literary canon and shape literary history. We are "... too lazy to think and think about themselves through literature, too enslaved by literary prizes, by flattery, by the social dinners, festivals, checks, too faint-hearted to risk breaking with the novel, through poetry, through whatever else" (SARR, 2021, p. 42, our translation). Reality is performed, in this novel, through the literary construction steered by multiple genres that place the text in a border zone, threatened by silence and by failure, but also allows a glimpse of a reality that's potential escapes apprehension through the historic representation that is confident of its capacity to say what was real in the past. Here it alludes to the way that the work is structured: as already mentioned, made up by several characters that generate a shifting in voices, the narrative revolves around the many spectral searches that scramble the temporal categories of past, present and future with a preference for the latter. On one hand, we have Diégane Latyr Faye, that narrates his vital searches: that of writing and, above all, that which embarks on the investigation about Elimane and *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*, when he tries to discover the reasons behind the accusations towards the African writer – Elimane – as a phantasmagoria that runs through a major part of the narrative as an evoked absence that does not fully meet with the narrator and the main character. On the other hand, we have the search that the reader (and the text itself) undertakes in acknowledgement of the characters – constructed by a multitude of voices – so that, the final image of the book, what remains as an outcome, is incomplete and polysemic.



The diary, that makes up the best part of the first part of the novel, on one hand emphasizes the fragility of the present, susceptible to the past, haunted by ghosts; on the other hand, the historical archival research, and the fact that the narrator and the character are constructing an archive, opens space to return to the inquiry against Elimane, as a possibility to modify literary history and the formation of the canon, and also ab window of possibility for the future typical of an archive that casts itself into a future act of retrospection. The fragility of the present remains as a theme that is kept alive until the last moments of the novel, remaining a window of opportunity for the future without being the typical open future of modern temporality.

And all of this happens in a novel that is built around the solution of a mystery and that uses historical research, particularly documents and evidence, trying to establish a verdict about the accusations of plagiarism in Elimane's novel and his later disappearance, but never solves the mystery and ends up questioning the criteria that underpin how the value of works of art are judged. Despite using the clues and the search for a solution to the enigma, which lead him to police reports, as a narrative force, he does not finish in the last pages with the presentation of a clearly presentable conclusion for the reader after the inquiry, as is the case in classic police novels, the most famous character being Sherlock Holmes, and we do not even find the creation of a *hard-boiled* device, typical in Raymond Chandler's writing. Despite the novel having as references historical events of mass destruction – like the Second World War, the Latin American dictatorships, the wars in Africa – the investigation goes through the post Second World War period examining Western History as a producer of silences and violence, especially motivated by actions of central countries that have had implications for nations of other continents.

This is why, the end of the novel is so resonant, especially when the character Diégane returns and remarks on the failure of his undertaking, when he reads a letter sent by Siga D., in 1969, one of those who contacted T.C. Elimane

For years, in my hallucinations, I saw myself as I am now, in this, old, room, writing at this desk, feeling slightly sad. I interpreted this vision as a signal that one day I would manage to finish the book of my life after *Le Labyrinthe de l'inhumain*. I saw the same sadness that seizes some creators when they finish a work that has demanded all their strength. I fooled myself. In reality, and I understand it at this very moment, this vision did not show me finishing my novel, but this letter. The sadness that rises in me now does not reflect my feeling at the completion of my book, but at its incompleteness. I will not finish. I am one hundred and two years old and I have run out of time. I miss the

future. This is how all fortune tellers end up: in the nostalgia of the future. This is how the soothsayer ends up: in the nostalgia of the future (SARR, 2021, p. 416, our translation).

Despite being a long novel, there is a feeling of absence at the end of the book: a fragmented, incomplete work, in which diverse discursive genres proliferate, beyond the stories that converge when they speak of failure; in which the reader, when trying to grasp the main characters, has to accompany the elusive historical research and the detective impulses of the narrator. It is possible to say that this unsuccessful quest, and all the failures that wreak havoc in this narrative full of spectrums, that lead to the awareness of the loss of trust in historical progress and the criteria that lay the foundations of the modern concept of history, unleash fragments of a text, which as a whole, we are not capable to comprehend. Therefore, what appears is a historic reality that we are incapable to fully appreciate, whose signs of presence are elaborated through the hiatus and fissures in the text. What is considered historically real emerges similar to Hayden White's criticism in his reading of Auerbach's criticism about a concept of reality as the production of "a mirrored verbal image of some extraverbal reality" (WHITE, 1999, p. 93), and more like a specific case of where the artistic undertaking should be understood considering the historicity of the work of art. The debate about the presentation of reality in historical texts should be understood through the use of specific language, metaphors, rhetorical figures, as he affirms. This novel, therefore, distances itself from allegory – at least in the way that allegory has generally been understood in the West, as a term used to talk of the other – due to its proximity to remains and paths found by an investigation, even if it is fictional, in the past.

Contours of sensibility emerge that tension the limits of the way the real is organised and they revisit, through a metonymic process of difference, the structuring of a hybrid novel. As a way to intervene in the visible and legible dimensions of reality, the novel can be read in several different ways, through its multiple temporalities, putting at play the narrative approaches and enriching the world by means of the use of scenes of dissent – like those where the Elimane's silence are reaffirmed as part of a possible world, as well as the questioning about the celebratory rituals of the academic world – that ensure "the conflict of various sensorial regimes" (RANCIÈRE, 2009, p. 59, our translation). The multiple voices stimulate possibilities compared to the historical referentiality highlighted in the novel by the expressed experience and read in its fragments, and its incompleteness, making available reading experiences that go beyond the narratives own limits and open it to transformation. Again, we must highlight the disposition towards the future of the story, not only through the appearance of this temporal category, but especially by the fissures present in the novel.



Moreover, the last letter helps to understand the relation between fragmentary form and a future that isn't conditioned to modern temporality and, thus, it is still a way to continue opening up to what will come from its trails.

But it is a melancholy that can still be happy. Everything will depend on you. I leave. Comfort me, as I'm about to take a step into the shadows, the idea that someone, you whose name I don't know but whose face I know, will read this book, and perhaps get something out of it. I don't want to disappear completely. I want to leave this trace, even if it is not complete. It's my life (SARR, 2021, p. 417, our translation).

A life that at the end surrenders like a letter left for the future, that embraces an emotional melancholic mood – both as a concept and a strategy of writing – that opens up even more to the criticism to the foundations of modernity of which the History itself is one of its expressions, likewise the modern temporality of optimism for the future to come. Returning to the theme of failure, of the unaccomplished, of incompleteness that serve as one of the central images of the whole of the novel that incorporates many materials that would be external, like the letters that, gradually become predominant for the duration of the novel.

The ghosts of the past that does not go away are connected to failure in several dimensions: the character of Diégane, in understanding the final reason for T.C. Elimane's silence, and that of the narrator, that even with the shifting of voices, fails in creating the hoped for novel that could clarify the history and legitimate the literary value of the book accused of plagiarism. The failure and the phantoms are therefore ways of disputing the optimism of History, but also criticises authoritarianism and mechanisms of power that justify the silence of many, eliminating the possibilities of human reinvention. The novel form also fails, and this is why it continues reinventing itself and can move forward incorporating practices that are external to it, like the last letters sent by Madag, one of the voices that contacts T.C. Elimane and that also created his own private archive, and that, also devastated by the lack of understanding, asks the main character to publish his notebook, and not the work of a whole novel.

I will wait, finally, for Madag to come. I could not accept his request. Publishing what was in that notebook would have destroyed his work, or the selfish memory that I want to keep of it. Madag will come to see me one night to hold me to account, perhaps to take revenge, I know; and his ghost, will approach me, will whisper the terms of the terrible

existential alternative that was the dilemma of his life; the alternative before which the heart of anyone haunted by literature hesitates: to write, not to write (SARR, 2021, p. 420, our translation).

This is how the novel ends: in hesitation, in the recognition of the impossibility to shape a conclusive image of all of T.C. Elimane's journey, it refers to a secondary character, that is in doubt about handing over a private archive, but that hesitates, just like the genre itself, and continues incorporating external elements to it for new presentations. And the failure, of the characters, relates to all those who have given in to modern temporality and to the past that remains like open wounds in its connection between coloniality and power.

The choice for a politicisation of time directed to criticise modern temporal linearity happens through the questioning of the future category in asymmetry with the typical references of modernity. This politicisation of time, however, does not choose the same pre-modern temporality that spread as a rhetoric option of writers that were not directly experiencing the central European or North American territory. This is the case, for example, of the group that received the label: magic realism. There is a difference in *La plus secrète mémoire des hommes* writing proposal in relation to Latin American production, so admired by Sarr, from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, from the writers Gabriel Garcia Márquez in *Cien Años de Solitud* and Carlos Fuentes in *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz*. Whilst these invest in the elaboration of a cohesive narrative where there is a temporal singularity in the Latin American territory of a circular form as a way to invest in the politization of time, this embrace modernity in its traces and remains in a poetics of the fragment that criticises the epistemological foundations of modern History. An archaic time that considers itself to be indigenous and original is avoided. Latin America, in other words, has its own particular time that opposes the central territories in its linear and homogenous way of modern temporality. Furthermore, some productions from Africa have also invested in this perspective, like many of Mia Couto's novels, among which *Terra Sonâmbula* stands out.

This most recent of Sarr's novels, contrary to the novels here mentioned, takes on a contemporary tendency to write novels that cannot be easily be classified as fiction or nonfiction, possessing authorial digressions, letters, diary entries and essays are used to emphasise the author's readings and political opinions. There is a lot of nonfiction involved, especially with the shifting between the author and narrator, as well as the use of the references to T.C. Elimane's life. It is not so easy to define this book as a novel due to its typical hybridism like a chimera resistant to fiction, a characteristic stamp of novels as a modern genre, even if since Bakhtin we have worked



with the omnivorous character of novels. Sarr, therefore, seems to meet what is being produced in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and should interest historians: the use of documents, the presence of documents in the narratives that use a range of materials, in this case, archival data and journalistic reports, which whilst also putting less emphasis on, or not just investing in creating events, also avoid rhetorical choices that legitimize what “really” happened. Finally, we are not faced with prose that invests in self-fictional procedures with the mixture of the name of the author and the narrator or even with the striking presence of the fragments that could possibly be identified as biographical.

I return, then, with the intention to reach a certain conclusion, to the perspective of some literature's appropriation of historical research references, and of non-literary genres – essays, diaries and letters – that give a particular tone to this fiction through its intimate connection to history, archival research and a criticism to progress without ceasing to be attentive to the creation of works of art. An aspect that stands out is the discussion about temporality, specifically the value given to the future as a temporal category without making use of linear history that projects individuals towards a future place that will redeem the present. This prose becomes even more singular when we consider the novelty of its avoidance to domesticate of the past, associating the production of knowledge, evaluation criteria for works of art and racism, whilst also avoiding the analytical descriptions carried out by post and de-colonials. Venturing into the performative and compose prose that tends towards the denial of typical conventions of 21<sup>st</sup> century novels, makes the story closer to the practice of historians, especially through the high regard for archival research and the presentation of the evidence collected after the investigation.

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