

‘Récit d’enfance, récit de distance. Gaby as implicated subject in Gaël Faye’s *Petit Pays*’

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Introduction

Gaël Faye’s award-winning 2016 novel *Petit Pays* has received critical acclaim for its lyrical depiction of a childhood universe set alongside the violence of Burundi’s civil war and the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Translated into over 40 languages, the novel has been hailed varyingly as an ode to a lost paradise of childhood in Burundi, and a contemporary oral tale of political realism. The focus of this reading will be on Faye’s interweaving of a child’s perspective with a sustained focus on proximity and distance, and how these shed new light on this historical experience. The figure of the child is a vehicle for exploring subjects implicated in violence; and alongside this, distance draws our attention to how intricately different actors remain involved. In this way we can start to inch beyond the binaries of innocence/guilt, victim/perpetrator that dominate discussion of this period when transitional justice frameworks remain the primary approach to episodes of extreme violence. Combining both these elements, Faye’s novel brings Gaby’s position to the fore and reveals such subjects as complexly implicated in systemic injustice. As such, the insight is not on those larger-than-life political figures so dominant in Great Lakes history, but rather on the childhood of an ordinary figure.

Michael Rothberg’s umbrella category of ‘implicated subject’ helps us read Gaby as protagonist in *Petit Pays* in numerous ways. The term refers to a subject who participates in injustice but in indirect ways, and thus gives us a more complete picture of violence, exploitation and domination.¹ Foregrounding implication rather than victimhood gives us insight into the interplay between subjectivity, structural inequality, and historical violence and enables us to see figures who are more complexly entangled than more common descriptors may suggest.² It also opens up the discussion to the lesser discussed actors within this history: in this case children and Burundi. Especially true in writing about life after the genocide is what Rothberg identifies as anchoring most explorations of traumatic violence: a conceptual framework based on the stable categories of victim/perpetrator.³ This imaginary, essential to the work of transitional justice, can skew our vision of subjectivity by limiting our analysis to a legalistic, individualistic, and I would argue, adult framework. But where does the child fit into such categories? Or a resident of a neighbouring country, such as Burundi (which until now remains understudied, particularly in literary studies)?⁴ An understanding of systemic injustice requires looking at the everyday reproduction of certain conditions, which are to be found in small actions by multiple actors who may *appear* removed from any violence that is perpetrated. This chapter examines a number of such small actions to argue that Faye’s text presents the kind of agency and subjectivity that requires Rothberg’s different kind of vocabulary.

Though Rothberg’s focus on responsibility does not address childhood as a category, his focus on implication as a subject position embedded in diachronic and synchronic relationality accurately describes how Gaby’s ties to injustice are due to current circumstances and inherited privilege.

¹ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), p. 20.

² *Ibid.*, p. 35.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴ See for example Juvénal Ngorwanubusa, *Le Regard étranger: L’image du Burundi dans les littératures belge et française* (Oxford: Peter Lang 2014).

Further, Gaby's development as a character underscores that implicated subjectivity is not a fixed ontological identity, but rather a dynamic position liable to shift. This comes in the novel against a backdrop of Burundi's shifting political landscape. Central to my reading of the text will be the reconsideration of guilt and innocence that is created through the narrative of a child who moves closer and further away from the violence of the genocide and civil wars as he grows older. This analysis reveals how situations of conflict position us in morally and emotionally complex ways, whilst still calling out for political engagement.⁵ Such a reading then impacts on the way we consider the ongoing entanglements of other actors, namely Belgium and its former empire, as discussed in this volume.

The fictional representation of violence, trauma and memory during and in the wake of the genocide has been treated by a number of scholars within the field of Francophone studies.⁶ A specific focus on the child's perspective comes in two works of fiction: Tierno Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins* (2000)⁷ and Scholastique Mukasonga's *Notre Dame du Nil* (2012),⁸ and I will refer to these in what follows. The experience of child soldiers in African conflicts has also been the subject of several critical works, most commonly on the better-known fiction of writers such as Ahmadou Kourouma and Emmanuel Dongola.⁹ The perspective tends to be first-person and the tone, as in *Allah n'est pas obligé*, often pessimistic and resigned. These focus on children as explicit agents of violence who are identified as innocent victims turned gun-wielding killers operating under the influence of drugs. Faye's text presents a more nuanced account of childhood than these two extremes. At first glance his protagonist is ostensibly a 'good boy'. Yet in the way Faye uses distance and proximity to shape the story, we see that child's closeness to and implication in various forms of injustice. The text shares with *Notre dame du Nil* and *L'Aîné des orphelins* a certain remove from the violence of the genocide that sets them apart from more direct acts of witnessing, but in this way provides fresh insight into the wider temporal and geographical scope of that particular crisis. By addressing these two facets of the text together (childhood and distance) my aim is to avoid reductive readings of childhood as ignorant/innocent, or accounts of participation in injustice as clichéd or polarised. What I seek to show is the way this perspective underscores the conflation of child and adult perspective, in broader terms how the past lingers on in the present and what traces of Burundi's colonial past

⁵ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, p. 19.

⁶ See Virginie Brinker, *La Transmission littéraire et cinématographique du génocide des Tutsis au Rwanda* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014); Alexandre Dauge-Roth, *Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Disremembering and remembering traumatic history* (Lanham: Lexington, 2010); Nicki Hitchcott, *Rwanda Genocide Stories: Fiction After 1994* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017); Zoe Norridge, *Perceiving Pain in African Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁷ T. Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

⁸ S. Mukasonga's *Notre Dame du Nil* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).

⁹ See Éloïse Brezault, *Johnny chien méchant d'Emmanuel Dongola* (Paris: ACEL-Infolio, 2012); Odile Cazenave, 'Writing the Child, Youth and Violence into the novel from sub-Saharan Africa: the impact of age and gender', *Research in African Literatures* 36.2 (2005), 59-71; Pius Ngandu Nkashama, 'Les "enfants-soldats" et les guerres coloniales: A travers le premier roman africain', *Etudes littéraires*, 35.1 (2003), 29-40; John Walsh, 'Coming of Age with an AK-47: Ahmadou Kourouma's *Allah n'est pas obligé*', *Research in African Literatures* 39.1 (2008), 185-97.

can be found in this fictional account of the 1990s. The importance of vehicles and movement draws our attention to the longed-for but near impossible wish to set oneself at a distance from violence.

Petit Pays tells the childhood story of Gabriel (or Gaby) as he comes of age in Burundi. We are given a picture of his everyday life, and gradually the disruption and destruction of various forms of violence, not least the Genocide against the Tutsi in neighbouring Rwanda. The novel has the eponymous title of one of Faye's autobiographical rap songs, and though the author has spoken clearly against this being his story, in ways it suggests some crossover.¹⁰ Both Faye and Gaby are born of a French expatriate father and a Rwandan refugee mother, and raised in Burundi during the years leading up to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the concurrent tragedy that unfolds in Burundi. The plot runs from 1992 to 1995, and its circular structure begins and ends in France, following the family's expatriation there. The past does not vanish but remains present in far more than nostalgia in the text. *Petit Pays* is narrated from a dual perspective of Gaby as a reminiscing adult and Gaby as child, giving access to both life stages but also revealing the ways they are conflated. I disagree with critic Marie-Odile Ogier-Fares who sees the two voices as distinct, marked always by shifts in the syntax, claiming that 'It's the child who brought and spoke of the wonderful Small country all through the first part of the novel.'¹¹ The transitions between these narrative voices occur throughout the novel and are not always obvious, and I would argue, deliberately so. These happen at sentence rather than chapter levels, and act as small-scale interruptions of the adult perspective to disrupt and overlay any notions of 'pure' childhood naivety. This has the effect of blurring boundaries between life stages, underscoring the presence of the past, and demonstrating the grey zones where innocence and responsibility overlap. Illustrations of this provide the main body of this chapter.

When we first meet the adult Gaby at the novel's opening, he is obsessed with a return to Burundi. He describes himself as unadapted to the world, unable to settle though at moments decidedly established 'in France.'¹² The return journey lingers with inevitability, but his sense of a temporary locatedness goes beyond that

Except that I no longer live anywhere. Living somewhere involves a physical merging with its landscape, with every crevice of its environment. There's none of that here. I'm passing through. I rent. I squat. My town is a dormitory that serves its purpose. My apartment smells of fresh paint and new linoleum. My neighbours are perfect strangers, we avoid each other politely in the stairwell.¹³

In this way, our initial encounter is with a subject self-consciously uncertain of his position. What is more, his entanglement in structures of racial injustice is penned in the prologue when the founding stereotypes of Hutu-Tutsi difference are uttered to the child Gaby by his French father. On the opening page of the novel, the informal dialogue of a family embeds him in those myths. The child Gaby is positioned within that structural injustice when he is told, 'Take you, Gabriel,' he said,

¹⁰ See Catherine Fruchon-Toussaint, 'Petit pays n'est absolument pas mon histoire', interview with Gaël Faye, RFI, 8 September 2016, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/culture/20160908-gael-faye-petit-pays-absolument-pas-histoire> [accessed 8 August 2020].

¹¹ Marie-Odile Ogier-Fares, 'L'enfant, voix de la terreur et de la beauté, une figure énonciative de la réconciliation dans *Petit Pays* et *En attendant Bojangles*', *Revue Critique de Fictions Françaises Contemporaines*, 17 (2018), 17-25 (23). (All secondary text translations in this chapter are my own.)

¹² Gaël Faye, *Small Country*, transl. by Sarah Ardizzone (London: Hogarth, 2016), p. 3. All primary text references are from the English translation unless otherwise stated.

¹³ Ibid.

pointing at me, 'you're a proper Tutsi: we can never tell what you're thinking.'¹⁴ Gaby's uncertainty about his position and identity, which I discuss later on, hinges on this marker. Not only does he receive this label from a French father married to his Rwandan mother, and thus charged with the significance of that categorisation from the Rwandan context. But also, given that there was no Hutu social revolution in Burundi and that the Tutsi remained in control there after independence in 1962, Gaby lives with that label in a context where the Hutu/Tutsi dichotomy carries very different meaning. His coming-of-age (and political consciousness) coincides with the Hutu-majority Frodebu victory of 1993.¹⁵ The trans-African significance of the term 'Tutsi' is mobile, therefore, and as a child, Gaby's murky understanding of these dynamics comes across loudly throughout the novel.

This understanding of dynamic and embedded positioning is crucial to a move beyond a victim/perpetrator binary in thinking through what Rothberg describes as the complex subjectivities of life after violence.¹⁶ What is more, the coming-of-age story shows an increasingly independent child nonetheless persistently intertwined with his past, his peers, and his parents. Faye's dual and overlapping narrative voices get to the heart of this in the violence of genocide and civil war, gesturing as such to the multiple entanglements of decolonisation. By unpacking the complexities of Gaby's position as a child shifting closer to and further away from that violence, we better understand his and other subjects' relationship to it. I am by no means presenting the child as an allegory for Burundi, but rather inviting us to see him as an illustration of the implicated nature of subjecthood that does of course affect a whole range of actors in this region's history of injustice.

Childhood as innocence

Readings of childhood narratives of violence in contemporary African literature fall into the trap of framing childhood as a period of ultimate bliss and, crucially, absolute innocence, interrupted and ruined by episodes of violence.¹⁷ When violence, of varying kinds, is described by critics as 'erasing childhood'¹⁸ or 'depriving [one] of childhood',¹⁹ it belies a naïve vision that conflates childhood with absolute innocence or freedom from pain. This results in an overwhelming stereotyping of children only as innocent victims. My approach here does not follow that of scholars such as Aline Lebel, whose examination of *Petit Pays* frames the tale as a case of 'lost paradise' where Gaby's childhood, as well as the land he leaves, is a lost and longed-for Eden. Although she mentions the adult narrator's challenge to any idealised view of the past, Lebel nonetheless argues that the childhood presented in the book is a time of happiness, and she equates this with innocence.²⁰ Ogier-Fares does similarly, asserting that 'the child narrator has guaranteed innocence.'²¹ Though the author himself was taken by the notion of a lost paradise,²² an overemphasis on this myth risks overlooking

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 1.

¹⁵ René Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Cambridge; New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 178-179.

¹⁶ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, p. 33.

¹⁷ Childhood and coming-of-age stories set in Africa are doubly subjected to these absolutist clichés when they are overlaid with the all-too-common narrative of Africans as only victims of tragedy.

¹⁸ Edgar Nabutanyi, 'Archives of Troubled Childhoods in Contemporary African Fiction', unpublished doctoral thesis, Stellenbosch University, 2013, p. 6.

¹⁹ Odile Cazenave, 'Writing the Child, Youth and Violence into the Novel from sub-Saharan Africa: the Impact of Age and Gender', *Research in African Literatures* 36.2 (2005), 59-71, p. 62.

²⁰ Aline Lebel, 'Le récit d'enfance au prisme du génocide et de la violence politique: le motif du "retour" vers la terre d'enfance chez Gaël Faye et Scholastique Mukasonga', *Revue Critique de Fxixion Française Contemporaine*, 17 (2018), 100-116, p. 104.

²¹ Ogier-Fares, 'L'Enfant...', p. 24.

²² See Fruchon-Toussaint, 'Petit Pays...'.

the far more ambivalent nature of Gaby's childhood. I argue instead that far from offering a clichéd view of childhood as innocent and pure, the text itself holds such a reading up as naïve by blurring the boundaries between childhood and adulthood, and between guilt and innocence.

What Faye's text gives us is a picture of childhood that moves beyond the absolutist descriptions of perfection turned to horror. There is an ambivalence and strain to Gaby's memories, even in the chronological period before the civil war in Rwanda. Where Lebel contrasts Mukasonga's work to Faye's for the way the former shows that 'violence has always formed part of her world,'²³ the critic overlooks the backdrop of violence in Gaby's domestic and regional situation. This comes through vividly for example in the soundscape of his parents' conflict:

That night, the walls of our house trembled with Maman's rage. I heard the sounds of breaking glass, of windows being shattered and plates smashing on the floor... Their voices were indistinguishable, distorted by the high and low notes bouncing off the tiles and reverberating in the false ceiling, I could no longer tell what was French and what Kirundi, what was shouting and what were tears, whether these were my parents battling or the neighbourhood dogs fighting to the death.²⁴

Such perception – characteristic of the impression Faye builds through what Gaby sees, hears, and thinks – disquiets readings of the child as 'enchanted' and thus blissfully unaware.²⁵ It is reminiscent of the young protagonist Faustin in Monénembo's *L'Aîné des orphelins*, who is under no illusions and whose tone often reflects the violence he is witness to. What is more, *Petit Pays* directly undoes notions of this period as Edenic by pointedly using associated images to underscore the horror, ironically drawing attention to the mythical nature of such descriptions: 'Mais le Rwanda du lait et du miel avait disparu. C'était désormais un charnier à ciel ouvert.'²⁶ ('But the Rwanda of milk and honey had disappeared. It was now a mass grave, open to the skies.')²⁷ The internal echo of 'miel' and 'ciel' inclosing the shocking 'charnier' at this chapter-end mark the emptiness of those Edenic ideals, and the danger of surrounding places and ideas with such language. Gaby's relatives return to Rwanda after 30 years in Burundi, having fled after the first episodes of ethnic cleansing in 1959. But their dreamed for return instead becomes a search for the dead. The incoherence of a romanticised view fuelled by vocabulary of utopic bliss is underscored by the words' proximity. Typical of the blurred double narrative, these words come in a voice that blends the semi-awareness of a child (who writes of 'this thing that wasn't war'²⁸) with the astute language of an adult. There is no way for the child Gaby to remain 'enchanted' or 'carefree' due to the repeated interruption of the adult narrative voice in the text, the backdrop of small and large-scale violence, and due to his own everyday experiences of growing up.

There are certainly moments of ease and happiness. As the narrator describes time with his four best friends:

It was in that VW Combi that we plotted our futures, from small outings to grand excursions. We were full of dreams and it was with impatient hearts that we imagined the joys and

²³ Lebel, 'Le récit d'enfance...', p. 105.

²⁴ Faye, *Small Country*, pp. 21-22.

²⁵ See Ogier-Fares, 'L'Enfant...'.

²⁶ Gaël Faye, *Petit Pays* (Paris: Grasset, 2016), p. 167.

²⁷ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 136.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

adventures life held in store for us. In short, we felt at one with the world, in our hideout on the patch of wasteland by our street.²⁹

Yet during this period, what Lebel characterises as 'insouciance' (carefreeness) is accompanied with the ordinary childhood struggles of pride, jealousy and belonging.³⁰ Ogier-Fares also describes the childhood world as 'a radiant and extraordinary world,'³¹ which seems at odds with Gaby's experiences. Faye's text brings to the fore the ambivalent actions and subjectivity that are at the heart of an ordinary childhood.³² So where Lebel describes an 'innocence enfantine' (childish innocence) ruined by the rupture of extreme violence, she overlooks the ambivalence of the everyday realities of coming of age.³³ It is not so much a clear-cut case of the two narrative perspectives being distinguished by guilty (adult) vs innocent (child). Rather, their blurring highlights the impurity of Gaby's position where Faye draws particular attention to the moral dilemmas that the protagonist faces. As Rothberg outlines, 'opening up the more ambiguous space of the implicated subject between and beyond the victim/perpetrator binary paradoxically provides a more precise picture of the production of damage.'³⁴ This question of responsibility allows us to examine the grey zones of indirect participation in injustice, even in childhood.³⁵

Two instances where Gaby's innocence is under scrutiny illustrate this, providing insight into the kind of spectrum of culpability along which multiple subjects hover. These episodes are more ambiguous than the more direct act of violence when Gaby sets fire to the taxi killing the man inside, yet are linked into the same web of implication.³⁶ When the boys take mangoes from neighbours' yards their childish play is amusing, but when this is followed by selling them back to Mme Economopoulos and being beaten up by Francis, the lines between fun, exploitation and violence are blurred.³⁷ Faye draws our attention here, first in Francis's patronising remarks, 'You shouldn't steal from other people's gardens. Didn't your parents ever teach you that?' and then in Gaby's panic at finding himself, for the first time, directly victim to violence, 'So was this what violence meant? Raw fear and disbelief.'³⁸ Any apparent childhood innocence is already marked by inequality and violence, remarked on here with adult astuteness. The fact that the giver of this lesson, Francis, is a Banyamulenge marks another specific trace of violence and marginalisation where ethnicity and its horrific implications reverberate from one generation to the next.³⁹ Gaby's growing understanding of this marks him out as more complex than a child naively pursuing fun with friends.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 57-58.

³⁰ Lebel, 'Le récit d'enfance...', p. 105. For instance, Gaby resists the addition of Francis to their friendship group, and he envies his friend Gino who 'spoke fluent Kinyarwanda and knew exactly who he was' (Faye, p. 65).

³¹ Ogier-Fares, 'L'Enfant...', p. 23.

³² The horror of the genocide was in large part due to the scale of involvement by ordinary citizens who participated in the killings, as Mahmood Mamdani discusses (p. 7).

³³ Lebel, 'Le récit d'enfance...', pp. 100; 106; 109.

³⁴ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, p. 34.

³⁵ Ibid., pp. 37-39 where Rothberg discusses Primo Levi's notion of grey zones.

³⁶ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 173.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 78; p. 130.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

³⁹ This Kinyarwanda speaking group, established in South Kivu, DRC, and in Burundi, was persecuted after the Rwandan genocide. See Mahmood Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 238-251.

Gaby's consciousness around crime grows in an episode surrounding the theft of his bicycle. This episode is one example of where the dual narrative perspectives of *Petit Pays* converge. When the child Gaby learns his bicycle has been stolen by the family's guard, we read: 'No way. Surely Calixte would never do something like that? I was crying real tears now. It felt as if the whole world was against me.'⁴⁰ Eight-year-old Gaby is obviously distressed that a man he trusted has committed this theft, but the overwhelming feeling is of having been victimised. Nearing the end of their rural search for the stolen bicycle, Gaby spots Calixte in a crowd of curious onlookers who then give chase. Yet the tone again here is one of a philosophising adult where simile and reflections on language signal a perspectival shift away from the wronged child:

The entire town ran after him, as if chasing a chicken whose neck needed wringing in time for lunch. There's nothing like a spot of blood sport during the midday lull to kill time in the sleepy provinces. Popular justice is the name they give to lynching, it has the benefit of sounding civilised. Luckily, the crowd didn't have the last word that day.⁴¹

The shift is away from an emotional stance of victimhood (Gaby in tears, as above), but this is marked as a conscious shift in agency, not just emotion. Indeed, Gaby is then given the choice to leave his bicycle with its current owner, a farmer's son who until this point is none the wiser to its origins. His dilemma is whether to regain possession of his BMX, or to leave it with the boy so to avoid 'breaking a child's heart'.⁴² To underscore his conflicting feelings, Gaby's companions each echo a different stance vis à vis the right solution. Donatien, not wanting the farmer's son to be deprived in turn of 'his' bicycle, pleads with Gaby to let him keep it, 'to help a poor child'.⁴³ The less patient Innocent – deliberately named – is set against such Robin Hood moves, and against lying to Gaby's father, and loads the bicycle into the truck.⁴⁴ Ultimately, Gaby is left with heightened consciousness of his agency, and his implication, but still in a state of remorse: 'I'd been feeling vain, selfish and generally ashamed of the whole episode: I had gone from victim to executioner, simply by wishing to retrieve something that belonged to me in the first place.'⁴⁵ Faye's use of the words 'victime' and 'bourreau' belies the child's simplified thinking, at the very moment the author also draws attention to his complex and layered emotions. As Gaby looks for reassurance, he articulates the anxious shift in positioning between agency and powerlessness.⁴⁶

Gaby's playful thieving, assault at the hands of Francis, and his pursuit for justice for his stolen bicycle reveal the limitations of fixed and mutually exclusive categories of guilty/innocent. He is responsible but not fully, and naïve but not ignorant. As such his 'impure' positions of implication both challenge reductive readings of childhood and provide insight into the complexities of subjectivity and agency in and after violence, supplementing absolutist moral ascriptions with a more nuanced account of power.⁴⁷ This has implications for how we consider other actors in the

⁴⁰ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 26.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Ironically named since he uses the context of the war to perpetrate his own crimes. See also Gaby's uncle, named Pacifique, who fights for the RPF.

⁴⁵ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 51.

⁴⁶ The focus Faye provides in this episode is far more on Gaby's internal shifts than any sense of an epic boys' adventure, as presented by Ogier-Fares, that helps Gaby bounce back from his mother's departure (p. 23).

⁴⁷ Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, p. 35.

genocide, and in particular those who might be considered, for various reasons, innocent at first glance. I come back to these intricacies of involvement below.

Each of these scenarios is of course also taking place within a system of powers and privileges that structure Gaby's life, including the way he is racially and socially positioned by others, as the opening page of the novel established (see above). Gaby as protagonist is the focus of this chapter, but he is not an individual removed from community. Hannah Arendt's writing on communities and collective responsibility – as another move away from the individualised (Western) sway of 'guilty perpetrator' or 'ideal victim' – is pertinent to this analysis and is discussed by Rothberg.⁴⁸ The example below reveals Gaby as member of a rich family, employing others, but Gaby is also a member of a gang, an active penpal, a neighbour, friend, and school pupil. Each of these communities sees him enter into different networks of relatedness and therefore implication. None of this action takes place in a vacuum of power relations, and this is where Rothberg's account of systems of privilege that engender both synchronic and diachronic implication is most clearly relevant. For Rothberg, it is about far more than individuals and their morality, and more about the collective responsibilities of those who are implicated in events in which they are not active, criminally culpable participants.⁴⁹ Indeed, whilst not ignoring individual crimes, it becomes crucial to re-position subjects in their political, social and economic structures. As one reviewer describes him:

Gabriel is in fact a privileged little boy: he is sent to the French school in Bujumbura (the capital of Burundi), he lives in a beautiful villa where he is served by domestic servants, and he has but one goal: to have a good time with his friends and gorge themselves on mangoes in their hideout, an old VW Combi.⁵⁰

Gaby's entanglement in a system of powers is obvious in the stolen bicycle episode, where his parents' household employees spend the day chasing down the bicycle, involving police and a crowd of onlookers, only for Gaby to conclude that he will never ride it again. At this, Innocent's exasperated 'Enfant gâté' (spoilt brat) highlights Gaby as superior to the 'pauvre enfant' (poor child) who had been found with his bike.⁵¹ The short, contrasting phrases underscore Gaby's position of privilege, and this is all the more emphatic coming from an employee paid to look after his family. It is not only through class that he occupies this privilege, but by the intersection of other privileges from his wealth, French education, mixed race, and large, gated home. What is more, in terms of inherited privilege, this epithet [of 'enfant gâté'] also echoes Gaby's mother insulting his father when he is dismissing her desire to live safely in Europe: 'L'histoire dont je parle ne t'intéresse pas, Michel, elle ne t'a jamais intéressé. Tu es venu ici chercher un terrain de jeux pour prolonger tes rêves d'enfant gâté d'Occident.'⁵² ('You've never been interested in my version of the story, Michel... You came here from Europe in search of a playground where you could eke out the dreams of your spoilt childhood in the West.')⁵³

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 50

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

⁵⁰ Mel Teapot, 'Petit pays : l'histoire d'un paradis perdu', *L'Envolée Culturelle*, 9 May 2017 <http://www.lenvoleeculturelle.fr/petit-pays-lhistoire-dun-paradis-perdu/> [accessed 23 July 2020], n.p.

⁵¹ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 46.

⁵² Gaël Faye, *Petit Pays* (Paris: Grasset, 2016), p. 30 (my emphasis).

⁵³ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 17. The fact that Yvonne sees Michel in Gaby becomes crystal clear later on in the novel when, following her breakdown, she refuses to speak to either of them and repeatedly shows a preference for her daughter Ana.

The over-simplified conception of childhood as but a linear, temporal category characterised as innocent and pure neglects both the ambivalence of childhood experiences *and* the way they endure. Such a reading also points to the need to interrogate other actors involved in the genocide. The reach and persistence of Gaby's childhood into the adult life maps equally onto our reading of Belgium's colonial past in this region: ambivalent and persistently entangled (See Nicki Hitchcott's chapter in this volume). Rothberg's simultaneous focus on the diachronic draws our eyes to the colonial legacy that lingers in the text. Hierarchical relationships are reflected in the status of the various inhabitants of the cul-de-sac and their domestic staff, but also class distinctions between this neighbourhood and the plight of Rwandan refugees and rural poor beyond Bujumbura. This comes both as a synecdoche of where they stand historically, and a geographical inscription marking a kind of socio-political dead-end. The slow days where Gaby and his friends drag their feet through the oft-cited 'impasse' (cul-de-sac or no-through road) underscore the permanent traces of such colonial stratifications. The author thus points to the legacies of colonialism in poverty and social fracture, as well as the more direct damage caused by European states' involvement (and lack thereof) in the genocide.⁵⁴ When Ruanda-Urundi was taken over by Belgium as a result of the Treaty of Versailles, the new administration adopted the evolutionist and racist criteriology – the infamous Hamitic hypothesis – used by the Germans to map out the ethnic boundaries of their colony.⁵⁵ Like the Belgian Congo, this League of Nations Trust territory was managed by paternalistic administrators who exacerbated ethnic differences – between the Hutu and the Tutsi – to impose colonial rule.⁵⁶

Most explicitly, the colonial past is embodied in Jacques, an older Belgian man whom the family regularly visits in Bukavu (DRC). Enduring racism in this encounter points to material and immaterial traces of that past as explored elsewhere in this volume. Jacques' racist jokes are met with laughter from everybody but Gaby and Ana, whose confusion here is part of their ongoing exposure to injustice they don't understand: 'Don't make fun of me, you baboon ! ... And to think I couldn't hold onto a good woman for more than three days', Jacques went on, 'but I've been lumbered with this chimpanzee for thirty-five years!'⁵⁷ We see again here that violence and injustice are embedded in everyday relations, as the complexity and coercion of Belgium's history is drawn out. Another place the novel undermines utopic visions of life is where Jacques' property (the stage for these racist insults) is described as a quasi-paradise: 'a sort of Garden of Eden on the banks of Lake Kivu...At Jacques's house the table had already been laid to welcome us'.⁵⁸ In this way, the Great Lakes horrors of the 1990s are set in a longer history of systemic violence.⁵⁹ Faye uses the family's border crossing to underscore the traces of territorialisation and expropriation that have been so divisive and demeaning in the region's history from 1885 onwards.⁶⁰ This renders even more problematic any notion of Burundi pre-1990 as Edenic (see Lebel above), pointing at the same time to the entangled histories of justifying European religious and political 'missions' in the region.⁶¹ Tropes

⁵⁴ See for example Roméo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2002).

⁵⁵ See for example Jean-Pierre Chrétien et Marcel Kabanda, *Rwanda, racisme et génocide: l'idéologie hamitique* (Paris: Belin, 2013).

⁵⁶ See Pierre Ryckmans, *Dominer pour servir* (Brussels: Librairie Albert Dewit, 1931).

⁵⁷ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 14.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁹ Colette Braeckman, *Terreur africaine. Burundi, Rwanda, Zaïre: les racines de la violence* (Paris: Fayard, 1996).

⁶⁰ See for example Bas De Roo, 'L'État indépendant du Congo, une machine à piller au service d'un Léopold II impitoyable?', in Idesbald Goddeeris, Amandine Lauro and Guy Vanthemsche (eds), *Le Congo Colonial: une histoire en questions* (Brussels: Renaissance du Livre, 2020), pp. 33-49.

⁶¹ See Gale Kenny and Tisa Wenger, 'Church, State, and "Native Liberty" in the Belgian Congo,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 62.1 (2020), 156–185.

which risk whitewashing Belgium's bloody-handed history are satirised as Faye contests such discourses with this caricature of colonial pomposity. And yet, the children's bemused state at the same time highlights the blurred lines of implication.

In these ways this chapter speaks to three 'silences' that Mahmood Mamdani outlines as common to many accounts of the genocide, and by extension accounts that surround both Burundi and Rwanda's civil wars.⁶² The nuancing I see in Gaby's characterisation corresponds to a silencing around the *agency* where top-down initiatives behind the genocide can dominate at the expense of recognising its subaltern and 'popular' character. Mamdani describes the large-scale civilian involvement as the genocide's 'uniquely troubling aspect', since the majority of those involved were ordinary citizens. Hence the value of unpacking Gaby's 'ordinary', ambivalent childhood. Secondly, the contextualisation in the workings of systemic injustice over time speaks to a recurring silence around the *history* of the genocide. That is to say, the way the genocide has been described as without precedent both in terms of colonialism (and the way it politicised indigeneity) and preceding waves of violence (to which the generations in Gaby's family bear witness). Lastly, the albeit crucial focus on Rwanda as the nation in which the genocide was perpetrated can risk silencing the *geography* of processes that led up to, and shaped responses to, the atrocities. The border crossing in Faye's novel points not least to the fact that 'Ruanda-Urundi' was one single 'trust' territory managed by the Belgians from 1923 onwards. These dynamics went far beyond the boundaries of Rwanda and are addressed by the spectres of Belgian colonialism I have described above, but more so in Faye's attention to approaching, crossing and communicating over borders and boundary lines. Neighbouring countries and households are navigated by Gaby, as Faye hints at the tense, complex relationships such 'neighbours' have known in Central Africa's recent past. In a region where neighbours and moving over borders holds particular resonance, the thematic of distance calls for attention, and I turn to this for the remainder of the chapter.

Distance and proximity

Central to the novel's dynamics is the notion of distance, which Faye plays with as he shifts the focus from individual to national and international and small-scale interactions presage political tensions and large-scale violence. Subjects' implication in injustice is in *Petit Pays* repeatedly examined by this presence of distance, both spatial, temporal and ethical. Distance dominates far more than any sense of 'reconciliation' as described by Ogier-Fares: 'We can thus reread the whole novel in the light of this epilogue of reconciliation between the adult and the child, between the adult and the country of his childhood.'⁶³ Rather, from the novel's opening there is a strong sense of detachment between the narrator and his home setting, but also a painful distance felt from Burundi and from a painful past. There is a sense in which the adult perspective views the past with the guilt-tinted spectacles of the émigré. Within the frame of the return journey which encloses the rest of the novel (introduced at the beginning of this chapter), there are multiple comings and goings; in other words, a drawing apart and together that points to relationships more strained than reconciled. This tension is partly (in the retrospective narrative) the weight of guilt at never having been at the very centre of the most horrific violence, even as a child. Nor is it a case, as I have demonstrated, of a childhood totally protected from hardship that is suddenly interrupted by that brutality, from the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda. Rather, Gaby's proximity to violence creeps and shifts, just as he also

⁶² Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers*, p. 8.

⁶³ Ogier-Fares, 'L'Enfant...', p. 23.

attempts to withdraw from it in different ways. The narrative maintains a climate of tension that affects him throughout: from the domestic to the international, it proves impossible for him to remain removed.

In his own positionality, as we have seen, Gaby embodies the trans-African entanglements explored in this volume. As protagonist, he is at the centre of the story. But as a child, and living in Burundi, he is simultaneously at a double remove from the intense violence of the genocide in Rwanda. Though Burundi was intensely tied up in the genocide violence,⁶⁴ as the narrator describes, 'From April to July 1994, at a distance and between four walls, next to a telephone and a radio, we lived through the genocide'.⁶⁵ At a more local level, Gaby is allowed, by his position of privilege for quite some time, to snooze, like the cul-de-sac, only partially awake to villages being ravaged and clashes beyond Bujumbura in the political turbulence of elections and ethnic conflict. Despite the need for curfew, '[f]rom the womb-like safety of our house, all of this seemed unreal. The *impasse* was as sleepy as ever'.⁶⁶ In relation to his sister Ana, too, Gaby is kept further from violence. Free to roam the streets with his gang, the vehicles so central to his escapades hint at the degree of freedom he has as a young man to truant and travel. In one episode the group of boys commandeer a taxi to take them to a college swimming pool during school hours. It is no coincidence they drive down 'chaussée Prince Louis Rwagasore' as they carve out their own path of independence.⁶⁷ Instrumental in the creation of the Uprona and an enduring symbol of Burundian independence, Prince Rwagasore was assassinated in the early stages of the decolonising process. He still stands for national unity – echoed in this episode at the band of brothers' togetherness as they drive past his tomb, emblazoned with the country's motto 'Unity Work Progress'.⁶⁸ Diving from the highest board, then laughing their way back to the taxi 'bare-bottomed', the 'band of brothers' revel in their friendship and freedom: 'We had never felt so free, so alive from head to toe, all of us as one, joined by the same veins, the same life-force flowing through us.'⁶⁹ This access to money, vehicles, movement and even nudity is Gaby's partly due to being male. Unlike his sister Ana, Gaby is not tied to the domestic space in the same way, both due to her gender and due to being subject to the complex demands of their volatile mother.⁷⁰

Gaby's relationship with his mother is one of suspicion, increased hostility and distance. Her own absence is preceded by her distress at being far from her homeland and members of her family, and by her brother Pacifique's departure to join the RPF offensive. Distance is at once what structures and propels the plot. What is more, Faye's overall approach to narrating the genocide is to use this removed perspective, where – in a similar vein to Monénembo and Mukasonga – a young narrator is exposed to snippets of violence, rather than a plot that takes it as a sensationalised central subject. Faye describes these two levels: 'And I tried – just as the character keeps violence at a distance, in my role as writer at that moment – I tried for as long as possible to keep this violence at a distance and not to describe it too much.'⁷¹ Though Gaby's experience of distance/as distanced is made

⁶⁴ See Mamdani, *When Victims...* and Lemarchand, *Burundi: Ethnic Conflict and Genocide*.

⁶⁵ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 135.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* See Christine Deslaurier, 'Rwagasore for ever? Des usages contemporains d'un héros consensuel au Burundi', *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, 118.2 (2013), 15-30, for detailed analysis of Rwagasore's significance as a site of memory and ongoing figure of significance in postcolonial Burundi.

⁶⁹ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 129.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 159 and p. 255 for examples.

⁷¹ Fruchon-Toussaint, 'Petit Pays...', n.p.

central in this way, he nonetheless moves closer to the heart of physical violence as the plot progresses. At each of these junctures, the adult and child perspective are conflated as young Gaby tries to make sense of what he sees and hears, and the overlaid adult voice pierces that naivety with dark realism.

As Gaby's family are directly affected, so is he. His uncle Alphonse is killed in an RPF offensive, then his mother's other brother Pacifique leaves to join the fighting. There is at this point a shift in his consciousness:

My home? But that was here. Yes, I was the son of a Rwandan woman, but my reality was Burundi, the French school, Kinanira, our street. Nothing else existed. Still, with the death of Alphonse, and now Pacifique's departure, there were times when I felt as if politics did affect me.⁷²

Once again we read the self-consciousness of a child realising his position (torn as his family is between Rwanda and Burundi), alongside the maturity of an adult reflection. Here the text's lingering inevitability (of violence coming closer to home) is articulated explicitly. Gaby's reading of the political backdrop is apt not only on a personal front, since the novel unfolds against the backdrop of the 1993 multi-party parliamentary elections (the first since 1965). Melchior Ndadaye's win saw an end of military rule and the victory of Frodebu (Front for Democracy in Burundi), crucially a Hutu majority party that sees a political landscape tracing previous (colonial) ethnic mapping. The weight of this remains unknown to the child Gaby, of course, whose written summary of the election focuses on the president's 'presentable and clean' appearance: 'This matters! Because soon he'll have his portrait hung throughout the country, so nobody forgets about him'.⁷³ The young boy is at that point ignorant of Ndadaye's impending assassination, where the scene is set for the horrors of an unfurling civil war across Burundi, as well as fractious tensions with Rwanda.

That same sense of inevitability is shown with acute fear as the family are stopped at a roadblock on the way from Kigali to Gitarama for Pacifique's wedding to Jeanne. The car trip in Rwanda starts with joyful dancing along to a Papa Wemba song. Wemba's transnational fame is a symbolic nod, perhaps, to the power of culture to reach beyond political and ethnic divisions, on the part of musician author Faye. But the limitations of that transcendent potential are biting clear as the family approach a roadblock hushed into silence at threats to the '*inyenzi*' (cockroaches) on the same radio. The mood turns sour as Gaby's aunt lies about the purpose of their trip:

'I've never seen a Frenchwoman with a nose like yours. And as for that neck...'
He ran his hand down the nape of Maman's neck. She sat there, rigid with fear. Over on her side, Aunt Eusébie was negotiating with the other soldier. She was desperately trying to hide her nervousness. 'We're going to Gitarama to visit a sick relative.'⁷⁴

The realism of the harassment in the name of identity checking brings to life the persistent and insidious racism suffered, as well as the policing of movement known by so many, especially Tutsi, and the gendered nature of that violence. But where this is clear to the reader, the child narrator sits in the car with the sick feeling of simultaneously exposed and compromised innocence. There is a

⁷² Faye, *Small Country*, p. 66.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

clear sense of alienation as he understands 'the soldier's innuendoes, the fear in Aunt Eusébie's gestures, the fear that had taken hold of Maman' and yet remains an observer in 'a ringside seat for this spectacle of hatred'.⁷⁵ All eyes are focused on the vehicle during this episode of racist violence that foreshadows the later arson and recalls Gaby's truanting in the taxi and Combi (see above) – revealing his shifting proximity to violence and guilt. It is once again his youth, gender and race that keeps him in the back seat (or indeed in the boot of the car where he is sat) here, ill at ease as his mother is harassed. Gaby's sense of alienation is only heightened then at the family wedding where he and Ana are unable to answer their relatives' questions in Kinyarwanda, and feel uneasy and conspicuous, 'at a loss with [their] clumsy bodies'.⁷⁶

This is a key moment in the text for the way it draws attention to the intertwined histories of Burundi and Rwanda (as well as the DRC) as exemplified in the bouts of violence which follow this moment: the genocide in Rwanda, civil war in Burundi, the overthrow of Mobutu in the DRC three years later.⁷⁷ The text, always playing with the notions of return and distance, thus looks both backwards to the colonial past and forwards to its violent trans-African traces.

Once again it is Faye's novel pairing of childhood with this focus on distance that sheds new light on the experience of violence. For Gaby, there are repeated attempts to escape. These come in play, in friendship, and in reading and writing; all are pursued with a child's imagination. Whether in the stationary Combi with his gang of friends, or writing to his penpal, or spending time reading borrowed novels from the neighbour Madame Economopoulos, Gaby's imagination provides a temporary remove from the bleaker realities of daily life. Ogier-Fares frames this as a more positive development of individualism that suggests another society to come in future: 'The act of writing has a redemptive role, as much for the individual as for the society. His metamorphosis and his search are closely intertwined'.⁷⁸ Yet ultimately the child awakes from reveries and dreams when the noise of gunshots reaches his house – he cannot escape the violence: 'But no matter how much hope I held out, my dreams were fettered by reality. The world and its violence were closing in on us a little more each day'.⁷⁹

In each of these there is an attempt to get away from the various forms of violence that surround him, ('forgetting [him]self entirely')⁸⁰ but an inevitability that each escape is short-lived or limited. This dynamic permeates the text in such a way I see Faye highlighting not only the interwoven nature of different sites and scales of violence in Central Africa, but the localised, personal experience of those violences as varyingly held at a somewhat safe distance, then inescapably up close, in repeated cycles of unpredictability. Gaby's mother is an embodiment of this close then distant volatility, and the novel's concluding scene where her voice haunts the returned adult son, marks the ultimate trace of the past: '*That voice, a voice from beyond the grave, cuts me to the quick. It mutters something about stains on the floor that won't go*'.⁸¹

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 120.

⁷⁷ Kevin Dunn, *Imagining the Congo: The International Relations of Identity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 3.

⁷⁸ Ogier-Fares, 'L'Enfant...', p. 24.

⁷⁹ Faye, *Small Country*, p. 165.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 153.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 182.

It is through Gaby's vain attempts at escape that Faye underscores the impurity of the character's position. What becomes clear is that his 'petit pays' – the world of his street and friends – is always already connected intricately to other people and places. He cannot extricate himself from his parents' origins, for example, or the tensions of the civil war. And as he moves inevitably closer to violence – without possibility of permanent escape – we see him not as an ideal victim but more as a morally compromised subject. It should not go unnoticed that the key episodes involving Gaby are all to do with vehicles (a bicycle, taxi and a car). His entanglement with those vehicles speaks to a more general determination to escape from hostile circumstances, as well as the pressing, dangerous significance of travel and border-crossing. His everyday journeys are foregrounded against subtle but significant references to the men who have shaped both Gaby's family and wider Great Lakes history (see mention of his uncles, Ndadaye, and Rwagasore above). There is a progression, as Gaby comes of age, from two wheels to four, but as a child, his access to and control of those vehicles is dependent on others. His relationships of trust, envy, dependence and desire shape his positions in each scene: whether confused in the backseat en route to the wedding, or forced forwards by jeering peers towards the petrol-soaked taxi. In Gaby we see moral compromise as he is pushed and pulled around, his very movements subject to wider social rules of belonging and loyalty.

What Faye's pairing of childhood and distance provides is a new access point for the impure positions of less likely subjects in this episode of historical injustice. At once seeking distance and feeling guilty for it, Gaby navigates his political, social and ethical positioning as a confused child. The ambivalence of his involvement in the episodes discussed in this chapter speaks to the multiple ways in which ordinary citizens are caught up in webs of implication. Faye's description of the various departures and returns, halted by borders and roadblocks, maps onto the region's wider scarring of territorial division. Gaby's fraught episodes with vehicles, trying and failing to escape multiple violences, demonstrate that political *impasse* suffered by the region as prolonged effects of empire. The parallel adult perspective throughout the novel augments the picture of complex implication in small- and large-scale violence, by overlaying self-conscious positionality that goes beyond so-called victim or perpetrator roles. In this way the chapter has demonstrated the need to go beyond established categories that dominate scholarship on agency in extreme violence, in order to train our eyes to areas that are central to the ongoing production of systemic injustice.

By shedding light on this period of Great Lakes history, Faye works to counter the three silences around agency, history and geography that Mamdani identifies. This in turn counters representations of Central Africa as the heart of darkness that have in the past led to decades of violent interventions in the name of civilising a primitive chaos. Contesting the political consequences and preconceptions that come as legacies of such outdated images of Africa requires new angles on history, and new vocabulary. Discussions of memory and historical injustice have in large part overlooked implication and implicated subjects, and yet this kind of focus can open up new forms of memory work.⁸² It has been my argument in this chapter that *Petit Pays* provides a new access point on the impure position of a child in this period of violence. Such a focus is necessary for confronting the material and symbolic dimensions of inequality which persist as postcolonial traces in Burundi, Rwanda and beyond. This wider volume takes steps to explore the complex entanglements of other 'lesser-seen' actors, such as those European states who are implicated subjects – historicised through dominant discourses as distant and removed from this period of violence, but embedded in its systemic injustice in multiple ways which are yet to be fully

⁸² Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, p. 57.

acknowledged. What Faye's text does through Gaby's trajectory is demonstrate the ways those countries (Burundi and Rwanda on the one hand, Belgium on France on the other) do not sit in any neat dichotomy of proximity/distance. Implication on trans-African and transnational scales is revealed as the involvement in injustice of these bordered zones is held under scrutiny. Faye's expert conflation of child/adult, past/present, and innocent/guilty is thus extended also to these nations, revealing them to be complexly entangled spaces of postcolonial resonance.