

Transcript

Aarthi Vadde

Hello and welcome to Novel Dialogue, a podcast sponsored by the Society for Novel Studies and produced in partnership with Public Books, an online magazine of arts, ideas and scholarship. I'm one of your hosts, Aarthi Vadde. From the beginning Novel Dialogue has brought novelists and literary critics together to talk about novels from every angle: how we read them, write them, publish them, and remember them.

This season, though, we're highlighting one angle in particular: how we translate them. And we're inviting a series of guests to talk about the role translation plays in their work as a theory and practice. Today I'm thrilled to have Boubacar Boris Diop, and Sarah Quesada joining me to talk about translating African literature for a global audience.

Mr. Diop is best known, to English speaking audiences anyway, for his novel *Murambi: The Book of Bones*, translated from the French by Fiona McLaughlin. This stunning novel, inspired by Mr. Diop's interviews with witnesses takes readers into the 1994 Rwandan genocide through the minds of victims, perpetrators and exiles. The novel is filled with memorable characters trying to make sense of the aftermath of atrocity and the ethics of its representation. Mr. Diop began his career writing fiction in French. But for his last two novels he has switched to writing in Wolof, the most widely spoken language in his home country of Senegal. He has also recently translated Aimé Césaire's *A Season in the Congo* into Wolof. He's won a number of literary prizes, including the Prix Tropiques and in 2022 he was awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature for his body of work. Mr. Diop, we're delighted to have you here, zooming in from Dakar.

Boubacar Boris Diop

Thank you very much for having me.

AV

And I'm equally excited to welcome my colleague Sarah Quesada to the show. Sarah is a professor of Romance Studies at Duke University and her new book will be coming out very shortly from Cambridge UP. It is called *The African Heritage of Latinx and Caribbean Literature*. Sarah regularly works across French and Spanish archives and is the perfect person to guide us through Mr. Diop's multilingual oeuvre.

So, Sarah, welcome, and I pass the mic to you for a conversation that goes from Durham, NC, to Dakar, Senegal.

Sarah Quesada

Thank you, Boris, for making the time. Well Boris, I wanted to start out our conversation by asking you a question related to how you became a fiction writer and perhaps it's not, this journey wasn't necessarily what brought you into becoming a journalist, sorry, a fiction writer, but you did once say to me that in order for an author to write better, enhance their writing one needed to become a journalist. Could you tell us a little bit about why you think this?

BBD

I used to write with my heart instead of writing with my head, with my mind. And that's why I took, when I really started writing, yeah, I needed to learn journalism because you have this density of language, you have this conciseness. You can say a lot with not so much words and that's why I just wanted to go to a school of journalism.

SQ

You know Toni Morrison actually mentioned once that your novel writes with this difficult beauty that that uses journalism to translate the realities of the Rwandan genocide and she says, I quote "*Murambi* verifies my conviction that art alone can handle the consequences of human destruction and translate these consequences into meaning."

So for me, for example, one of the key moments of your novel, Boris, exemplifies this difficult beauty when we enter into the psychology of the genocide's leader. And that's Joseph Karekezi, who happens to be this learned, you know, wealthy doctor, well established, but also one that becomes radicalized into ethnic hate. So would you mind reading this section in which this happens, this development of him and we learn a little bit more about him?

BBD

"Even during the best years, Joseph couldn't stand to see his enemies much wealthier than him. He looked down on them, knowing that in their eyes he was nothing, just a poor devil with impressive diplomas. He suffered a lot because of that. I saw it very clearly. When your father decided to become a powerful man, he knew that he would have blood on his hands. Since President Kayibanda's time, people were always killing Tutsis and then going home to play with their children. Tens dead. Hundreds dead. Thousands dead. They couldn't be bothered to count any more. Little by little it became routine. And your father must have said to himself: 'I'm an important doctor, I'm not going to die like a poor bastard.' Joseph Karekezi was never scared of anything or anyone. Besides, that's what it's like in our family, we're foolhardy. When a man like that decides to do evil, he is more dangerous than all the others."

Thank you.

SQ

Thank you, Boris. I mean that, it's such a powerful moment in the novel, and for me, for example, one of the reasons it's powerful is because, well, one sees how the quotidian develops quickly into the absurd and tragic as you know, this powerful man becomes radicalized by hate and then justifies the mass killing of ethnic communities and then later the annihilation of one's people becomes well expected, almost normalized as if that, too were a quotidian thing.

So, so this absurd and tragic normalization of the strange reminds me of one of the most recognizable styles of Latin American writing, which is, of course, magical realism. So is there a sense of a Latin American quality to your work?

BBD

In my generation, we read a lot about South American literature and we read people like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Vargas Llosa, Ernesto Sábato, my favorite writer, Argentinian, and yeah, but you know, I told you how I become a writer, reading these books when I was 18. And, but there is another part of the story I didn't talk about.

At the same time, in the same house, my mother used to tell us stories. And, you know, in Africa, these stories can't be told during the day. She told the story during the night, so during the day I would be in the library and during the night I was listening to my mother with enthusiasm, with passion. And these stories, they were true magical realism. Of course, this word didn't exist at that time, but what I heard when I was young and I was very, very impressed, I was more impressed by what I heard from the storyteller, from my mother, by what I read in the library and you see, yeah, here it's a kind of anticipation. You see the books, they were in French. But the stories my mother told me, they were in Wolof. So, I was really prepared very, very early to shift from French to Wolof.

SQ

What you're relating is really sort of a lived experience that again precedes this thinking of magical realism as Latin American, when it's in fact finding its roots elsewhere, before. So that's fascinating.

I mean, you also mentioned this aspect of Wolof, the Wolof novel in your work, Boris, and in terms of translation, I wanted to also ask you a question about that transition that you make between writing, because you started out writing your novels in French and then transitioned into writing them in Wolof and your Wolof novels have then been translated perhaps more widely in English than they have been in French. So I wanted to ask you, first of all, why that is, why it is that your Wolof novels are translated more widely into English than they are in French and then also why for you, as one of the most prominent Senegalese writers of our time, why is it important for you to write your novels in Wolof and then have them translated.

BBD

OK, you know, I shift from French to Wolof for many reasons. But one of them, I won't say the most important reason, but one of them, yeah, because I went to Rwanda in 1998 and it was like, I keep, I kept going to Rwanda. In fact, tomorrow I will go to Kigali. So there's a connection between the genocide, my experience of Rwandan genocide and the fact that I decided to write in my mother tongue, which is, which is Wolof. And I wanted to do it for a very long time, but I thought, yeah, I wasn't competent for that. Yeah, it wouldn't work because I read so many books in French and I didn't read so much in Wolof, maybe that's why.

But when I went to Rwanda, I said you know, this happened in Rwanda. The French state, the big player, was involved. And France was involved because of, they wanted to protect, yeah, they don't want Rwanda to become an anglophone country. It was about defending French language. And yeah, my French is, I wrote all my books, all my novels in French, yeah, I feel a kind of disgust, of contempt, and I said I know it will be difficult, maybe it will be even impossible. But I have to try. And I started writing in Wolof. And when I did it, I learned a lot, a lot, a lot about my own writing.

AV

Could you say a little more about the experience of writing in Wolof versus the experience of writing in French and how it feels to become confident in your vernacular language? I don't know if you would consider French or Wolof, both native tongues, if you could talk a little bit more about your relationship to both languages as a writer.

BBD

You know, Senegal is very strange country when it comes to our relationship to France. Our first president wrote, he was a poet and a very good one. He wrote in French. French is the official language here in Senegal. And Léopold Senghor's successor, Abdou Diouf became the boss of Organization internationale de la Francophonie. So, many people they think that in Senegal that everybody speaks French. In fact here, nobody speaks French. Please come here whenever you want, you know we speak Wolof.

So I'm a writer, that's very simple. When you write in French, you write—that's what I discovered when I started writing in Wolof, you write your language you never hear in your daily life. To put it the way I can say, when I start writing in French, I shut the door, I shut the window, and I tell the words of my people, you are not welcome. Don't enter, I don't need you.

So that's why, and now, now, wherever you go in Senegal, people, they speak Wolof. So the difference is that when I arrive in France, I don't hear the words I'm writing. When I write in Wolof, I hear everything, every word.

SQ

So it sounds that for you, writing in Wolof speaks to the true essence of a worldview that would otherwise not be available if you were to write it in French. Am I right to say that, to come to that conclusion?

BBD

[Mmhmm]

SQ

My question then, is it sounds that translation becomes in many ways an ally to a Wolof worldview by virtue of its accessibility, right? And, even to, say, Senegalese living in the diaspora, but my, but on the flip side, what might be lost when your novels in Wolof become translated into what really is a colonial language, whether it's French or English?

BBD

It's very, very difficult to translate from Wolof to French, and the other way round from French to Wolof. I did it with Aimé Césaire's *A Season in the Congo*. But it's much more difficult from, when you try to translate from Wolof in French. When I published *Doomi Golo*, my third Wolof novel, someone in France tried to translate it. A specialist. I was very happy and I was very, very proud. And yeah, he gave me a sample the two first chapters. I'm sorry. It was a disaster. And I asked him to stop. And oh yes, yes, you know, it's too serious. I asked him to stop very, very kindly, but I did it. And I start translating *Doomi Golo* in French. And here in Senegal what people say, there's really, the Wolof novel is much, much,

much, much better than the French translation. But as we all know, there's always something lost in translation.

And last my novel is set in Nigeria, and it's called *Malaanum Lëndëm* in Wolof, yeah, in English it could be a, yeah, "A Story from the Darkness," something like that, malaanum lëndëm. And I'm translating it with a French woman. She's French. She learned Wolof. She knows Wolof very, very well. She speaks it. She read it. Her thesis, it was about the Wolof novel in general, not only my books. And I think it will be a very, very interesting novel.

SQ

So translation doesn't necessarily harm the cosmopolitan, or the worldview that your Wolof novels seek to convey and in fact that they allow your Wolof novels to stand in relation to or in dialogue or even in difference with these novels that you've just described, is that a correct assessment?

BBD

Right. Actually, it is mostly a question of rhythm. Yeah, the French, of rhythm, of rhythm, yeah. French, one of language is very, very, French doesn't like, for example, repetitions. They don't like that. In Wolof, you repeat every time, when you say something you repeat it, again and again. And people, and people, they're used to what you are saying.

That's lost in French. But I tried to, I did my best, yeah, to stick to the Wolof version when I translated *Doomi Golo*. And someone said to me something very, very bizarre, very, very strange. She's an academic from Milan. She knows very well my work. In fact, yeah, I can say modestly that she's a specialist of my work and, she said Boris, *Les Petits de la guenon*, which is the translation of *Doomi Golo*, that's your first African novel.

AV

Do you agree with that assessment?

BBD

Yes, I think I agree. Maybe I shouldn't confess it, but I think it's, yeah. I felt it, in fact. So that's that, it's because I felt it was that it was so striking for me. It was my kind of, a kind of secret. I knew it, but I thought nobody would see this. But it's true.

SQ

And in that regard, I wanted to return to a question that involves both memory and also this translating effect. So in your work, there seems to be a return to sites of memory, sites of memory that are charged with a particular meaning, or what Marianne Hirsch terms like these points of memory that puncture through layers of oblivion or what Pierre Nora terms "lieux de mémoire," right. And we've talked about how your work has been translated into different languages and the politics of translation, et cetera.

But I think that what your work also does, and really effectively, is that it translates the emotionally charged physical places, materiality, into a textual form as if materializing the evanescence of a charged emotional response to visited sites. And in *Murambi*, we see this eagerness of the main protagonist to always return to the memorial grounds, whether it's Kigali, or Murambi, these memorial grounds of the

genocide where the conflict started. So my first question is why do we seek these memory sites? Why is there an eagerness to return to these sites of memory? And second, why is it so important in your work to translate the physical sites of memory, Kigali, Murambi, etc. into the textual? And that's, of course your novel.

BBD

Yeah, it's mainly because they were there. They were everywhere. You know, more than one million people were killed in 3 months. So it was done somewhere. In 60s, in the 70s, you had massacres. That's what my character said in the passage I read. And when there was killings, the Tutsi, they used to go to hide in the churches. And the churches were just safe place.

After the killings, they'd go back home. They were enough lucky to survive. But in 1994 the killers' mindset had changed. This time they say, yeah, it will be the final solution. Like Alison Des Forges put it in one of her books, let no one tell the story.

The first place I went was what they call, you have the sites, that's how they call it in French: les sites du génocide, the sites of the genocide. And it was four years after the genocide, but the bodies were there. There's so many of them, what to do with them? And that's why in my novel, you have Murambi. It's a place where I kept going. I went many, many times to Murambi because I was so shocked. I was so, so impressed. So, and, in fact, they had no time to deal with that. So many, so many dead bodies. But they couldn't even try. But they said no. When these people were killed, nobody even cared. They called for help. Nobody accepted to come, to do something. So we will leave them here. People will come from all over the world. They will see it and that's important.

And now, Rwanda, Kigali, has changed. When I went there, it was an open space. It was an open cemetery. Bodies everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere. Now, you have just like New York. I'm exaggerating a little bit, but it's just like that. You have huge buildings. The city has a new faith. And for me, this change says something. And I tell my Rwandan friends, it's like Rwandan state wants to hide the crime scene.

AV

So, Sarah and Mr. Diop, I want to thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. And this season, Novel Dialogue is asking every writer and translator on the show a question, and we're going to collect the answers for our website. So, Mr. Diop, is there a word or concept that you consider untranslatable or very difficult to translate? I have a feeling you have many to choose from, but what would you like to share with us?

BBD

Very difficult, yes. Untranslatable, I'm not sure, but very, very difficult. And it's the Wolof word "keroog," keroog.

AV

Keroog.

BBD

K-E-R-double O, G. Keroog. And it means, at the same time, yesterday and tomorrow. The past and the future. Even many Wolof speakers are not aware of the particularity of the word. You have something similar “ejo” in Kinyarwanda. It has the same signification, but, but, if you try to translate keroog, as ejo you miss something. Because the way it means yesterday or tomorrow, the past and the future in Wolof, is completely different from the way ejo means means yesterday and tomorrow. And don't even try to translate keroog in English or in Italian, or it will never work. I think--

SQ

There's an imperfect--

BBD

Because it's so linked to the context, yeah.

SQ

I was going to say there's an imperfect equivalent in Spanish which is “ahorita,” which people would think, which is ahorita in Spanish, which is “now”, but with, in a smaller version. I can't, it's untranslatable, but people think it means now, but really it means in the future. It's always very confusing to people.

BBD

It means always now or always in the future.

SQ

Yes, exactly.

BBD

There are sometimes it means now and some of the times it means tomorrow.

AV

Wow, it's such an interesting word in light of the discussions of memory we have had today and thinking too, about in some ways, how we draw distinctions in time, past, present, and future, and maybe when we shouldn't draw those distinctions in time. Do we have a language for that?

Well, thank you for giving us two words that might get us closer to the--

BBD

Thank you very much.

AV

--yeah, to the relationship between present, past and future. So--

BBD

Thank you for having me.

AV

Oh yes, as we approach the end of another Novel Dialogue, we'd like to thank the Society for Novel Studies for its sponsorship, Public Books for its partnership, and acknowledge support from Duke University. Hannah Jorgensen is our production intern and designer, and Connor Hibbard is our sound engineer.

Lookout for episodes featuring Yan Ge, Alia Trabucco Zerán and Ann Goldstein, translator extraordinaire of the Neapolitan novels by Elena Ferrante. So from all of us here at Novel Dialogue. Thanks for listening, and if you liked what you heard, please subscribe on Apple, Spotify or wherever you get your podcasts.