

# MEMORY, MEMOIRS, AND THEATER

ALIOUNE SOW

I have pursued my research on local memory practices and discourses in Mali. It includes an examination of selected public ceremonies, commemorations, celebrations and sites of memory, to understand better the politics of memory that have emerged since the political transition of 1991. More specifically, I have looked at the impact of political changes on the Malian literary field and the resulting distinctive relation between narration, narrative and democratization. There are several axes informing this study, starting with the analyzes of processes of rehabilitation of literary figures such as Fily Dabo Sissoko, Mandy Sidibé and Alkali Kaba, as well as the resurgence of literary forms such as the epic in the public sphere. The second one focuses on recently published memoirs. I investigate these literary forms and practices, which have proliferated since the political transition, as means of challenging the official and institutionalized transitional and truth seeking processes such as the “conférence nationale,” the public trial and prosecution of former dignitaries of the military regime, mechanisms of amnesty granting, and past human rights abuse reports. The aim of the study is to trace and describe the specific conditions and dynamics of the revival of memoirs, to isolate distinctive local literary processes and comment on the configurations, methods and modalities of writing. Emphasizing the religious context in which these texts are situated, the study underlines the singular modes of testimony and confession developed in these narratives.

In addition to my research on memoirs, I have also pursued my work on Malian popular theatre and its relation to the production of discourses on migration. Focusing specifically on testimonial theater, I examine the relationship between theatrical forms, activism and social movements in Bamako. The plays analyzed are varied and include Habib Dembélé's stand up comedies, the production of the international group *Blonba*, and the hybrid genre written and performed by illegal migrants



deported from Europe or North Africa. At issue here are the theater practitioners' engagement with dominant discourses on migration and their attempts to redefine key terms such as “mobility,” to generate alternative meanings of migration, readjust its interpretation to travel and adventure in order to claim new legitimacy. Part of this research was conducted in collaboration with Cécile Canut (Paris-Descartes) who directed the project “Les mots de la direction.” It led to several publications including co-edited special issues of *Les Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* and *Etudes Littéraires Africaines*.

As director of the France Florida Research Institute, I would like to mention the 2015-2016 annual research project, dedicated to science-fiction and climate change funded by the cultural services of the French Embassy in Washington, DC and co-sponsored by the Center for African Studies among other units on campus. The aim of the project “Imagining Climate Change,” organized with Terry Harpold from the English Department, is to bring into conversation French, American and African scientists, science fiction writers, and filmmakers to initiate an interdisciplinary dialogue on the imperatives of climate change, and stimulate scholarship on the topic. The ambition of the project is to emphasize the key role played by

cultural forms in the understanding of local and transnational imaginaries of climate change. Two colloquia brought together science fiction writers such as Jean-Marc Ligny, Nathaniel Rich, Yann Quero, Tobias Buckell, Jeff Vandermeer, scholars such as Christian Chelebourg. Kenyan filmmaker Wanuri Kahiu will also visit UF to present *Pumzi*, and discuss her new animation projects.

*Alioune Sow is associate professor in the Center for African Studies and the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures. He also directs the France-Florida Research Institute.*