

Tracks...
by Penda Diouf
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To Amadou Makhtar Diouf,
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Prologue

Do you remember the dunes? Do you remember the dunes in Namibia? Do you remember the dunes in Namibia and the sand swaying on their slopes? The song of their slopes? The lap of the dunes in Namibia from which grains of sand stream, falling one by one, rolling over themselves. Hastily from vertiginous small of the dune's back, they burn with impatience to roll on the ground, far from their point of origin. A place where they will no longer be seen. Where they will see nothing. Because their eyes have seen everything and their retinas have burned. They sing their lament in a flow as enchanting as it is baleful. A howling dune. It's the lament of the grain of sand roasted in the sun, in the Namibian desert, which rolls, falls, and tumbles. These are the tearless cries of the grains of sand, witness to ancient deaths. Witness to bodies emaciated by thirst, by other continents' forgetting. The grains of sand, felled by the wind, wail their sadness for the bodies caught in the German trap. The slopes cry Big Mama's blues for the dead children. The *Namib* desert, despite the signification of its name, *shield*, wasn't protected well enough. For the first time, the order was given to spare no one. Men, women, and children.

“Within German borders, every Herero, with or without a gun, with or without livestock, will be shot. I will no longer spare neither women nor children; I will drive them back towards their people, or I will shoot them. This is what I have to say to the Herero people.”

*The Great General of the Kaiser, von Trotha,
also known as “the shark”*

Beneath this radiant sun, in this lunar desert landscape, so beautiful it brings me to tears, men are dead. Men are dead. Only the mineral remembers. The grain of sand that tries to flee its reality, its eyes, its senses. It remembers. And escapes. It sings. And when you, tourist, come hurtle down Crazy Dune, frolic on the red sides of Big Mama, surf on her rounded knoll, don't forget the song of the grain of sand. Don't forget the silent cry of the abandonment, sadness, and neglect. This song of the last century that still rings out today.

Seams

I have always been fascinated by marks on the skin. Wrinkles, scars, scarification, tattoos. Marks formed by time, wounds. Those caused by others marking the body, opening it up to the inside. Forcing the skin, penetrating it to form

Cuts Lesions Cavities Crevices Cracks Slits Dents Wounds
Scratches Tears Gulfs Breaches Orifices Holes Gaps

A gap. Two parts that belong to the same body, separated. Like twin gametes. The same tissue, torn in two. Two who were only one before the impact. The violence of impact.

The trauma of impact. The cut digs a well in the heart. A hole. Like the kind dug to bury a dead body. A black hole, like a lost memory. Silence of the mourners.

I like cuts. What they leave in us, what they leave on us. What they say about us.

In war, split life in two, and send each half to one side, to make up. Two pieces of a puzzle that will never really fit back together.

I like the work of sewing. The needle that goes in and out, in, out, in, out, in, out, in a slow, hypnotic movement, like a serpent searching an escape from its destiny who isn't able to help himself, it's even his essence, to bite, and bite, and bite, again and again. Bring two pieces of cloth together, patiently draw the seams that unite them. A work of art to make it discrete, invisible, as if the gulf had never existed. Surgery. A bridge. Bring the separate cloths of history back together, a patchwork sewn with intimacy. And make a flag out of it, a bloody cape to show the world.

CHOOSE A THREAD OF THE SAME COLOR AS THE CLOTH BEING MENDED

Thread

And follow the thread back through time...

I am following my path, my instinct. Sometimes I walk into invisible walls, catch my reflection in funhouse mirrors, get lost in labyrinths, feeling my way towards the exit, blindly caressing the exterior of my prison, pushing the hood off of my eyes. The thread guides me through the darkness.

PASS THE THREAD THROUGH THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

Children's Games

Where did little Penda go? She who nobody still wants to play with? Who's never in the center of games? She shouldn't take up too much space, shouldn't overshadow the heroes. At best, she endures it. Good versus bad. Of course, she's the bad. Or rather, she helps, she serves. The perfect foil. These innocent children's games surely prepared me for my adult life. Always being on the periphery, in the margins. But not showing myself. Certainly not shining. Not shining. The reproduction of oppression starts young. By imitation.

And Mélanie, in preschool. She's different, too. White, of course, but with a speech problem. She leaves class early once a week to go to the speech therapist. She can't pronounce her cousin's first name correctly: Lui, Lui, Lui, Lui, Lui, Lui. Each of us being different, we're on the same playing field, that of the excluded. Even if the cause of my rejection is more visible, heavier to carry than hers because a doctor will soon help her pronounce "Louis" normally and rejoin the group. The clan. As for me, I will continue to advance in the court of miracles.

Carnaval

I'm 5 years old when I discover what blackface is. Politically, it is of course too early for me to have an opinion on the behavior. The preschool party is themed: Africa! Not Mali, not Tunisia, not Ethiopia or Mozambique. But Africa!!

It's the 80s, even if I doubt that attitudes have changed very much since then. If not, I never would have bought an educational sweatshirt that says, "Africa is not a country."

I was looking forward to the day. I thought since I was black, I would be a little celebrated and honored, I would receive special attention that day. My excitement grew.

Two tables were set up to prepare for the show for the parents and the whole school. I hurried to the hairdressing table, already imagining the effect the wig would have on my face. My first wig!

- No, Penda, you have such pretty braids. Why do you want to wear a wig?

I just want to dress up, like everybody else. It's true the wig was very ugly, in retrospect. But I just wanted to look like the others.

No problem, I'm going to compensate with makeup. I wait in line. All my classmates leave with charcoal black makeup spread on their faces, a toothless smile on their lips. Proud of themselves. With their wigs à la Yannick Noah, they looked like real little Negroes. And I waited. I waited to have my face smeared the color of charcoal, to look more like the representation that is made of me and my people. Negroes. And yet again, I wound up being denied.

- But no, Penda, you're already black. Why do you want me to make you up?

I just...want...to be like the others, to get dressed up. I want to have fun, too. I understood that day what I was in others' eyes: a disguise. I was a Carnaval costume, a mask, something you can take off at night, you can wipe off to rediscover your true personality. And your white skin, of course.

That day, everybody danced, laughed, shouted, had fun, and got dressed up. It was a party, a festival. We danced a farandole. I didn't have a costume. I showed up as if naked, with my everyday face, my hair braided by my mom, wearing the red tights everyone wore that day. I showed up the same way I was every day. Holding my solitude with one hand, my strangeness with the other. The dark side of Carnaval gathered me in its arms.

Childhood