A Language of Silence

Lived Experiences of Return among Burundian Returnees in Bujumbura Mairie

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How do Burundian returnees narrate their experiences of violence, displacement, and return, and how is silence constructed within these narratives?

Ma patrie

Le Burundi

Si petit et si joli

Je t'aime de ton mon cœur

Et je t'aimerai toujours

Vive, vive, vive, vive, mon pays le Burundi

Vive, vive, vive, vive, mon pays le Burundi. [1]

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[1] A Burundian song often sung by returnees in exile, Muyinga, 15 August 2024. "My homeland, Burundi, So small and so beautiful, I love you with all my heart, And I will always love you, Long live my country, Burundi, Long live my country, Burundi".

On ne s'habitue pas au mal, mais on sait que quand ça vient, ça passe.[2]

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[2] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025. "We don't get used to the evil, but we know that when it comes, it goes".

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

ABSTRACT

Silence is often described in paradoxical terms, "loud", "heavy", "muted", or "deafening", reflecting its complex and contradictory nature. This dissertation explores the lived experiences and narratives of Burundian returnees, with a focus on the events of 1993 and 2015. Marked by violence, displacement and return, these events serve as points of departure for understanding returnees' interconnected narratives that emerge from realities of political conflict and forced displacement. In particular, it examines how silence is constructed and expressed within these narratives. While expressions of silence vary, returnees' experiences are consistently marked by the space silence occupies and the meaning it holds in relation to how return is perceived and interpreted. Based on short-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Bujumbura, Burundi, in March 2025, this research uses a combination of various qualitative methods, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal meetings and interactions.

In a context where a highly politicised discourse surrounding return converges with a long-standing institutionalised culture of silence, this dissertation argues that silence in Burundi functions as an ambivalent space of negotiation between being silent and being silenced, capable of both upholding and subverting power. Drawing on the notion of historicity, the relationality between the past, present and future, it explores how silence operates as a language through which returnees articulate the complexities of their return. In the end, what emerges is a form of *enlisement* in silence, a sinking into the language of silence that permeates the everyday, as a response to legacies of violence and displacement.

Keywords: *Burundi, returnees, lived experiences, narratives, violence, displacement, return, language of silence, historicity.*

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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In this dissertation, the notions of return and silence stand central. The terms return and returnees are used intentionally throughout this text, instead of comparable and the more institutionalised terms of repatriation and *rapatrié.es*. This choice serves to highlight a distinct social category of Burundians for whom return continues to be a politicised act,[3] following one or multiple experiences of displacement and exile across both space and time, and lasting beyond the moment of their 'homecoming' (Vorrath 2008). In contrast, *rapatrié.es* is often associated with those who have benefited from formal, assisted return by UNHCR, and is closely linked to the broader political and development rhetoric around durable solutions.

I refer to silence to describe discursive absences, inarticulations, or partially articulated expressions in returnees' narratives. This includes not only what is spoken, or what is present in the field, but also that which is absent, silenced, and remains unspoken or unspeakable. According to Murray and Durrheim (2010), this is part of a larger, collective pattern of silence and silencing, embedded within interlocutors' "unspoken and unspeakable historical contexts" (Samuels 2023, 894). Building further on the work of Napolitano (2015), Navaro (2020), and Dragojlovic and Samuels (2021), I follow their call to remain attentive to *traces*, sounds and silence that point to particular histories of everyday life (Napolitano 2015, 49). I approach silence, not as an absence but as a trace, a legacy of past violence and displacement that continues to be actualised in the present.

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[3] I build on existing literature that challenges state-centric, nationalistic discourses, framing return as the cessation of refugeehood, associated with a positive change towards safety, dignity and security (Black and Gent 2006; Black and Koser 1999; Chimni 2004; Crisp and Long 2016). In the context of Burundi, the return of refugees cannot be understood as a solution to cycles of violence and displacement (Tegenbos and Vlassenroot 2018), nor as evidence of sustained peace and stability (Schwartz 2019). On the contrary, return has often coincided with persistent insecurity, as processes of violence and displacement continue to affect those who return 'home'. For more information on discourses surrounding return, and its equation with homecoming, see also Hammond (1999), Long (2013), Macdonald and Porter (2020), and Warner (1994). For more information on the context of displacement and return in Burundi, see also Malkki (1995), Mbazumutima (2023), and Purdeková (2020), and Turner (2005a, 2005b, 2021).

REFLECTING ON SILENCE AND THE FIELD

Situations of violence and displacement are further mobilised in this research to understand how silence operates across temporal dimensions: the past, present, and future. While various interpretations of history and memory in Burundi have been the subject of previous debates and analysis,[4] this dissertation's objective is not to produce an exhaustive inventory of silence and silencing mechanisms, whether repressive or productive. It doesn't seek to attribute responsibility, assign blame or accountability for acts of violence, nor does it presume to do justice to these events. It is not a matter of questioning who was responsible, who was a victim, or whether to defend or dismiss competing versions of the past, nor of establishing a definite historical truth.

As Cohen (2001, 4) notes, in some cases, "the status of 'knowledge' about the truth is not wholly clear", and polarising narratives each establish their own claims and counterclaims to truth (Eastmond and Selimovic 2012). What counts as truth, and to whom, varies across interlocutors and contexts of reality, depending on their position, ethnic affiliation, personal experiences, or political stance. Truth, therefore, is not an objective entity but a *certain* social and historical construction (Foucault 1977). As Fassin (2017) suggests, it is less a matter of recovering *the* truth than of understanding how a certain truth is told and constructed. Even I, myself, have been confused in my search for *a* conception of truth, let alone *the* truth. As Curtis (2019, 5) reminds us, particularly in contexts marked by "structural inequality and political control", such as Burundi, it is important to remain self-reflective about why, how, and for whom we conduct research. He argues that humility must be central to this process, for me to attend to the specificities of context, both spatial and temporal. This research is situated in Bujumbura Mairie during March 2025, and is influenced, not only by the particularities of this time and place, but also by my own positionality and inevitable limitations that characterise it.

This dissertation centres on the lived experiences of return and the silence within these narratives, with the intention of capturing returnees' *emic* perspectives through everyday observations and conversations. These experiences are embedded in a specific point in time and space and informed by the broader social and cultural frameworks in which they came into being. I remain mindful that these narratives are partial and contingent upon what can and cannot be said in a given context, and shaped by dimensions of Burundian society that I, myself, cannot access, perceive or comprehend. The narratives collected and shared with me, and the interpretations I have drawn from them in this small-scale research, are inseparable from my own position in, and my relation to, the field. Following Anthias (2002), I acknowledge that all knowledge is framed in relation to *who and for what*. My own *habitus* and pre-existing perceptual framework inevitably

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[4] See for example Argenti and Schramm (2012), Bigirimana (2021), Chrétien and Dupaquier (2007), Chrétien and Mukuri (2002), Chrétien and Gérard Prunier (1989), Gatugu (2018), Lemarchand (1994), Lemarchand and Martin (1974), Purdeková (2019, 2025), Reyntjens (1994, 2005, 2015), Rugigana (2024), Russell (2019a), and Uvin (1999, 2009).

structure what and how I heard, saw, and understood. This subjectivity has been shaped by, *inter alia*, my analytical choices I used to interpret events and silence, and my personal connection to Burundi, a connection that, although distant, has oriented both my emotions and the way in which I navigated the field.

NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND PSEUDONYMISATION

As Ferrari (2020) writes, we must attend to the multiplicity and opacity of silence. However, researching silence is inherently paradoxical. Speaking about silence can be counterintuitive, and may, in itself, break or even reproduce and perpetuate silence (Sue 2014). Lived experiences of displacement and return, in a context as politicised and volatile as Burundi, particularly during the period of this research, present both moral and ethical challenges, and above all, responsibilities. The use of such narratives requires careful attention to the ways in which these are (re)presented, but also to the protection of interlocutors' anonymity. Many interlocutors expressed unease and apprehension towards this research topic, often conveyed through evasive glances, coded silences, or explicit warnings and references to surveillance and allusions to *La Documentation*, Burundi's National Intelligence Service. Those who agreed to meet me were reached through a process of trust, involving at least one, and at times up to four, intermediaries.

The voices of my interlocutors, featured throughout this research in the form of direct quotations and descriptions of scenes, are drawn from verbatim transcripts of recorded interviews or, where recording was not possible, from detailed field notes, always cited with interlocutors' permission. Through an informed consent letter, either written or oral, each interlocutor was extensively informed about the objectives and procedure of this research, ethical precautions, their right to withdraw, and the opportunity to comment on the research findings. To ensure their confidentiality and anonymity, all personal data has been safely stored, encrypted, and carefully pseudonymised through a non-identifiable coding system. Pseudonyms have been assigned to all interlocutors, and any identifying details have been removed or altered. Audio recordings were deleted immediately after transcription.

To share their experiences, personal opinions and stories most fairly, I chose not to 'polish' their words. Repetitions, hesitations, outdated expressions and vocabulary, and unfinished thoughts were preserved as valuable elements of expression. I have translated all excerpts from conversations and interviews from French to English.

/00. INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

Si nous rêvons de lendemains meilleurs pour notre chère patrie, il nous incombe de redonner son rôle à la Parole.
Une parole citoyenne qui s'exprime sans ambiguïté.[5]

A First Glimpse

Eric, a long-time family friend whom I had never met, but of whom I had heard about for years through my grandparents, who had lived in Bujumbura for over a decade, and through their friends, was waiting for me at the small Melchior Ndadaye airport, holding a cardboard banner with my name written on it in capital letters. He embraced me right away, referring to me as *ma petite-fille*, and quickly ushered me towards his car, worried that I might not support the heat of the midday sun. He spent the rest of that first day with me. Slowly, over the course of the afternoon, driving from the airport to my accommodation, then to an apartment viewing later in the afternoon, to the chaotic Lumitel headquartes on the *Boulevard de l'Uprona*, and later along the flooded shores of the Lake Tanganyika, he began to recollect and share fragments of his life. He spoke of how he had known my grandparents, even sending them a picture of me in the streets of Bujumbura to satisfy their sense of nostalgia, and to reassure them about my safety. He told me he was from a small village and had built his career. He recounted how he had met his wife and spoke proudly about their children, now living in Canada. He described how he divides his time between Brussels and Bujumbura, for health reasons, but also, he added, for safety. He told me how his wife and children had once been forced to flee Burundi and had lived in Belgium without legal status, how a pastor from Liège had helped them. As we drove across the city, his stories unfolded: about the house he now lives in, the ongoing fuel crisis and the decadently rising prices, and the latest M23 attacks in Uvira, driving me to the nearby Congolese border for me to see. Driving along the *poissonerie*, he spoke, too, about the influx of Congolese refugees, *des réfugiés de luxe*, as he called them, noting how they arrived in Bujumbura in 4x4 cars, and stayed in the city's most expensive hotels. Their arrival, and with them, the flow of foreign currency, *devises internationales*, had driven down the value of the franc burundais, *les francs bu*. They even have priority at the *poissonerie*, as in many other shops, he added, because they pay in dollars. Talking about the current state of politics in Burundi, eventually, our conversation turned to its past, and to President Melchior Ndadaye. Ndadaye became Burundi's first democratically elected and first Hutu president to hold office in 1993. In the weeks after his election, Eric said, songs of hope could be heard in the streets of Bujumbura.

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[5] Excerpt from Joseph's published memoir, the source remains intentionally anonymous to protect the author's identity and safety. "If we dream of a better tomorrow for our beloved country, it is up to us to restore the role of speech. A citizen's speech that expresses itself without ambiguity".

Oh! We were once oppressed.

Stand by Ndadaye, so that he does not falter, even at the very source.

His enemies are many, and they lie in wait.[6]

These were not just chants of celebration, but formed part of a collective sense of hope that the promise of change would not be ended before it had the chance to even begin. Before his election, Ndadaye had worked as a bank official. This is a detail I might have overlooked if it had not been for the personal connection in Eric's recollection. His wife, Grâce, had worked alongside Ndadaye at the same bank, and, after his election, had later succeeded him in his post. It was a small detail, almost anecdotal, but one particular moment stayed with me. With a mixture of astonishment and pride, he recounted: "She told him, 'They won't let you live long.' Can you believe that? She dared to say that".[7] He repeated the words, emphasising not so much the content of her words, but the courage it had taken not to remain silent, and to say these words. In what I imagine to be a furtive conversation in the office, or in between hurried meetings, beyond the reach of listening colleagues, a glance over her shoulders, a whispered truth, she had dared to tell him that. Just 102 days after taking office, the inevitable happened: Ndadaye was murdered in a carefully planned assassination.

At first, I smiled at this story, but the more I sat with it, the more I wondered: Why had Eric chosen to share that particular interaction? Was it because Ndadaye had become president? Or was it about something more subtle, written in the unspoken rules of Burundian society? I was reminded of fragments of conversations heard over the years, in and about Burundi, moments that were filled with caution. In Burundi, there are questions one learns not to ask, topics that fall between the lines of the permissible. In a society where words can be dangerous, where memory is highly selective and politically mobilised, and where speech is either constrained by censorship, rumours and fabrications, or shaped by fear of arbitrary detentions and forced disappearances, silence is not simply an absence, but a form of language in itself - *the language of silence*. In this context, perhaps the courage, or audacity, was not in predicting Ndadaye's assassination, but in naming it aloud. This brief interaction defied unspoken codes; it broke a tacit agreement of what can be openly talked about, and what remains unspoken. As such, it opened a window into the layers of silences that are present and coexist within Burundian society.

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[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 2 March 2025.

Research Focus

This research explores the silences within returnees' narratives of violence, displacement, and return, expressions of silence that are intertwined with Burundi's history of political violence and forced displacement. How is silence constructed and expressed in returnees' narratives and lived experiences of return? What can be said, and what is left unsaid? What, then, lies beneath, within and beyond silence? To engage with these questions, we need to situate silence within its larger political, historical, social, and cultural context in which individuals and communities (choose to) remain silent through various practices of silence. This involves confronting a society's taboos, silent refusals, fears and hatreds, imaginaries, and the forbidden; the spaces between what is said and what is not, between the visible and the invisible (Vermylen and Moriceau 2021).

I draw on a range of theoretical notions, including the notion of silence. Moving beyond the dichotomy between being silenced and being silent, whether as a form of repression or resistance, whether from below or from above, this dissertation considers silence as an ambivalence. How is silence constructed and expressed in returnees' narratives and lived experiences of return? Rather than conceiving silence as a fixed position on a continuum between expression and repression, this dissertation argues that silence is inherently relational and continuously negotiated. In the context of Burundi, the highly politicised nature of return and the country's hegemonic culture of silencing, I explore how silence forms a *language of silence* (Donnan and Simpson 2007; Motsemme 2004) in returnees' narratives; how silence itself becomes a powerful form of expression, or language in its own right, through which returnees articulate their experiences. Additionally, I draw on the notion of historicity to emphasise the relationality between the past, present and future (Hirsch and Stewart 2005; Lazar 2014; Stewart 2016; Trouillot 1995). Rather than viewing the past as a fixed and linearly defined historicity, it illustrates culturally specific and mutually reflexive constructions of the past, present, and future. As Hirsch and Stewart (2005, 262) note, historicity concerns "the ongoing social production of accounts of pasts and futures" in present circumstances by those who interpret them. In post-conflict societies, such as Burundi, where official historical narratives are partial, biased, politicised, and influenced by present violence and political interests, historicity provides a lens to understand how returnees navigate the overlapping temporalities and the multiple layers of displacement, return and silence.

This dissertation explores how Burundian returnees, both first- and second-generation,[8] narrate their lived experiences of violence, displacement and return, looking at both the silences that underlie these experiences and the narratives through which they are expressed. It centres on the events of 1993 and 2015, along with subsequent return movements between 2000 and 2012 and, more recently, since 2018. These events serve as points of departure for examining the interconnected narratives of violence and displacement that emerge

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[8] Second-generation returnees refer to children of former refugees who were born in exile. This distinction is particularly relevant in the context of Burundi, as many former refugees returned with children born abroad.

from conflict and political violence. The overarching research question guiding this research is to understand how Burundian returnees narrate their experiences of violence, displacement, and return, and how silence is constructed within these narratives. To address this question, this research focuses on the *language of silence* along three temporal dimensions - past, present, and future. Following this chronological line, the first sub-question focuses on the ways in which silence surrounding past experiences of displacement and return is mobilised and expressed. The second sub-question explores the space silence occupies within these narratives, and the ways in which silence is used to render experiences of return invisible within returnees' present realities. Finally, building on the first two, the third sub-question, looking ahead, examines how these expressions of silence inform returnees' expectations and imaginaries of the future.

<div align="center">*</div>

This is by no means a definitive account of research, but rather serves as an examination, through ethnographic research, of the lived experiences of Burundian returnees. In order to understand and realise what it means to return to Burundi, this dissertation, while exploring how silence is constructed within their narratives, also highlights the difficulties of hearing silence and grasping its layers of expression.

Outline of Chapters

In an attempt to clarify the rationale and direction of this dissertation, I begin by outlining the different chapters of this dissertation. I will first give a brief overview and contextualisation of return to Burundi, setting the stage for the backdrop of this dissertation: the highly politicised nature of return to Burundi (01). This is followed by an outline of the methodological approach used (02). The third chapter presents a review of relevant existing literature, debates and conceptualisations of silence, which form the central framework for this research (03). Based on ethnographic material, the discussion of this dissertation is organised in three distinct temporally structured chapters, each examining the presence of silence in returnees' lived experiences of displacement and return (04, 05, 06). The first chapter of this discussion begins by briefly contextualising Burundi's historical and political landscape, with a particular focus on the events of 1993 and 2015. The objective is not to offer a comprehensive historical account, but rather to highlight important moments that help situate and understand the voices of interlocutors throughout this dissertation. This chapter examines how returnees narrate and make sense of the past, and how silence surrounding past experiences of displacement and return is mobilised and expressed in response to present conditions in Burundi. It addresses differing characterisations of violence associated with these periods, and the competing narratives and counter-narratives that have emerged (04). The second chapter of this discussion explores how silence is constructed and articulated in returnees' narratives of return in the present. It focuses on the space silence occupies within these narratives and how silence is employed to render return invisible (05). Building upon the previous chapters, the third chapter turns its attention to the future, examining how present-day silence in Burundi informs their expectations and imaginaries of the future (06). The final chapter offers concluding reflections, bringing together the main findings of this dissertation, as well as considering the broader implications of silence within lived experiences of displacement and return (07).

/01. (POLITICISED) RETURN TO BURUNDI

POLITICISED RETURN TO BURUNDI

In 1993, the assassination of President Ndadaye and the ensuing violence displaced over 700.000 Burundians. Similarly, the outbreak of violence in 2015, triggered by contested elections and the resulting political crisis, led to a large refugee crisis, forcing 400.000 Burundians into exile (UNHCR 2018). The country's refugee situation has been shaped by a long history of political and ethnic conflict and violence, leading to multiple waves of displacement (e.g. following the events of 1972, 1993 and 2015). Many Burundians were forced to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, such as Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Tanzania. Since the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement (hereafter: Arusha Agreement), and under international initiatives led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (hereafter: UNHCR), Burundi has established a formal policy framework for return, promoting "safety and dignity" in repatriation (Fransen 2017). Notably, between 2002 and 2014, over 600.000 refugees were repatriated to Burundi, and since 2017, 252.149 refugees have returned to the country, with returnees[9] now comprising an estimated 70 per cent of the country's total population (UNHCR 2024, 2025). However, while both Burundian and Tanzanian authorities promote repatriation, the process has become increasingly politicised. The Tanzanian government, under increasing pressure from hosting long-term refugee populations, and determined to put the needs of its own nationals above those of "foreigners", has exerted various forms of pressure, from diplomatic coercion to physical threats of forced repatriation, on Burundians to return. This process was marked by the closure of Tanzania's refugee settlements in 2012. The Burundian government, meanwhile, has strategically framed the return of refugees as a reflection of restored stability and legitimacy in the eyes of the international community. Despite the ongoing political and economic crisis, marked by a continued deterioration in human rights, including increasing instances of arbitrary arrest, forced disappearances, and repression, this instrumentalisation of return persists, driven by respective national and geopolitical interests (CGRA 2025). More recently, the suspension of USAID funding has had large impacts on the tripartite repatriation agreement between Burundi, Tanzania and UNHCR, placing the planned repatriation of 150 Burundian refugees at risk.[10]

As such, in the Burundian context, return is not merely a physical or administrative process; return has become a highly politicised and contested act. As Mencütek (2021) argues, states often mobilise return through governing practices and "strategic narratives" that construct the home country as an imagined "safe zone", a discursive and symbolic space created to encourage repatriation. This political instrumentalisation often serves domestic and geopolitical interests, regardless of actual conditions on the ground. Return is a symbolic and political process of rapprochement between state, community, and citizen - an attempt to reconstitute a disrupted social contract (Long 2013). In addition, returnees themselves have been historically

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[9] Here, the term returnees refers to a broad category that encompasses both self-organised and organised procedures of return, as well as voluntary and involuntary returns.

[10] Conversation with Belgian diplomat, Bujumbura, 8 March 2025.

subjected to political mobilisation. For example, during the electoral campaign for the presidential elections of 1993, President Buyoya appealed and mobilised Hutu refugees in exile to return, to support his candidature. As Prosper, a returnee and now professor, explained with authority and conviction:

> "Here, we have refugees who left in 88 and returned in 92. When former president Buyoya wanted to hold elections in 93, he created a kind of union to form a government of national unity. When he saw the Hutus wanted to participate in the elections, he realised that if he didn't rally the Hutus, he couldn't win. So, he instructed the Hutu dignitaries who were in his government to go out to all the countries, to raise awareness and convince the Hutus in the refugee camps to return. But what he forgot, what he didn't know, was that the majority of these Hutus didn't return because they were happy to come to Burundi [*pauses*]. He was very happy. On television, you could see people returning *en masse*, returning to vote. But those who came back, not for the elections, but for the opportunity to vote for a Hutu. And he thought that those who returned would be very grateful, 'I have brought you out of exile'. That's why he didn't try to steal the elections like the others. He was sure he was going to win. It was only afterwards that he regretted it [*laughs*].[11]

This illustrates how return was manipulated, not to promote reconciliation or integration, but as a tool for electoral gain. Buyoya lost the elections after having wrongly assumed the intentions of those returning. A similar pattern developed around the presidential elections of 2020, with political mobilisation efforts encouraging exiled populations to return, only when doing so aligns with a political party's interests or electoral fever (IRRI 2019). While the very act of displacement is highly politicised, the act of return is even more so. Many have returned to a landscape that has remained fundamentally unchanged: the CNDD-FDD remains in power, political repression persists, and the country's economic situation has only deteriorated. Often entangled in politicised and militarised narratives of exile, their return raises questions about their true motives, intentions and allegiances, as well as the political background of their return (Vorrath 2008). Returnees, particularly those who have been affiliated with opposition groups or particular ethnic factions, whether in Burundi or exile, are often viewed with mistrust and suspicion, both by the state and local communities. As Eastmond and Selimovic (2012) note, the act of return, of "being back", functions as a powerful moral and political claim: a public declaration of belonging that may disrupt or challenge official narratives of inclusion and exclusion.

This politicisation of return became particularly pronounced following the 2015 events, where the act of return itself is perceived as political, and returnees continue to be perceived by the current government as *contestataires*,[12] *opposants*, or even rebels, on the basis of their exile. This stigmatisation is reinforced by official government rhetoric, which regularly uses negative language and frames returnees as opponents to the state; returnees are often met with mistrust, perceived as disloyal, or accused of siding with the opposition. As one interlocutor noted, "Those that left the country, did they return as Burundians, as we

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[11] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025.

[12] Translated as dissidents.

knew them before? It has been difficult for us to reintegrate".[13] This climate of suspicion, from both the state and Burundian communities who never left, not only hinders their reintegration but also limits their political engagement. Fearing surveillance, reprisals, or even physical harm, many deliberately avoid speaking out.

Importantly, returnees do not form a singular, homogenous group. Rather, their experiences of exile and return are shaped by various trajectories and different degrees of politicisation and militarisation during exile. As such, return is embedded in multiple, and often conflicting, narratives and experiences of displacement, affecting not only how returnees are received but also how they are perceived by the state, host communities, and each other.

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[13] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 24 March 2025.

/02. METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

This small-scale ethnographic research on lived experiences of return is based on a short-term fieldwork in Bujumbura, Burundi, in March 2025. Focused on the province of Bujumbura Mairie, for both practical and safety considerations, data collection consisted of a combination of various qualitative methods, alternatively or collectively engaging with participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal meetings and interactions, and imperfectly captured moments and conversations. Interlocutors included returnees who fled Burundi in the aftermath of the events of 1993 and 2015, stayees (those who never left), as well as staff from international organisations and diplomatic missions.

In total, I held informal conversations with at least twenty-three individuals, seven of whom I formally interviewed. Their lived experiences and narratives did not follow a linear or chronological description of events and information. They emerged as constructed, situated, everyday practices of meaning-making, emphasising how returnees, as "experiencing subjects", negotiate and ascribe meaning to their experiences of displacement and return through social relations and cultural repertoires (Sigona 2014). These fragmented and partial recollections of lived experiences, drawn from personal memories and collective discourses, are not "transparent renditions of reality" (Eastmond 2007, 252), but embedded expressions within a more powerful discursive field produced by political, social and cultural processes. As such, the ways in which narratives of exile and displacement are produced, articulated, and circulated can be understood in relation to individual perceptions, cultural repertoires, and the broader social and political contexts in which they are embedded. It also considers how power relations and "socially available and hegemonic discourses and practices" (Anthias 2002, 511) permeate and condition the boundaries of what can be expressed, but also through what remains unsaid or unsayable.

Ethnographic fieldnotes and observations were documented both in a notebook and a digital diary. Semi-structured interviews, which lasted between half an hour to an hour and a half, were, when permitted, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Informal conversations were noted in a field notebook, or, when immediate recording was not practically feasible, reconstructed from memory as soon as possible after the encounter. Additional sources include two written *mémoires* by returnees, offering personal reflections on their experiences of exile and return.

Upon arriving in Bujumbura, I felt completely unprepared for the extent to which the larger collective silence surrounding displacement and return would impact this research. Questions about exile often elicited evasive glances, puzzled silences, or carefully coded responses, reactions which revealed as much as they concealed. The sensitive, but also highly politicised, nature of the topic, and the absence of ethical and government

clearances for this research,[14] made it immediately clear that gaining access to my interlocutors would be much more difficult than anticipated.

"It's Tuesday, late afternoon, when I return to my accommodation after a long, hot day at the office. As usual, a few of the owner's friends are sitting in the lounge area, drinking a beer - every moment seems like the right moment for a beer in Buja, preferably a Primus. I joined the conversation and began sharing some of the difficulties I have been facing in my research. For one of them, as for many others, Burundians, this came as no surprise. She explains that the subject remains highly sensitive because "those who instigated the 2015 conflict are still in power".[15] Unlike in Rwanda, where time and a change in political regime have allowed for a somewhat more open discussion, here, in Burundi, mentioning the topic provokes discomfort. Since my arrival, my research has been met with disapproval, or, at the very least, expectant looks; eyes half-rolling, turning away, followed by a long, heavy silence. It is as if the topic itself resists articulation. Interlocutors regularly ask if I am really a researcher, or perhaps a journalist, or working for the Belgian government. As an interlocutor observed, my only "saving grace" is the colour of my skin, which makes it unlikely that I work for the Burundian government. Emmanuel, a returnee working in the transport sector, and released, less than a week ago, from yet another arbitrary detention at the Prison Centrale, whom I spoke with on Saturday, was more direct. He fled Burundi in 2016, following the 2015 events, after being forcibly disappeared and tortured by the government. He was suspected of being a renowned Tutsi rebel: "Your nose and height are enough to be arrested, that's how you die in this country".[16] At the end of our conversation, he warned me: if I continue like this, it would not be long before I would be questioned by *La Documentation*".

Excerpt from fieldnotes, March 18th, 2025.

I often commented on the level of reluctance and suspicion towards questions about the past, particularly those touching on displacement and return. In response, a friend laughed and corrected me, "*Méfiants? Les Burundais sont extrêmement méfiants*".[17] This was not limited to political or politicised matters. A certain vagueness seemed to permeate everyday interactions, as colleagues repeatedly cautioned me not to believe what Burundians say. Burundians, colleagues told me, are *pudique*, reserved and marked by "a cultural lack of self-confidence",[18] although often framed as humility and modesty; they will conceal their true thoughts and say what they think you want to hear, rather than what they think or feel, especially to outsiders, like me. Gradually, the "complexity of *seeing*" in Burundi (Berckmoes 2014, 26-27) began to unfold. The invisibility described here is marked by a context of profound political instability and opacity.

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[14] This decision was made in accordance with my supervisor, and in line with the guidelines provided to CADES students.

[15] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 18 March 2025.

[16] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 15 March 2025.

[17] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 9 March 2025. "Suspicious? Burundians are *extremely* distrustful". The French word *méfiance* is difficult to translate precisely in English, as it conveys nuances situated between distrustful (i.e. the lack or absence of trust), and suspicious (i.e. a disposition to suspect), implying a more active sense of doubt. Therefore, this research employs the term *méfiance* to suggest a more cultural form of caution to describe returnees' state of guardedness.

[18] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 10 March 2025.

At the time of this research, Burundi was approaching parliamentary elections, set against a backdrop of broader ethnic instrumentalisation across the *sous-région*, armed attacks between the M23 and the *Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo* in the nearby town of Uvira, across the shores of Lake Tanganyika, and the presence of fugitive Congolese soldiers in Bujumbura and fear of the return of *génocidaires*, just a week before my arrival. These conditions, in conjunction with a larger climate of censorship, surveillance, arbitrary arrests, and highly politicised perceptions, displacement trajectories and temporalities, made returnees' experiences increasingly difficult to access.

How then could I overcome this pervasive silence and collect returnees' experiences and narratives? As Rivoal and Salazar (2013, 179) observe, "serendipity has become a convenient notion to point out the very experience of suddenly coming to 'see' something that had previously been out of sight. As such, unexpected encounters *via-via* proved invaluable during my fieldwork. Initial access and interactions with returnees were only possible through trusted Burundians. Over time, I developed three 'networks' of interlocutors, each of whom came from a distinct political and ethnic background, thus allowing access to a broad range of interlocutors differentiated by gender, age, exile experience, and place of reintegration. However, all of my main interlocutors were from relatively similar, higher socioeconomic backgrounds and were part of a larger intellectual segment of society; educated, fluent in French and well-versed in the current state of affairs in the country. This unexpectedly oriented my research towards a wealthier, yet in many ways, more sensitive and politicised community of returnees. Dieudonné works for a local ngo conducting scientific research on returnees and displacement. During my research stay, he invited me to work from their office - a bi- or tri-weekly occasion during which we shared lunches and many conversations on Burundi, the broader geopolitical landscape, the organisation's work, his projects, and my own. Joseph, who works in the academic *milieu*, with a background in anthropology, but no initial connection to my research topic, regularly met me for walks and conversations. He introduced me not only to different parts of Bujumbura but also to its political context, cautious of the requirements or expectations that anthropological research entails. Eric,[19] a retired political figure and long-time family friend, became a familiar point of reference. From helping me sort out my local sim card to presenting me to his friends, he took me on long drives along the shores of Lake Tanganyika and through Bujumbura's neighbourhoods, despite the ongoing fuel crisis, speaking nostalgically of the Burundi of the past and how it has become, recounting political events and personal encounters, and offering his wisdom about the country he was born in, his enduring love for it, and the many hardships it, and he, had faced.

Every day, I would alternatively spend time with these different networks of interlocutors, observing and participating in Bujumbura's daily life, watching, attending, following, engaging, and learning from what others are doing, the events unfolding around them, and their surroundings (Ingold 2014). This allowed me to contrast, complement and re-interpret different information across time and space. Whilst I didn't formally

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[19] Whom I mentioned in the introduction.

interview them, all three had experienced displacement and exile from Burundi at various points in time and can thus be described as returnees (cf. note on terminology, p. 9). After a while, through my engagement with these interlocutors and those within their networks, my own network emerged. Without their facilitation, any attempt to discuss experiences of return would have been discredited and viewed with, even more, suspicion, if not an outright security risk, for those willing to share their experiences with me.

/03. AN ARCHITECTURE OF SILENCE

AN ARCHITECTURE OF SILENCE

> As language always points to its own transcendence in silence, silence always points to its own transcendence, to a speech beyond silence.
>
> Sontag (1967, 15)

The Sound of Silence

A plethora of adjectives and oxymorons reflect the complex, ambivalent relation between silence and voice. Silence can be described through paradoxical terms, "loud", "heavy", "muted", or "deafening". It can be listened to, to the "sound" of silence, and sometimes said to "speak" louder than words. Silence exists on a continuum, from "stilness" to "mutedness" to "deafness", each illustrating the layered forms of expressions within silence. Silence, then, cannot be reduced to the absence of voice, a binary opposition with, or the antithesis of speech. Rather, it is an active communicative process in itself. Silence entails "neither muteness nor mere absence of audible sound" but the presence of non-speech (Dauenhauer 1980, 4, cited in Zerubavel 2006). It exists in the spaces "which otherwise fall between the cracks of official histories" (Navaro 2020, 166). Similarly, Weller argues, "the spoken and the silent are not opposites, not ontologically different from each other. One is not the power to the other one's resistance" (2017). What, then, lies beneath, within and beyond silence? What is silence, and how is it expressed? Drawing on theoretical and ethnographic approaches, this section explores the meanings that silence conveys, the function it serves, and the dynamics of its control.

A growing focus in literature has turned to "the language of suffering" (Donnan and Simpson 2007, 6), and the role of silence, examining how societies live *with* and *through* silence, particularly in the aftermath of political violence. Studies on silence have noted how narratives of violence can be "shrouded" (Dragojlovic 2023, 884), "warped" (Russell 2019b, 63), or "enveloped" in silence, marked by unanswered questions, incomplete sentences, silences between words, evasive glances, and thoughts that are neither expressed nor even articulated (Shohet 2023). These silences may be self-imposed or externally enforced, yet the boundaries between intentional or structural imposition, between being silent and being silenced, often remain vague (Donnan and Simpson 2007; Passerini 2003; Sheriff 2006). This ambiguity lies at the centre of its function. Silence, thus, emerges in the interstices of everyday life, as a site of both power and negotiation (Ferguson 2003; Motsemme 2004) in the space between what is said, not said, and what cannot be said, between speaking and hearing, between what is remembered and what is allowed to be remembered.

Power in Silence, Silence as Power

Silences are embedded in, and given meaning by, complex mechanisms of power at various levels, from the individual to the collective. As Foucault (1978) argues, discourse "can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1978, 101). In the same line, silence and its inherent ambiguity become a modality of power. It can be both productive and repressive, used to exert power and control, to erase, obscure, and limit, but also to create space for contestation and resistance. Silence further determines the conditions of knowledge. As Zerubavel (2006) notes, it not only controls access to information but also determines its circulation and defines the boundaries of what is considered acceptable discourse. In doing so, it also conditions which voices are privileged over others. Spivak's central question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), illustrates how silence is structurally imposed, through practices of censorship or epistemic violence, in which marginalised voices are routinely excluded and silenced by dominant narratives. Here, silence becomes a deliberate instrument of subjugation, a means of the "suffocation of the Other's voice" (Zerubavel 2006, 41). In the Burundian context, Russell (2019b, 9-10) expands this further, arguing that silence is not only a reflection or result of violence, but a central element of power, it "binds together the acts of violence suffered", and as such, "silence *is* power, and a regime of silence is inextricable from the power of the political regime responsible for it". In authoritarian contexts, particularly, state-sanctioned silencing serves to uphold hegemonic discourses and suppress uncomfortable truths through omission, denial, erasure, and repression. According to Sue (2014), these negative expressions of silence simultaneously maintain and reinforce current power structures.

However, silence is not exclusively imposed from above; it can also be adopted, consciously or unconsciously, deliberately or inadvertently, from below. A growing body of post-structuralist, feminist, and anthropological scholarship concerned with the equation of voice with power, emphasises instead that silence itself can function as an act of agency or resistance (Dotson 2011, Selimovic 2020). As Danahay (1991, 66) writes, while silence is often considered "the locus of a counter-hegemonic critical position", to break silence is also to engage with the implicit violence of being silenced or being silent. In post-conflict settings, silence may be employed in pragmatic and strategic ways; silence is not endured but *used* to a certain end. Sheriff's (2000) research on cultural censorship in Brazil highlights how silence, while often used to obscure and sustain power, can also function as a form of power in itself, a strategic adaptation through which subaltern communities navigate dominant structures. Das (2007), in her work on the partition of India and Pakistan in the wake of violence and collective trauma, identifies "zones of silences" surrounding experiences of sexual violence, where silence is used not only as a response to violence but also as a strategy of survival, an alternative form of agency. A similar distinction between deliberate and subconscious silences in women's responses to intimate violence is used in Gammeltoft's (2016) ethnographic research in Vietnam, which views these silences as both a strategically muted voice and a collectively shared form of self-censorship. In postwar Bosnia and Herzegovina, Eastmond and Selimovic (2012) further explore how returnees use silence as a communicative practice in everyday life to navigate

and oppose ethno-nationalist narratives. In turn, Donnan and Simpson (2007), examine the "breaking" of silence, and its transition from private suffering to larger public narratives, looking at subjective experiences of violence among North Irish Protestants' in the 1970s and 1980s, In these cases, silence becomes a form of power, "an agential strategy for coping with a precarious everyday, a form of tacit communication of ambiguity as well as a tool for making claims" (Selimovic 2020, 5).

The Ambivalence of Silence

Building on the above, part of the literature on silence, among the multitude of nuances and perspectives from which silence can be studied, is centred on a dichotomy: being silent and being silenced, whether from below or from above, and whether it is a productive or repressive force. As we reflect more about silence and the expressions it takes in Burundi, this dissertation turns to understanding the question of silence as an ambivalence. How is silence narrated and constructed within returnees' narratives? How is it expressed in their lived experiences of displacement and return? Rather than conceiving silence as a fixed position on a continuum between expression and repression, this dissertation argues that silence is inherently relational and continuously negotiated. As Clair (1998, 162, cited in Selimovic 2020) notes, "silence can be both expression and oppression". Similarly, Dragojlovic (2023, 884) describes silence as "a form of ongoing violence" as well as "a powerful method of resistance in and of itself". In line with this, Ferguson (2003, 63) further writes, "silence as oppressive or resistant power" does not "perform only one of these tasks in only one way". It is precisely this ambiguity, what Dave (2014, 19) captures as the "deliberate polyvalence" of silence, its potential to both uphold or subvert power, that makes it an important space of negotiation. What is important here is that silence can simultaneously be imposed or chosen, from different directions, and to different ends.

In Burundi, the convergence of a politicised discourse of return and a long-standing institutionalised culture of silence makes it particularly difficult to separate these dimensions. Understanding silence here requires attention to its historical, social, political and cultural context. In Burundi, Russell (2019b) speaks of a historical "regime of silence", where the imposition of silence is not only a consequence but a constitutive part of violence, enabled, weaponised, and sustained through euphemisms and silent vocabularies. The use of state censorship of public media outlets, border closures and mobility restrictions has all been used to do violence, and what he further defines as a "denial of knowledge" (Cohen 2001). Curtis (2019) speaks of secret codes and understandings, and *non-dits* as central to understanding Burundi's political history. Through "power as the ability to proceed 'as if not'", Purdeková (2017, 342) discusses public secrets and the politics of silence in relation to public memory and commemoration of the past. Jamar (2022) further examines how transitional justice practices for (post-)colonial violence, illustrating its silent entanglements with colonialism.

While previous literature has explored the country's broader culture of silence, this dissertation focuses specifically on returnees, as a figure who epitomises the presence and implications of silence. To examine how silence is constructed and expressed in returnees' lived experiences, this research departs from a convergence between the highly politicised nature of return, as a contextual stage, and Burundi's established context of hegemonic silencing.

Given this ambivalence, it becomes difficult, even impossible, to determine which dimension of silence comes first, being silenced or being silent. More importantly, establishing a chronological or hierarchical ordering of silences is not the objective of this dissertation. Nor to categorise practices of silencing and strategies to resist or circumvent silence. While they lie beyond the scope of this research, such strategies undoubtedly exist, both within Burundi society and among Burundian returnees. This research does recognise the coexistence of both imposed silences and intentional acts of being silent, along with both their productive and repressive aspects. It also recognises the political dimensions of silence in the context of return to Burundi, even if the nuances of this silence cannot be fully addressed here.

/04. NARRATING THE PAST

NARRATING THE PAST

Au lieu de porter une lumière sur les événements qui ont secoué notre pays, beaucoup ont engagé leur talent à enfouir le plus profondément possible la vérité. Un décrit et l'autre dément, dans un langage aussi sévère l'un que l'autre.[20]

Burundi's violent past has often been recounted through multiple, and sometimes conflicting, discursive labels. In discussions, interlocutors described them as *les évènements*, political crisis, civil war, genocide, *éclatement*, *enflammement*, *affrontements*, *calamités*, *massacres*, and *malentendus*, each linked to distinct temporal thresholds and varying degrees of violence. This lexicon of violence reflects a spectrum of experiences, from political assassinations to episodes of mass violence and genocide (Russell 2019b). Burundi has experienced successive periods of authoritarian rule and repeated episodes of violence since its independence. Among the most cited historical episodes of violence are: the selective genocide of 1972, the 1988 Ntega-Marangara massacres in northern Burundi, the 1993 assassination of President Ndadaye and the ensuing civil war, and the political crisis of 2015. Without going into a detailed history of these conflicts, the following sub-sections present a brief overview of the renewed cycles of conflict in the country, with particular attention to the events of 1993 and 2015, which form the central focus of this research and serve as points of departure for examining returnees' interconnected narratives of displacement and return. This chapter begins with a brief contextualisation of Burundi's historical and political landscape, before exploring returnees' fragmented narratives of the past. Rather than framing returnees' narratives about the past in opposition to the present, drawing on the notion of historicity, this research starts from the relationality between these temporal dimensions: how, through narratives in the present, returnees perceive and make sense of the past. As Lemarchand writes in his discussion of Eastern Congo, "connecting the dots between past and present is nowhere more fraught than where history is a violently contested terrain, where claims to citizenship are heavily determined by ideological constructions, and the tendrils of violence rooted in long-ago events" (2013, 418). This is particularly relevant for returnees in Burundi, for whom the historical events of 1993 and 2015 constitute not only important political and social ruptures but also continued reference points in contemporary discourses around ethnicity, politics, and belonging. In this context, "remembering, then, is as much about the present and the prospects for the future as it is about the actual past" (Eastmond 2016, 21). Following Fisher Onar et al. (2014, 26), I came to see this as a "site of narrative contestation", a space where returnees navigate conflicting understandings of the past, present, and future. In doing so, this chapter addresses how silence surrounding past experiences of violence, displacement, and return is mobilised and expressed in response to present conditions.

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[20] Excerpt from Joseph's published memoir. "How can it be that the same event, occurring in the same place, on the same date, with the same actors and the same victim, has more than three descriptions, two of which are diametrically opposed? One describes and the other denies, both using equally forceful language".

1993: When the Inevitable Happened

"The '93 war took place on 21 October 1993. It was the assassination of Ndadaye, of Melchior. That was Wednesday. I was at school, in a high school in the north called Mokeine, and then the President was assassinated on the 21st of October. Since we were in boarding school, we didn't have a radio. We didn't know what happened. It was Thursday when the teachers picked up several radios, they came to tell us what was going on. And when they came to tell us what it was all about, some of them had already fled. We no longer trusted them".[21]

In 1993, the assassination of President Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi's first democratically elected Hutu leader and head of the Front pour la démocratie du Burundi (FRODEBU), during an attempted military coup marked the beginning of a brutal civil war and widespread acts of ethnic violence. Over the next years, more than 50.000 people were killed, and approximately 1.2 million were displaced (Amnesty 1995). Among them, some 700.000 Burundians, mostly Hutus, fled to neighbouring countries in fear of persecution by the Tutsi-dominated army, notably to Tanzania, due to its relative proximity and history of hosting earlier waves of displacement. Others sought refuge in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda. For the first time, the conflict also gave rise to important internal displacement, with over 250.000 displaced within the country. In response, large-scale militarised zones, or *camps militaires*, were established, predominantly destined for the protection of Tutsi communities. At the same time, Hutu communities were subjected to harsh and often inhumane conditions in various *zones de regroupement*, which forced populations into tightly controlled areas under the pretext of ensuring their safety (Human Rights Watch 2000). These patterns of displacement and encampment reflected and reinforced the broader ethnic and political divisions in the country. Although violence persisted, the signing of the 2000 Arusha Agreement, alongside initiatives such as the 2001 Tripartite Commission between the Burundian and Tanzanian governments and UNHCR, as well as external pressures, including the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the conquest of Zaire and the 1996 First Congo War, as well as reluctance from the Tanzanian government - set in motion a repatriation process. In 2005, following a ceasefire agreement and the establishment of a transitional power-sharing government, Pierre Nkurunziza was democratically elected, symbolising the end of a decade of violence and civil war. However, peace remains elusive. As Daley (2006, 658) notes, the post-conflict period in Burundi was not one of true reconciliation, but characterised as an in-between state of "no peace, no war".

2015: When Everything Ignites

In 2015, fifteen years after Arusha, the fragile equilibrium was again broken. Opposition to Nkurunziza's ambition to win a controversial and unconstitutional third term, seen as a direct violation of the Arusha Agreement's two-term limit, sparked mass political unrest. Contested elections, violent demonstrations and a failed coup d'état led the country into another political and military crisis. The state responded with

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[21] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025.

systematic persecution through enforced silence: independent media sources were shut down, a nationwide curfew imposed, borders closed, and internal movement prohibited (Russell 2019b). Political assassinations went unpunished while opponents, including members of civil society, faced arbitrary arrests, intimidation, and surveillance (Vermylen and Moriceau 2021). Particularly in Bujumbura, severe repression and following a failed military coup, groups of opponents gradually took up arms. Most of the violence remained confined to specific areas of Bujumbura, but hundreds of people died and many fled the capital. As a result, the political crisis more or less reversed a repatriation process that had been ongoing, forcing hundreds of thousands of Burundians into exile, many of whom had already experienced displacement, usually after the violent episodes of the 1970s or 1990s, and having previously returned following the transition process initiated by the Arusha Accords and earlier post-war transition.

The events of 2015 held a strong communicative dimension, in which media, described by Vircoulon (2018) as "l'arme de la communication", became central to the political struggle. As Joseph, during one of our conversations, observed:

> "And even more so in 2015. In any case, our mainstream media have really played a very catalytic role. The situation is normal, but with the information conveyed by certain media, and the local media, with the financial and technical support of these big media, it conveys alarmist information. You may also have studied how rumours are used as... I would say a double-edged sword for those who want to manipulate information. There were too many rumours in 2015 that made people believe that there was... that the apocalypse was really going to descend on us. When in fact nothing was going to happen, and nothing was happening. It was simply fabricated information".[22]

Rumour and propaganda were further emphasised by Innocent, who introduced me to the existence of a prophecy of war circulating online during the 2015 crisis.[23] This prophecy contributed to an atmosphere of fear and panic, and led to the anticipated displacement of many Burundians, acting in response to direct threats, but also to the discursive construction of the crisis, reinforced by fabricated information circulating online.

Fragmented Narratives of the Past

If we are thinking about silence in relation to the past, particularly in the wake of conflict and violence, it is important to highlight the basic ambiguity of any reference to the past and the role silence plays in regard to memory. Silence often coexists with remembering, it shapes what is remembered and what is forgotten, resulting, *inter alia*, from the inability to articulate a violent experience or memory. Here, memory and silence are not opposites, but interconnected processes. Silence intersects with contested narratives and counter-narratives where present and past events compete for legibility, thus creating spaces for silence to

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[22] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 20 March 2025.

[23] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 18 March 2025.

thrive (Hooser et al. 2023). As I have noted above (cf. the ambivalence of silence, p. 31), existing literature has described a culture of silence in Burundian society and how this silence has been politically and institutionally mobilised to different ends. However, this atmosphere of silence cannot be considered as distinctly Burundian, nor as a constitutive cultural characteristic. It needs to be situated in connection with and against a difficult past.

During discussions, interlocutors would often take me through their version of the country's history and the events that led to their exile and return, in response to my general question about their lived experiences: *Could you tell me more about yourself?* Their responses were layered, reflective of their personal positions within these events, but also integrating multi-generational stories of conflict and displacement tied to those of their parents or grandparents, while simultaneously selecting and curating what to include or (un)intentionally leave out. What was left unspoken, and the silences that remained, often explicitly omitted or explained, were as revealing as what was said; which events were mentioned, and which left out, and the varying importance given to these respective events. Throughout my fieldwork, the same historical event was described in contrasting terms, minimised, amplified, denied, or re-framed, as a reflection of the narrator's position, ethnic affiliation, personal experiences, and political orientation. As Ramadhani, a neighbour of Joseph, remarked, "The war, especially in '93, was also linked to ethnicity because it was in the interests of the politicians".[24] Prosper, in turn, noted, "Now we don't talk about the events of '88. We talk about the events of '93 and 2015. But the events of 2015 are superficial. Because in the events of 2015, it wasn't one ethnic group that was chasing the other".[25] In contrast, recounting the events of 2015, Joseph reflected, "I could see that the situation was going to flare up and degenerate into a real political-ethnic crisis, but a very politicised one, even though it was at its basis very ethnic".[26]

These varying inclusions of silence, and subsequently in language, leading to the divergent narratives they produce, notably influence how the past is perceived, but also give rise to conflicting interpretations. The past, in this sense, is not simply recalled; it is curated, narrated, selected, and re-narrated in response to present-day realities. In Burundi, silence appears not merely as the absence of speech, but as an active practice through which violence of the past is acknowledged or denied. It structures how the past is discursively constructed, and fragmented across narratives that are symbolically or politically mobilised, redefined and silenced. Returnees' narratives, through selective recollection and omission of certain dimensions of the past, illustrate what Zerubavel (2006) describes as "conspiracies of silence", tacit agreements about what must remain unspoken and forgotten. Similarly, Trouillot's (1995) concept of "bundles of silence" shows how power shapes both historical narratives and their very articulation.

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[24] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 24 March 2025.

[25] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025.

[26] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 20 March 2025.

Another important observation is the extent to which various characterisations of violence were often clearly located and positioned within the broader discourse of ethnicity. Returnees evoked and discussed ethnicity quite regularly, interpreting past events and present circumstances through their lens, framed from the perspective of either Hutu or Tutsi, constructing a distinct sense of "us" and "them" (Hansen 2020). For instance, Ramadhani noted: "You may see me as a Tutsi man, but I am Hutu",[27] contextualising in a single phrase his experience, his sense of belonging and place. This explicit ethnic reference not only functions as a categorisation but also as a lived experience, informing the opportunities and constraints he faced during his time of exile. However, when specifically discussing his displacement in 1993, he used a more uncertain vocabulary: "So, to flee to the region, to Rwanda, at that time, in 1993, it was the time of Habyarimana. The Tutsis were [silence]...what they would be. They were being abused. It is not so much a question of "closer to Congo, closer to Zaire", but all these questions, I put them into play to decide where I could find my place".[28] Here, in contrast, he avoids naming the genocide directly by using vague references to "the time of Habyarimana" and "The Tutsis were... what they would be". Perhaps, this omission of certain dimensions of the past stems from his reluctance or fear to publicly express his perspective on such violence, too precisely, in a politicised context where every word counts.

Such ethnic subtilities were all around when discussing the past, evident from carefully chosen words, such as, for example, referring to the Rwandan genocide, rather than the genocide of the Tutsis,[29] or in simple expressions and lamentations about the state of Hutu-dominated politics, such as "ce n'était pas notre époque" stated by a Tutsi interlocutor,[30] or when a close friend of Eric, ironically, explained her decision to stay in Burundi by saying "I didn't risk anything because I have a large nose".[31] These words, while filled with ethnic references, in between the lines, do not specifically name ethnic affiliation, reflecting a consistent silence around direct self-identification in relation to the past and questions of violence. This ethnic register has historically been used to delineate "who is in and who is out" (Mathys 2017, 469), while also defining categories of victimhood and culpability, determining who is seen as a victim, perpetrator, or bystander. In addition, the past, and its representations, have been historically, politically, and symbolically manipulated, instrumentalised, and reified as a mechanism of power, for legitimating state action and repression (Akin-Aina 2025; Bigirimana 2021), and even formalised as "institutionalized ethnicity" (Reyntjens 2015), trapping populations "dans ce piège ethniciste" (Banshimiyubusa 2022, 25).[32] Infused in everyday language, ethnicity and its violent pasts are "a history implied, more than told" (Russell 2019b, 63). As observed by Buckley-Zistel (2006), while researching selective remembering in post-genocide Rwanda, what is remembered and what is silenced in interlocutors' narratives of the past appears paradoxical: while past events were constantly, and easily, brought up, some dimensions of the past, such as ethnicity, continue to

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[27] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 24 March 2025.

[28] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 24 March 2025.

[29] Fragment of conversation, Bujumbura, 12 March 2025.

[30] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 12 March 2025. "It is not our time".

[31] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 9 March 2025. "I dont risk anything because I have a large nose".

[32] "In this ethnicist trap".

be veiled, often neglecting to address social divisions, or provide accounts of responsibility or accountability. Rather, returnees' narratives often included simplified and alternative conceptualisations of blame, in which one side has historically turned upon the other. As Prosper recalled: "The Hutus were afraid of the Tutsis, and the Tutsis were afraid of the Hutus".[33]

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[33] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025.

/05. NAVIGATING SILENCE IN THE PRESENT

NAVIGATING SILENCE IN THE PRESENT

Silences were commonly present in returnees' narratives, at times implied, at others explicitly acknowledged. Reflecting on his trajectory through exile, from Burundi to Tanzania, to Rwanda, to Uganda, and finally Cameroon, and his subsequent return, Prosper explained: "Especially for the political authorities, these are subjects they don't want us to discuss. Even we, Burundians, find it difficult to talk about these issues in public". His words and the silence he refers to point to the politicised nature of displacement, and even more, of return. They also illustrate how silence is still very much alive and an important feature of everyday life in Burundi.

This chapter examines how silence is constructed and articulated in returnees' narratives, to withhold and render their experience of return invisible to others. It considers the different ways in which return and the silence that surrounds it continue to permeate and influence how returnees navigate the present. Particular attention is given to the space silence occupies within these narratives, from politically reactive silences to the use of alternative spoken languages. These silences, I argue, emerge from the highly politicised nature of return itself. They act to hide their experiences of return and subsequent status as part of a wider context of silencing, or a culture of silence, transmitted across generations, and governing public space.

Silence, Everywhere

I often felt that there were multiple levels, or layers, of silence woven into returnees' narratives, between what could be said out loud, what could only be implied, expressed in between the lines, and what remained unsayable. When I asked interlocutors about their experiences, time after time, many of them would look away awkwardly, as if to evade the conversation, or glance over their shoulders with suspicion, as if someone might be observing or listening in, questioning who I was. "Are you working for the government?" "Are you a journalist?" However, the silence surrounding displacement was not absolute. While such themes remained impermissible in public settings, in private conversations, some interlocutors, speaking cautiously and often between the lines, shared their stories with me, a non-Burundian, whose "status" as a researcher appeared neutral enough to offer a sense of safety. Prosper explained: "As far as returnees are concerned, we can assume that you can help. For you, it depends on how you explain it. There are those where you will be welcomed very warmly because you want to help. But there are others who will be reluctant. What does she want to do with what she's going to collect? Particularly with the people of 2015".[34]

This sense of *méfiance* was illustrated through various Burundian traditions and Kirundi proverbs that emerged during my fieldwork. After yet another conversation with Joseph, whom I met multiple times a week over the course of these four weeks, he walked me to the exit of his workplace, onto the busy road,

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[34] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025.

something he had repeated at the end of every visit. Curious, and knowing my way out by now, I pointed this out. He explained that it was part of Burundian tradition: *kurenza imitwe y'inzuzi*. This literally means "to walk someone past the tops of the zucchini plants", a gesture of courtesy meant to ensure that a guest leaves one's home safely, but also without wandering off or breaking things. Beyond politeness, this proverb reflects a sense of mistrust, or even fear of the other, that permeates relationships with friends, family, neighbours or colleagues - an almost culturally ingrained sense of *méfiance*. Other Burundian expressions reinforce this *méfiance* and emphasise the importance of remaining silent to prevent nuisances, out of a sense of security. For instance, *uwihoreye ahonga bike,*[35] suggests that silence helps limit one's faults, and *irirenze umunwa riba rirenze impinga,*[36] highlights the power of words, their uncontrollability and repercussions. These expressions reflect a shared principle: in a highly politicised context marked by ethnic divisions and *méfiance*, speech, when not measured, can result in missteps; speaking up and breaking silence can have graver consequences than being and remaining silent. As a result, practices of silence, whether silent or silenced, or the unspoken, thus, appear as a constitutive dimension of returnees' everyday life in Burundi.

Silent Return

A first example of silence surrounding return emerged from my regular conversations with Joseph. Our first meeting was arranged through mutual friends and *connaissances* and took place at the main gate of his office, where he stood, waiting for me under the shade of the tall trees - a brief, welcome reprieve from the heat of the day. As we walked and talked, I introduced the theme of my research, explaining that I was interested in returnees' experiences of return. At first, he paused, and there was complete silence. Quickly, almost immediately, he redirected the conversation, describing himself, simply, as the son of a farmer from a small, remote village. This response felt like an anticipated dismissal, a practised gesture of timidity, as if to say that he had little personal or 'of relevance' to contribute, nothing, in his view, worthy of discussion. Throughout our interactions, I often had the impression of something left out, of something withheld, nervously dancing around the topic. Gradually, and carefully, almost apologetically, he eventually disclosed that he, too, had been displaced in 1993 but returned a few months later due to the unfolding genocide in Rwanda, the country where he had found refuge. He added, however, that he was too young at the time to offer a detailed recollection and instead referred me to a book, a memoir, he had written, recounting his experience. He assured me that all the answers to my questions could be found in its pages. His reference to the text felt like a way of simultaneously closing and opening the conversation. On the one hand, it came across as a form of evasiveness, diverting the conversation from his personal story and redirecting it, instead, to the safety of written words where it could be curated and controlled. On the other hand, it was not a refusal to speak, exactly, but a form of quiet reluctance to talk about it right now, here, out loud. I respected his silence and came to see it as reflective of broader political and social dynamics in Burundi.

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[35] Whatsapp conversation with Joseph, online, 28 March 2025. "He who remains silent limits harm".

[36] *Ibid*. "Once a word passes the lips, it goes further and further, so that it cannot be stopped".

At the end of my stay, we met for one last time in his office, as we often did. He was still visibly nervous about receiving me there, shuffling papers to make space on the dusty desk. This time, I tried, again, to prompt the conversation towards the subject of exile and return. It was then that he told me, almost in passing, that he had also left the country in 2015:

> "But what is most special are the events of 2015, when there had been misunderstandings around presidential mandates, and when I saw that the situation was going to flare up, and at the time, I didn't even have a bias, I was somewhere in the middle of extreme political tendencies. Some people accused you of being on the other side, or those on the other side accused you of being on that side, too. So when things get complicated, you are not immune. In any case, anyone can throw a stone at you, because no one accepts you as their own, because they have never seen you with them at political meetings. That is why I had to decide to leave the country. For 2015, it's a bit different. Besides, hearing that you have fled gives the impression that you were on the side of the troublemakers. That's why I don't say it often enough. Very few people here know it". [37]

Joseph's reflection captures the ongoing vulnerability associated with displacement, particularly in a context where neutrality is seen with suspicion. Even though Joseph was not politically or ethnically opposed to the government and had never participated in the protests against President Nkurunziza's third term, his decision to leave the country came from his absence of political stance in a highly contested political terrain where even perceived impartiality could be interpreted as a negative political alignment with or against both sides.[38] As Berckmoes (2014) points out, everyone is expected to have taken sides over past contestations, and political allegiance is assumed and constantly questioned, particularly for those who left.

Later, I began to evoke the idea of the unspoken and silencing discourses, asking him if there was a form of sensitivity or hesitation around recounting the events of 2015 and his subsequent exile. He paused, visibly reflective:

> **J:** I select, yes. I don't tell everyone. I don't tell everyone, even those who are supposed to be... I don't even have a camp. Because when you take a camp, it is like you're doing... But I also try to avoid telling certain Hutus, because there are some who would start asking you questions. Why did you flee? Whereas here, we stayed to defend our countries".

> **N:** Did you find it easier to share this with Tutsis rather than Hutus?

> **J:** Not really. Perhaps to Tutsis, whom I'm going to dissuade, to show them how the situation frightened me, too. So I'm just saying it to continue to strengthen the bonds of friendship. Otherwise, in any case, the situation was exacerbated by those who insidiously defended the Tutsi cause".

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[37] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 20 March 2025.

[38] In relation to the events of 2015, one could either support the ruling party, CNDD-FDD, or align with the opposition, comprising of political dissents and members of civil society.

Joseph's hesitancy to discuss what happened in 2015 and his subsequent exile are telling. His phrase, *je ne le dis pas à tout le monde*, repeated with insistence, indicates an awareness of the political and social implications attached to disclosing his experience. In order to navigate the current Burundian landscape, he selectively silences his lived experiences of displacement and return, depending on what to expose, to whom, and in what context. He later shared he had considered writing another *témoignage* about the 2015 crisis:

> **J:** I later hoped to write another account of that period, but over time, I became too overwhelmed. When you are hired here, as a young assistant, you end up buried in work, reading all these dissertations you see around us, and others too, as part of the assessment process. You become completely absorbed, even submerged, in tasks that leave no room for freedom.

Where return is often perceived with *méfiance*, his silence appears as politically reactive. As Eastmond and Selimovic (2012, 521) observe, "silence can be a potent form of communication", especially in situations where speech may reignite tensions or lead to exclusion. In this case, by selectively muting his voice and refraining from publishing another book about the events of 2015, he illustrates what Dotson (2011, 244) terms a form of "coerced self-silencing". His silence operates as a form of selective self-censorship, but it cannot simply be reduced to passive obedience to the government's rule, nor read as simply motivated by security concerns to evade state surveillance or repression (Dave 2014). Rather, it reflects how he, and many other returnees, navigate the tension between past experiences of violence and displacement, the prevailing silence that surrounds them, and their everyday lives in the present.

The Language of Return

Another expression of silence emerged in my conversation with Francine, a second-generation returnee. Born in exile in Kigali, and now a professor in Burundi, she spoke of the complexities of her return and integration in Burundi, a place that was, in many ways, foreign to her.

> **N:** Do you perceive a difference between those who stayed in Burundi and those who returned from exile?

> **P:** There certainly are, because we haven't had the same experiences. There are those that we have acquired from the outside world, which is not here in Burundi. And sometimes it's hard to reconcile that. Because, in fact, there is a Burundian culture that is really particular to Burundi. So, we try. We try to be like Burundians. But sometimes things get out of hand. [39]

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[39] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 8 March 2025.

Francine described how her time in Rwanda had influenced her behaviour and language, all of which weren't quite Burundian enough and could signal 'difference' in subtle ways. Despite her *amour du pays*, she explained:

> **P:** For example, if I talk to people who have been to Rwanda, we speak the same language, but not with the same accent. So when we speak, we find out. But for me, in fact, I don't know if it is because I have lived a lot with Burundians that I don't want people to know. Sometimes people say to me, "You speak a bit of Kinyarwanda", but I wouldn't want people to know, unless I told them. We try our best not to show them.

Her words reveal how difference is perceived in Burundi, hence, linguistically concealed in everyday interactions in Burundi. This implies that silence, here, operates not only through what is left unsaid but also through intentional acts of self-representation; by adapting her language, she tries to appear more Burundian. Accents, intonations, vocabulary, and expressions all become spaces of negotiation between what is kept silent and made legible to others, in her case, between belonging and exclusion. Although Kirundi and Kinyarwanda are mutually understandable, her decision to avoid using Kinyarwanda reflects a conscious, strategic effort of silence, to control outside perceptions or judgments, and to avoid drawing attention to her exile and (ethnic) background. She continued: "Because, when I speak, born in Kigali, refugee, directly, you can know my ethnicity. You can know who I am. So, if you have any grudges or someone who has hurt you, then I still have problems".

Even the ways in which words were formulated, literally, linguistic choices, were consciously controlled, measured, and limited. This linguistic silence becomes a form of protective silence, a way of silencing linguistic cues that might expose her identity, her past, and her exile to others, and the subsequent implications this would entail. As Ferguson (2003, 49) states, language serves as "both the instrument by which humans interact and the means of constructing what it means to be human". Francine's silence about her experience of exile and return is expressed through the literal absence of language, the absence of Kinyarwanda, as a way to navigate a politicised landscape of return and deal with imposed expectations of what it means to be Burundian. Her practice of silence is not only personal but also affected and coded by collective histories of violence, displacement, and ethnic tensions, illustrating how past experiences of displacement continue to be navigated in the present.

/06. IMAGINING THE FUTURE

IMAGINING THE FUTURE

This previous chapter has explored how expressions of silence are translated into returnees' narratives and continuously (re)negotiated within the social and political fabric of present-day Bujumbura. It has traced different ways in which returnees employ silence to render their experiences of return invisible, whether as an intrinsic part of language and linguistic handling, or as a politically reactive and politicised practice. Building upon the previous two chapters, this chapter turns to expressions of silence, examining how, among returnees, present-day silence in Burundi informs their expectations and imaginaries of the future. It draws, again, on the notion of historicity to explore how returnees navigate the coexistence of multiple, entangled temporalities, and how, through narratives in the present, returnees construct visions, imaginaries and expectations, or, at times, the lack thereof, regarding the future.

Interlocutors frequently highlighted the ambiguity surrounding the 2015 events, debating and questioning whether 2015 constituted the beginning of a new crisis or if it was 'simply' a continuation of the previous civil war that began in 1993. In the same line, when reflecting on the current situation in Burundi, whether the present *status quo* is, in turn, a continuation of the 2015 crisis or if it represents a new rupture in and of itself.

During one of my regular visits to the ngo,[40] Dieudonné invited me to his office to discuss the evolution of my research. As our conversation shifted from his personal experience of displacement in 1993 to the broader political landscape, he remarked, "socio-economic problems have been overlooked when the guns have stopped",[41] pointing to the aftermath of the 1993 events and the structural challenges that remain. Discussing the 2015 events, he suggested that "all theories of return could be seen at work in 2015", emerging through the intersection of physical, economic and social pressures. He described how the crisis was manipulated by political elites, instrumentalising religious narratives, what he termed "divine warlords and elites", referring to the divine justification of the extension of presidential power after Nkurunziza's second mandate. Ten years after the events of 2015, he insists that what followed was not a transformation, but a continuation of the crisis, through political oppression and repression. "It has morphed from a caterpillar to a butterfly", he said, but the situation has not changed. Through this metaphor, he illustrates how a semblance of stability is maintained in present-day Burundi, an "imposed calm",[42] achieved through tight governmental control over practices and language. Today, political opposition is suppressed, civil society is restricted, both domestically and abroad, and displacement, notably, the recent influx of Congolese refugees and Tanzania's "war" against Burundian refugees, is instrumentalised for political ends, within a larger logic of control and silence. Reflecting on what lies ahead, he asserted that "going is better than staying, even if there is no war".

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[40] The name remains intentionally anonymous to protect interlocutors' identity and safety.

[41] Fragment from conversation, Bujumbura, 19 March 2025.

[42] *Ibid.*

Similarly, Joseph discussed the implications of the events of 2015:

> "What happened in 2015, especially, showed us how protests had been *maqués* without mercy. That's perhaps why, today, the population appears much more docile than before. I believe that in the current circumstances, with such widespread precarity everywhere across the city, people would, under normal conditions, have organised themselves to say, "No, we've had enough". But now, everyone has become...".[43]

Despite deteriorating living conditions, public opposition and opinion are remarkably absent. According to Joseph, this silence, or docility, is not an indication of political satisfaction, but rather reflects a sense of fear and sheer exhaustion. He points to the paradox at the centre of this silence, whereas under normal conditions, such precarious conditions would lead to mobilisation among Burundians, today, as a result of a lasting legacy of state repression of the 2015 protests, where dissent was violently muted, much of the population, including himself remains silent. The cost of speaking out has become too high. In this context, silence is expressed as a form of quiet disengagement from public and political life. As such, anticipative silence for the future reflects a situated response to the historical and structural landscape of repression and fear, in which speaking out is not only futile but has also become dangerous.

This retreat into silence was further palpable in discussions about perceptions of the future. The upcoming 2027 presidential elections are often met with resignation. Interlocutors consistently, almost consensually, express a sense of indifference or silent resignation, especially as political change is unlikely. Given how hard it has become to go about everyday life, how can one be concerned with the upcoming elections? And if there is so little hope of change, why even bother? As Joseph illustrates, it is better to remain silent. This anticipative silence is not apathy, or something that is only imposed from above; rather, it is a learned response to violence and a cultivated form of caution that defines this silence from below: the fear of history repeating itself.

This is also present, not just in relation to the domestic context, but also extends to the *sous-région*. Speaking about the growing instability in the region, particularly the resurgence of conflict in the DRC, Burundi's rapprochement with South Africa, and South Africa's uneasy relations with Rwanda, Propser, resigned, noted: "No, it doesn't scare us. We don't get used to the evil, but we know that when it comes, it goes. If it kills you, it does. That's the way it is, that's the climate we live in here".[44] This, almost fatalistic, acceptance of "the climate we live in here" captures an everyday reality marked by both resignation and a persistent, normalised sense of uncertainty. Sugar has become a luxury and a scarce good, fuel is almost absent. When available, access to it often requires either illegal transactions on the black market or queuing for hours or

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[43] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 20 March 2025.

[44] Personal interview, Bujumbura, 13 March 2025.

even days at a time, where one must decide between getting fuel and earning an income. While no recent armed attacks have occurred alongside Burundi's borders, Burundi's deployment of forces in the DRC, failed negotiations to reopen the Nemba-Gasenyi border crossing between Burundi and Rwanda, and, above all, the resurgence of ethnic discourse,[45] further contribute to a thick atmosphere of uncertainty about what tomorrow may hold. This condition of uncertainty, related to the convergence of various events and forces, was expressed by interlocutors through phrases such as "the boat is sinking, maybe it's time to jump", "*ça va chauffer*",[46] or "it's the calm before the storm".[47]

Over time, this state of constant uncertainty and alert has become a defining feature of life in Burundi. For many, it is not a question of *if* something will happen, but *when*. Whether over regional instability, the revival of ethnic discourse, or deteriorating living conditions, this resignation results in a pervasive state of uncertainty that permeates everyday life. It informs expectations and imaginaries of the future, not only through uncertainty but through an absence of perspective, characterised by fatigue and fear. What begins as a sense of anticipation, of future violence, renewed displacement, or growing instability, gradually transforms into a form of resignation, articulated through silence. This results in a silent disengagement that is imposed and internalised. On the one hand, it is conditioned by state repression and the implicit threat of future violence. On the other hand, it is a pragmatic and learned response, a form of caution adopted by interlocutors, shaped by their past experiences of violence and displacement, to navigate this highly politicised and volatile environment, thus internalised. In the end, what emerges is a form of *enlisement* in silence,[48] a sinking into the language of silence, both in the present and in relation to the future, as a response to legacies of violence and displacement.

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[45] A revival of ethnic discourse among the population was mentioned by almost all interlocutors.

[46] Translated to "things are about to heat up".

[47] Excerpts from fieldnotes, Bujumbura, 10, 11, 21 March 2025.

[48] *Enlisement* is a term that is difficult to translate precisely to English, as there is not exact equivalent. It evokes a sense of becoming bogged down, of being caught in a state of stagnation, or of sinking into.

/07. ENDNOTE

ENDNOTE

This dissertation has illustrated the centrality of silence within returnees' narratives of violence, displacement and return, and the space this silence occupies within their lived experiences. Moving beyond a binary opposition between being silent and being silenced, it situates silence as ambivalent, inherently relational and continuously negotiated. It asks: How is silence narrated and constructed within returnees' narratives? How is it expressed in their lived experiences of displacement and return? Building on the notion of a *language of silence* (Donnan and Simpson 2007; Motsemme 2004), it argues that silence functions as a form of expression, through which returnees articulate the complexities of their return. Silence is neither peripheral nor abstract; it occupies space and holds meaning over how return is experienced and understood. In doing so, this dissertation positions silence surrounding return as a language in its own right.

Returnees' multiple and layered expressions of silence across overlapping temporalities highlight how silence carries traces of the past, is actualised and navigated in the present, and is anticipated in relation to an uncertain future. It becomes a way to live through and within interconnected histories of violence, displacement, and return. While expressions of silence differ, it continues to permeate returnees' lives in Burundi. As I hope to have shown throughout this dissertation, silence is not only political. It emerges simultaneously as an active, situated response rooted in legacies of violence and displacement. In the end, what emerges is a state of *enlisement* in silence,[49] a sinking into the language of silence that becomes part of everyday life and return in Burundi.

Through this language of silence, this dissertation contributes to broader debates around return migration, silence and violence. It invites further reflection on how silence can be conceptualised, not as the opposite of voice, but as a more relational and ambivalent form of expression. It raises further questions on how to understand silence in contexts marked by repression and fear, where speaking may be impossible, dangerous, or undesirable. How can we understand silence itself as a form of everyday violence?

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[49] *Enlisement* is a term that is difficult to translate precisely to English, as there is not exact equivalent. It evokes a sense of becoming bogged down, of being caught in a state of stagnation, or of sinking into.

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