

**Enduring Memory: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in West African Literature**

*Enduring Memory: The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade in West African Literature* investigates the means by which West African authors represent the legacy of the slave trade on African shores. The literary production of Ghana and Nigeria has been extensively examined in terms of its responses to the oral tradition, its representation of gender inequalities, modernity, and governance, and in particular, its depiction of the colonial period. However, many scholars who have considered West Africa's representation of the slave trade in literature have declared a kind of amnesia regarding the entire period and its memorialization. Achille Mbembe, in his article "African Modes of Self-Writing" (2002), claims, "there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery." Likewise, other critics claim that the memory of the era of the slave trade has been erased by African scholars such as Ali Mazrui in a sort of "colonial parenthesis" which denies the more violent episodes in the history of West Africa in favor of an essentialized, mythical African past.

*Enduring Memory* argues, instead, that West African authors describe the continuing suffering inflicted by the slave trade, not through overt forms of narrative history, but through metaphors, tropes, and other formal elements which indicate both the fragmented nature of the memory and the realistic ways in which people recall and experience those memories. The memory of the slave trade is *revealed*, not *shrouded*, in metaphor, as it is subject to long term transmission and is therefore more mnemonic than narrativized. Depictions of the slave trade thus disclose the unique locations in which temporally distant and seemingly forgotten events are assigned to memory. I argue that it is this particularity of expression which enables West African authors to avoid the false dichotomies which underlie the assumptions of those who would claim that the slave trade is invisible in West African culture. They refute the opposition of memory and amnesia, witness and silence, representation and unutterability, collective and individual memory.

This study intervenes in "black Atlantic" studies by focusing attention on specifically African representations of the legacy of loss and suffering which resulted from the slave trade. It thereby contributes to our greater understanding of trans-Atlantic culture. When we shift our focus to African modes of expression, we discover decidedly different forms of representation and memory from those produced by African American and diaspora writers and scholars. The centrality of the slave ship, so crucial to Paul Gilroy's work, for instance, is diminished. Those African people who were "left behind" take the center-stage as opposed to those who became the children of the diaspora. As a result of such a shift in contextual perspective, an entirely different system of metaphors, tropes, and images come to the fore, expanding our knowledge of the memories produced by the slave trade and contributing to our understanding of Black Atlantic discourse.

In the first two chapters, I discuss the debate regarding amnesia in West Africa and explore the possibility of remembering, and indeed representing, a past after hundreds of years. My contention is that any investigation into the memory of the trade must seek out what Rosalind Shaw describes as "forms of remembering different from those of verbally discursive admissions and projects of public memory." Though poststructuralist critics, such as Cathy Caruth and Elaine Scarry, have focused on the impossibility of representing certain forms of pain, torture, and trauma, I argue that the endurance of slave trade memory in West African fiction reveals the means by which Africans have preserved their own memories of the trade and encourages an investment in locating a language with which to describe this traumatic and distant past. These representations refuse a hegemonic, singular narrativization of the slave trade, thereby legitimizing the variety of linguistic forms that memory takes.

In the chapters on Tutuola and Ben Okri, I trace the way in which Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri imbue the landscape of Nigeria with the memory of enslavement. Both authors represent the way the memory of the trade continues to haunt the imagination of West Africa as evidenced by fears of captivity and enslavement in the landscape of the bush. I argue in my chapter on Amos Tutuola, for instance, that *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* reinvigorates a centuries-old African trope I call “the body in the bag” to depict continental continuities of memory and fear regarding the slave trade’s endemic presence in the African landscape. In my chapter on *The Famished Road*, I discuss Okri’s reinterpretation of Tutuola’s body in the bag, which undermines the project of global capitalism and redefines modernity in uniquely West African terms. For Okri, the bush can be transformed into the tool of the captive, wherein he subverts the power of the slave captor to invent a personal independence, one that parallels the newly formed independence of the state of Nigeria.

In the next two chapters, I discuss the slave trade as it is expressed through depictions of the commodification of human lives. In Armah’s *Fragments*, the protagonist’s return to Ghana is marred by his lack of resources and his inability to provide for his family, which he implicitly and explicitly links with the expectations previous generations had of the slave trade. As a result, each time he remembers the trade, he falls into an undiagnosable illness, which forces him to vomit profusely, figuratively purging himself of this dis-ease and releasing himself from these bodily memories. My reading of Armah contends that his exploration of slave trade memory requires a renegotiation of our Eurocentric understanding of “trauma” and its metaphorical, physical, and psychological expression over long durations. In Aidoo’s works, the memory of the slave trade surfaces as an unbridgeable division between men and women which exists because the memory of the trade continues to mark the body as a commodity to be exchanged and discarded. In both her play *Anowa* and her novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, human intimacy is thwarted by the insurmountable memory of the denigration of the value of human life. I argue that Ama Ata Aidoo creates, as a response, a “grammar of intimacy” that might transcend the uniquely oppressive nature of slavery’s legacy on African bodies.

In the final section, I pair Chinua Achebe’s novels, *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* with the more recent writing of Nigerian author Obi Akwani, whose novel *March of Ages* is a contemporary response to Achebe’s depiction of the slave trade. I read his work as a new iteration of the African historical novel emerging in 21<sup>st</sup> century West African fiction. The novel indicates a refusal of the metaphorical means by which Achebe and the other authors in this study represent the memory of the trade. Thereby, Akwani ushers in a revival of the African historical novel and an attempt to address overtly the repercussions of the slave trade in contemporary society.

Throughout the study, I concentrate on the contributions each author makes to the critical discourse surrounding the slave trade by investigating the unique literary devices each develops to depict the way this era of violence persists in the West African memoryscape. In my conclusion, I question whether these representations can provide a cathartic effect on the long term trauma that these authors explore in their texts. I discuss whether literature can provide a truth and reconciliation which has not otherwise occurred. I explore the ethical implications of these metaphorical representations of the slave trade, and argue that new literature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to produce an answer to the problem of representation that faces the majority of the authors in this study.