



BOOK FORUM

Continuous Pasts: Memory, History, Literature¹

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Sakiru Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* provides a fascinating reading of African post-conflict fictions dealing with twentieth century traumatic events in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone. Adebayo manages to bring together extensive theories from memory and trauma studies, postcolonial studies, and literary criticism to illuminate the complex artistic commitments to traumatic memory by contemporary African writers. There are four literary texts at the analytical heart of Adebayo's book: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* (2010), Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* (2007), and Veronique Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* (2000). All four texts were published in the first decade of the twenty-first century but deal with traumatic events that occurred in the twentieth century and their legacies thereof. Adebayo's discussion of these works together offers a remarkable comparative understanding of not only the centrality of traumatic memory in contemporary African writings but also the commitments of African writers since the dawn of the new century to twentieth century traumatic histories. Hence *Continuous Pasts* contributes to our understanding, first, of the significance of traumatic memory in African literatures since the twentieth century, and secondly, the ways that contemporary African writers have been narrativizing postcolonial traumatic histories.

In making these observations about postcolonial African literary turns to traumatic memory, Adebayo argues for an acknowledgment of African writings of the kind as "post-conflict fictions of memory" (16). He reads the four selected texts of the study as exemplars of the post-conflict African fiction of memory and argues that such fictional works have become a cultural vector for the past to

¹ This review was first presented as part of a book symposium panel, "Author Meets Readers: Engaging *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa*," during the Lagos Studies Association International Conference, June 20–24, 2023.

continue shaping the present and that they provide imaginative possibilities for a collective African memory or what he describes as a remembering together that gives impetus for a transnational African memory framework. Yet *Continuous Pasts* does not offer a clearer understanding of its African transnational memory framework and why such a framework matters. For example, it is unclear from the book how different works dealing with different traumatic histories in different African contexts can be understood as mobilizing a collective transnational African memory. What exactly is this transnational memory constituted of/by, and to what end? When one reads together such mid-twentieth-century African fiction as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Ferdinand Oyono's *The Old Man and the Medal*, Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*, Ousmane Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood*, among others as serving to produce a collective memory of shared colonial experiences and struggles in Africa, there could be little doubt about such a claim, especially as the anticolonial projects of such works seem manifestly tied to the times of their writing and publication. In the context of so-called postcolonial Africa that is the focus of *Continuous Pasts*, Adebayo does not exactly elaborate on how we can understand, for example, Biafra War memories chronicled in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and the traumatic memories of the Sierra Leone Civil War narrativized in Forná's *The Memory of Love* as a collective African memory (of what, exactly?). *Continuous Pasts* is also unclear on why a continental or a pan-African collective memory project is necessary, what cultural, political, and other work such collective memory project is doing or expected to do in the present dispensation and whether or not such a project is plausible and usable. As a consequence of these gaps, *Continuous Pasts* seems rather best understood as an awareness-raising book about the incidences of traumatic memory in contemporary African writing.

In Chapter 1, Adebayo discusses Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a postmemory fiction because the writer was born after the traumatic events of Biafra and because, according to Adebayo, the novel derives essentially from traumatic memories Adichie collected from her family members. This chapter, to me, is a bit of an outlier to the rest of the book not least because the novel deals directly with life during the traumatic event of concern unlike the other three discussed books which deal with life in the aftermath of traumatic events. The chapter also stood out as odd in relation to the rest of the book because Adebayo made pronouncements about the novel based largely on interviews Adichie gave years after the novel was published and so tended to gloss the story of the novel. For one, Adebayo's reading of *Half of a Yellow Sun* as postmemory fiction seems a bit stretched. While it is the fact that Adichie was born seven years after the Biafran War and so presents as a good candidate for an exegesis of the theory of postmemory, her novel does not, in fact, deal crucially with a postmemorial situation in relation to Biafra. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the trauma of Biafra is experienced by those who lived through it directly. All the characters are situated within the historical context of the violence and not after it. There are no characters in the novel who can be described as a second-generation trauma subject. The novel, I will contend, instead, seems rather invested in the Biafran survivor trauma and memory than in second-generation postmemory.

But beside this stretch of the postmemory framework in relation to Adichie's novel, what seems of more consequence is that this first chapter manages to weaken the thesis of the book by positioning Adichie's novel as a caution against the employment of traumatic memory. The chapter does this by reading *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a catalyst for violence in twenty-first century Nigeria. For example, as Adebayo writes near the end of the chapter, "We have seen Biafra secessionist movements spring up in the years following the release of *Half of a Yellow Sun* (ethnic tensions became remarkably fiercer after the publication of Chinua Achebe's *There Was a Country* in 2012)" (45). A little subsequently, Adebayo concludes, "Of course, Adichie does not necessarily have personal ties with [Biafra secessionist groups] and may not even buy into their politics, but *Half of a Yellow Sun*, among other recent stories on Biafra, has directly or indirectly sustained and aggravated conversations—and agitations—about the secession of Biafra" (45). Besides what I consider in Adebayo's statements here to be a fiction of inference—that is, that somehow Adichie's novel and others must have fuelled recent Biafra secessionism in Nigeria (even though Adebayo does not bother to explain how a novel could do that and why Biafra writings of the 1980s and 1990s, for example, did not provoke such secessionist sentiments)—what I did not understand is why the caution against writing Biafra traumatic memory that Adebayo advocates in this section of the book is necessary and useful considering that only in this chapter in relation to *Half of a Yellow Sun* was such caution advanced in the book even though earlier in the introductory section of *Continuous Pasts* Adebayo has suggested that traumatic memory in Africa and elsewhere serves importantly to trouble official histories and enforced silence and amnesia in postcolonial Africa. If the work of traumatic memory is indeed to trouble official history, or, as Adebayo puts it, "[to act] as a solid ground for the subversion of [enforced] political silences and the negotiation of traumatic memories" (*Continuous Pasts* 117), then why should it be expected to be convenient or peaceful, to say the least? Even more crucial, Adebayo does not clarify what exactly in the story of *Half of a Yellow Sun* "has directly or indirectly sustained and aggravated conversations—and agitations—about the secession of Biafra" or how the novel serves to produce "frictions of [Biafra] memory" in Nigeria's national and/or other memories of that past.

In Chapter 2, Adebayo provides a compelling analysis of traumatic silence and memory in Forna's *The Memory of Love*. I think that a signal contribution of this chapter is the way it problematizes what Adebayo describes as a Western approach to trauma therapy based on speech and testimony. Adebayo shows that in *The Memory of Love* some traumatized characters prefer silence and other approaches to therapy that do not align with the logic of Western psychotherapy. In the context of Forna's novel, according to Adebayo, silence can be a mechanism for testimony and therapy as well as a strategic tool of distancing oneself from taking responsibility for complicity in violence. Adebayo's reading of traumatic silence in *The Memory of Love* echoes a certain critique of postcolonial trauma studies evincing the multiple histories and understandings of trauma in literature.

Yet, given Adebayo's incisive disquisition on traumatic silence to critique the emergent memory practice of psychotherapy, one is surprised that Adebayo does

not elaborate on the frictions of silence in Forna's novel and deploy it further to trouble the extant assumptions of certain contemporary transitional justice regimes that insist traumatic memory can be restorative, and that traumatic testimony and storytelling are viable sources of truth, healing, and reconciliation. If we are to understand, as Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts* suggests, that African writers invested in the project of traumatic memory are doing so against the oblivion of historical silence and amnesia, how are we then to understand the utility of silence that, as this chapter claims, has been privileged in Forna's novel? Where do we place *The Memory of Love* in the genre of what Adebayo has called post-conflict fiction of memory? It appears there was a missed opportunity in this chapter to explore the project of traumatic memory beyond the political project of healing and restoration. While Adebayo's reading of Forna's novel helps one to interrogate the popular assumptions of memory practice as necessarily about witness/testimony and healing, especially in postcolonial African contexts, the chapter does not offer a path for how one can understand traumatic silence beyond its enlistment to critique the practice of psychotherapy and traumatic speechmaking/storytelling.

Chapters 3 and 4 of *Continuous Pasts* deal with the complex transnational dimensions of African traumatic memories. Chapter 3 discusses Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*. The chapter maps the haunting affects of traumatic memories of violent conflict in Ethiopian refugee subjects in the American diaspora. These traumatic memories, according to Adebayo, provide a shared sense of a traumatic memory community with traumatic subjects elsewhere. Similarly, Chapter 4 discusses Tadjó's *The Shadow of Imana* as a transnational African attempt to memorialize the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda. As Adebayo would have it, this transnational approach encourages the emergence of a multidirectional memory of postcolonial African conflicts. These two chapters are convincing in highlighting the mobilities of African traumatic memories and in showing that violence in African countries cannot be fully understood if they are discursively territorialized. The chapters provide insights into the deterritorialized nature of violence in Africa's postcolony as well as the transnational proportions of traumatic memories as depicted in Mengestu's and Tadjó's works. The chapters illuminate crucially the African writers' dalliance with traumatic memory as artistic projects enacted as a duty to posterity. The chapters offer a timely and much-needed framework for thinking violence in postcolonial Africa transnationally based on African travels and migrations.

There are two crucial points about Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts* that I would like to highlight. The first concerns what I consider as the book's important contribution to our understanding of postcolonial African fiction of memory as a work of mourning for the millions of Africans crushed unjustly by indescribable violence. In this intellectual contribution, *Continuous Pasts* offers us a prism with which to appreciate some contemporary African writing as a project of mourning and inventory of "our" shared traumatic pasts and presents. As Adebayo incisively puts it in the introduction to *Continuous Pasts*, "post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa [...] are works of mourning precisely because they participate (and invite others to participate) in coming to terms with, and thinking through, the atrocities of the past in order to better understand the present and imagine

the future” (16). In other words, *Continuous Pasts* invites us to read postcolonial African fictions of memory as a funerary stele upon which millions of African victims of atrocities are rehumanized, dignified as subjects of history, and artistically mourned. The goal of such artistic projects, to put it in the words of a soothsayer in Veronique Tadjó's *The Shadow of Imana*, is to appease the traumatized ghosts of Africa's histories and pray them “to agree to give the living another chance.”²

My second point concerns what I consider as a fetish of memory in Adebayo's book. And by “fetish of memory,” I mean that *Continuous Pasts* tends to overread memory in African fiction (if by “overread” one understands the book to loosely conflate the *past* with *memory* with *history*) and by so doing Adebayo under-theorizes its engagement with African traumatic memory. I make this point because I think the book does not clearly theorize memory to allow for a better understanding of the relationships between *history* and *memory*, and for an understanding of where *history* begins and ends and where *memory* begins and ends. What is the difference, for example, between what Adebayo calls “fiction of memory” and the more established genre of historical fiction? Some of the points Adebayo made for fiction of memory seems already taken up in the discourse on historical fiction, especially those often categorized as postmodern/postcolonial historical fiction. The point is generally that historical fiction of the kind serves to challenge official state/colonial histories. It serves, as Richard Slotkin astutely puts it, to “explore those alternative possibilities for belief, action, and political change, unrealized by history, which existed in the past” in order to “restore as *imaginable possibilities*, the ideas, movements, and values defeated or discarded in the struggles that produced the modern” dispensation, while also serving to “produce a *counter-myth*, to play into and against the prevailing myths” of the present.³ Adebayo advances a similar argument for the fiction of memory. Yet one quarrel one might pick with *Continuous Pasts* is that it does not elucidate the prevailing myths and histories that have given vent to the counter-myths of the memorial projects of the works it discusses nor does it explain clearly how one can understand history and memory together as related yet distinct concepts.

In addition, *Continuous Pasts* dwelt on the macrodynamics or larger pictures of traumatic memory and as such left more to be desired in terms of the nuances and microdynamics of its subject. To briefly illustrate what I mean by the nuances and microdynamics of traumatic memory, let us consider an instance of negotiating with the traumatic memory of the Biafran War in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Near the end of the novel just after the war, Odenigbo and Olanna facing the Nigerian government's attempts to destroy the memory of Biafra have to negotiate their traumatic investments in Biafra. Odenigbo's approach is to hide the objects of his Biafra memory and preserve them for posterity as memorabilia, perhaps memorabilia that in the future can function to destabilize the Nigerian government's official history of that violent past. Olanna, on the

² Véronique Tadjó, *The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda*, trans. Véronique Wakerley, 2000 (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2015), 44.

³ Richard Slotkin, “Fiction for the Purposes of History,” *Rethinking History* 9.2–3 (2005): 231. Emphasis in original.

other hand, burns her Biafra collectibles. When Odenigbo accuses her of burning Biafra memory, Olanna retorts that she would rather keep her memory in her mind than in objects that could be seized by the government. Here, we are presented with two attitudes to traumatic memory, one memorabilic and object-oriented, the other psychic and personalized. At the same time, these two attitudes to traumatic memory are presented in the novel as gendered: the former masculine and the latter feminine. I missed these kinds of microdynamic nuances of traumatic memory and gender, for example, in *Continuous Pasts*. Considering that three of the four texts discussed in the book are written by African women, I believe that *Continuous Pasts* would have benefitted with more attention to gender and other thematic and identarian dynamics vis-à-vis traumatic memory in Africa. Perhaps this might be a project for the future, after all, as the book's title suggests, nothing is ever finished—the past and present do continue into the future.

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