




BOOK FORUM

Sakiru Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts* and the Challenge of Postcolonizing Memory Studies: Three Musings

Chijioke K. Onah 

Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA
Email: cko34@cornell.edu

Abstract

This article offers three musings on Sakiru Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa*, focusing specifically on the challenges and prospects of centering African histories, cultures, and epistemologies in mainstream memory studies. Through a reading of *Continuous Pasts*, the article contests the marginality of African and Afrodiasporic memory cultures in memory studies, and makes a case for the affordances of “ancestral memory” in articulating a uniquely African and global Black diasporic memory practice.

Keywords: African memory studies; Intranational memory framework; African transnational memory (ATM); future-oriented memory studies; ancestral memory

The first time I met Sakiru Adebayo was in 2018, when I was still a Master's student at the Goethe University of Frankfurt, Frankfurt, Germany, and Dr. Adebayo was working on his Ph.D. at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa. The conference, held at the University of Stellenbosch, Stellenbosch, South Africa, gathered many memory studies scholars across the world today to reflect on the aftermaths of traumatic histories in South Africa and globally. We would later become friends and intellectual companions primarily due to our involvement in Memory Studies Association. This story is important, not less because it shows how personal Sakiru Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts* is to me, but also because it offers insights into the book's intellectual trajectory and forebears that might not be familiar to many African and postcolonial scholars who work outside the Euro-American dominated field

of memory studies and identify with Memory Studies Association. Though I agree with Adebayo's argument that "Africanists have always been doing memory work, although they might have used vocabularies, methodological tools, and theoretical approaches different from the ones already established within mainstream memory studies," what remains an ugly truth is that Africa—and Africans, especially Black Africans—remains marginal in memory studies as a field and in Memory Studies Association, as a community. Interestingly, and as my little anecdote might have enunciated, it is in and through this association that Adebayo's book is born and is most strongly in conversation.

It is therefore understandable that I am elated to see this book in print, which within mainstream Memory Studies Association, is, as much as I know, the first monograph on African memory studies done by a Black African. Again, while nonmembers of MSA might not appreciate the implications of these stories, these are the worldliness of the book through which the book and its arguments should be situated and understood. It is in that context—and in our shared multiple intellectual affiliations, that I share with you Adebayo's critical intervention in African literary memory studies, which capaciously intersects various fields such as memory studies, postcolonial studies, and African literature. Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts* explores the problematics of memory in Africa, and how memory regimes are contested, circulated, and represented in post-conflict African fiction.

Given these shared intellectual orientations and in the spirit of celebration of Adebayo's outstanding book, I want to share with you my three musings on the *Continuous Pasts*, with a specific focus on memory studies hoping that they provoke some thoughts and questions about the challenges and prospects of centering African histories, cultures, and epistemologies in mainstream memory studies, as Adebayo's book has done. I will do that through three major conceptual and theoretical frameworks, which seem to be the most enduring ideas in the book: (1) African transnational memory (ATM) framework, (2) ancestral memories, and (3) future-oriented memory studies.

I. African transnational memory framework

Perhaps the most expansive idea in Adebayo's book is his concept of the ATM framework through which he argues that post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa provide the tools "for imagining and theorizing a collective African memory," thus offering us several "imaginative possibilities and template for how post-independence African countries can 'remember together'" (7). If the colonial enterprise could be understood as "... an attempt to destroy and wipe out a people's memory," perhaps the anti-colonial project and the work of decolonization, could be articulated as a struggle over reclaiming a people's memory. One can argue then, and I think Adebayo's book would agree, that the crisis of nation-state in postcolonial Africa is, to a large extent, a crisis of memory. As Nigeria's recent elections show, Nigeria is a country haunted by its pasts, its memories—or lack of it—by its "open wounds of history." More than fifty-years

after the brutal Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–1970), Nigeria, as Adebayo posits, is, in a sense, “still at war.” I make this point not simply to show the importance of Adebayo’s book in framing and envisioning Africa’s present and future, but to extend those stakes at this critical time in Africa. I ask, for example, whether an ATM framework is enough, or whether it needs to be supplemented. I do agree with Adebayo’s point that “postcolonial African memory works need to be more attuned to the transnationality of memory in all its modes,” especially given the potentialities of an ATM framework to enhance “our understanding of the connected histories, shared presents, and common futures of African nation-states” (12). The rich potential of an ATM framework is clear. But even if for the sake of polemics, I do wonder about the idea of what I might call an *intranational memory framework* given the ongoing crisis of various nation-states on the continent.

Intranational memory framework seems relevant in our contemporary moment because it seems to me that while Adebayo’s book demonstrates the potentialities of an agonistic memory culture on the continental/transnational level, his book, at the same time, gestures toward how the same texts he studied elicited more of antagonistic memory discourse within the nation-state as the Adichie’s case exemplified. In other words, even when a text such as Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* gestures toward ATM solidarity, Adebayo claims that they also deepened the ethnic and sectional divide in Nigeria. I kept wondering to what extent an ATM framework will help us, given that what is tearing the continent apart currently seems to be more of an intranational memory crisis than a continental one. In other words, apart from looking for a shared transnational African memory ancestry, as Adebayo suggests, what would a shared intra-Nigerian memory of Biafra look like? Is a transnational memory frame simply an easy way of caring for the pebbles in our regional neighbor’s eyes—nationally speaking—while ignoring the plank threatening to gulf out ours?

2. Future-oriented memory studies

My second reflection is on the idea of a future-oriented study of African post-colonial memory. Adebayo argues that his exploration of the post-conflict situation in postcolonial Africa in *Continuous Pasts* “gestures toward futurity,” and posits that “studies and stories about Africa’s tumultuous pasts need to be more future-oriented.” According to him:

Africa’s histories of violence need to be studied in a way that is forward-looking and taught in a way that opens up conversations on how patterns of violence can be disrupted. The memory of the future and the future of memory need to take the primal place in the study of the past in—and on—Africa.... (120)

What Adebayo is asking of us is not just novel; as every memory studies scholar will agree, it is also a challenge, especially at a time when different theorists are

questioning the field's ethical commitment, given that simply remembering a past, contrary to what is always thought, does not always necessarily prevent its repetition. Future-oriented memory studies approach, therefore, sounds exciting and would be an important contribution to the field. This is something I longed to see worked out. What would a future-oriented approach to memory studies look like? I guess Adebayo shows an example when he briefly explores how the "continuous presence of the past, coupled with lingering injustices in the present" portrays a kind of a postcolonial African future "that is under siege." But will such an analysis count as future-oriented memory studies? Or it is rather in how the various texts, according to Adebayo, "depict individuals struggling to embrace the promise of a livable future?" Or in the novelists' own hope that their works "will open up conversations about, and possibilities for, a reparative future?" (4). A future-oriented approach, it seems to me, articulates and envisions a future in which postcolonial Africa's "problem of an arrested future" (120) gives way to a livable and just future in which the various structures of violence are dismantled and the continent's "crying wounds" are healed. While I am enchanted by such a prospect, I am interested in foregrounding the stakes of memory studies in general and African memory studies discourses in particular in articulating such a future. It is the challenge that Adebayo leaves us with—and one that I hope that he expands on soon.

3. Ancestral memory

For my third musing on Adebayo's book, let me end with the beginning, both in veneration for, and with a nod to, our ancestors.

At the end of Chapter 1, which primarily engages with the implication of Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory in a postcolonial context, Adebayo briefly offers two provocations. The first is pretty straightforward, which is that Hirsch's postmemory is inadequate in a postcolonial context because it is incapable of articulating the uniquely "concatenated" and "cumulative" nature of memory in the postcolony. Which is to say, memory in the African postcolonial context is hardly as individuated as Hirsch's concept seems to suggest, as what might appear to be the personal memories of many of the characters in the texts—or even an individual historical event—may not be unconnected to broader histories such as slavery, colonialism, and recent civil wars on the continent. In a short paragraph, Adebayo suggests that concatenated memory might be a better way to capture the complex layering of memory in a postcolonial context. This is to say, as he makes clear in the conclusion, that "memory in the postcolony could be thought of as not simply the memory of a single event but also as an interconnected chain of events" (124).

His second provocation got me more excited. In another short paragraph, he offers his second provocation, which was inspired by his engagements with Chimamanda Adichie's interviews following her publication of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adebayo offers that "in provincializing postmemory and in refashioning it for postcolonial contexts, maybe we could think critically about the idea of ancestral memories" (46). I agree that we should—and I claim that you did. But

what could ancestral memory mean, and what would constitute it? Adebayo gestures toward some framing in a rather poetic paragraph. Permit me to quote at length:

Ancestral memory, I imagine, transcends the psychoanalytic framings of archaic inheritances. It includes but also transcends the domains of genetic; it is in the bequeathing of feelings, phantom sensations, and tacit knowledge to a succeeding generation. It is in the mystical and covert incorporeal bestowals that precede an individual's birth. It invokes a transcendental—if not esoteric—language of ancestors and is in the return of ancestral voices crying out in the wilderness of justice. It is in the weight of our ancestors' traumas that we bear and in the amorphous yet definitive "memory contracts" that bind us to our progenitors. It is in the things we know but never learned and in the things we learned that opened us to the vast morphology of the unknown. It is our ancestors' losses visited upon us and their experiences relived in the central nervous systems of our memories. It is the push-and-pull factor of cultural epigenetics. It is also the return of strangely familiar ghosts of deep history as well as the in-body and out-of-body reappearance of long-repressed and latent progenitorial experiences. Our ancestral memories are in the things that know us; they are our embodiment of our ancestors' footprints. They are the memories (broadly defined) that are transferred, sometimes unfathomably, from distant and dead progenitors to the living. (46)

Given that this rather poetic rendition comes as the penultimate paragraph at the end of Chapter 1, one can make the mistake of thinking that this idea is secondary to Adebayo—maybe it is, but I see its copious footprint everywhere in the first chapter, and subtly throughout the book—starting from when it was first introduced to us in the introductory chapter. I am attracted to this concept of ancestral memory as a postcolonial African—or dare I say global Black diasporic—memory practice. Whether it is in the slave writing tradition, or in Toni Morrison's oeuvre, or in the broad array of texts that Yogita Goyal recently articulates as neo-slave narratives;¹ one can speculate on the affordances of ancestral memory for global Black memory culture. In retrospect, having read your book and the array of African literary canon that you curate, one can even hazard to say that these are texts *in search of the ancestors*. After all, you conceptualized postcolonial memory work as "being with the dead (an idea that resonates with your earlier works on trauma and memory in Africa):

... the question of memory in the postcolony is a question of the continual presence of the dead. Postcolonial memory is a marker of the oscillating tension between summoning the dead and laying them to rest." (10)

¹ Goyal, Yogita. *Runaway Genres: The Global Afterlives of Slavery*. New York University Press, 2016.

Postcolonial narrative is a narrative of mourning, Adebayo continues, and the post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa are engaged in *wake work*. Wake work—that perfect connection to Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake*² that connotes the global Black affordances of your ancestral memory that I have been musing on.

OK. Here is my dream with this fascinating idea; given its far-reaching implications and given its affordances for articulating a postcolonial memory work. What would it have looked like if your book started with those two brief paragraphs at the end of Chapter 1? To put it directly, what if we started with the provocations on postmemory rather than end with them? And, this is not to regret the very process that offers us that idea, given how canonical Hirsch’s theory is in memory studies—but to foreground the idea and let us think about its broader implications for the book and for the field of memory studies.

For example, I ended the book thinking that, perhaps the two provocations are not unconnected. If the post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa often presents the entanglement of familial and national histories, thus necessitating this concatenated memory framework, an ancestral memory frame already explodes the personal and gestures toward the collective—that is, the national and even transnational. After all, “the story of a life enmeshed in violence is the story of the nation,” Adebayo offers, per Veenas Das. Thus, we can see the affordances of the ancestral memory in Adichie’s vicarious witnessing in Chapter 1, or in the “vicarious responsibility” of Elias Cole’s conscientious daughter in Chapter 2, as well as in the Pan-African memory game in Chapter 3, or in the esthetics of witnessing in Chapter 4. Of course, I am in dalliance with your conclusion that the clearest point brought to bear by the four texts and the chapters in the book “is how the past remains an unfinished business—and how that informs the continued negotiation of the meaning of post-conflict nationhood in Africa” (118), but I do wonder if that memory or the crisis that birthed it, can be thought of outside of the broad conceptualization of the ancestral that you offer us. In other words, what would this book look like if conceptualized and framed through the prism of what you called the ancestral memory?

Perhaps if we think of ancestral memory in the voice of Thula Nangi’s grandmother in Imbolo Mbue’s latest novel—*How Beautiful We Were*—or in Saidiya Hartman’s travelog, *Lose Your Mother*; or in the Afrofuturistic *Black Panther* and *Wakanda Forever*. Or, if we think of the theoretical valences of ancestral memory in Adebayo’s own book—and how it seems to be a common thread even in most of his previous works, or in the idea of the complex pluralities of violence that breeds concatenated memories? Or if we think of the specters of the dead in the global Black Atlantic exemplified by Christina Sharpe’s work of mourning in *In the Wake*; perhaps we may not only see that a postcolonial African or global Black ancestral memory is already a concatenated memory. But more importantly, perhaps we can raise a toast to Sakiru Adebayo and his book that offers us this idea—and be able to say to him in the voice of my own late grandmother—*oꝝo bja, oꝝo bjakwama*: may more come, and may we gather soon to celebrate even more ideas from you.

² Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke University Press, 2016.

Author biography. Chijioke K. Onah is a PhD candidate in the Literatures in English Department at Cornell University. He specializes in African and African Diaspora Literature and Environmental Humanities. His publications have appeared in journals such as *ASAP/J*, *Matatu: Journal for African Culture and Society*, *African Literature Today*, and *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry*. He recently co-edited a special issue of *Matatu* journal on Civic Dissent and Violence in Nigerian Literature, Films, and Media. He is also currently editing a special issue of *The Global South* journal focused on the toxic ecologies of the Global South.

Cite this article: Onah, Chijioke K. 2024. "Sakiru Adebayo's *Continuous Pasts* and the Challenge of Postcolonizing Memory Studies: Three Musings." *The Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2024.5>