



BOOK FORUM

Continuous Pasts: A Review

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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.
Sakiru Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*¹

Sakiru Adebayo's thought-provoking intervention *Continuous Pasts. Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* starts with an powerful contention:² Memory as a public practice is in crisis on the continent.³ The following analysis of Africa's postcolonial memories takes this crisis of remembering as its point of departure to investigate how cultural productions –literary fictions of a canonical standing— not only engage with this perceived crisis but also have something to say about the role of memory in post-conflict contexts. In what follows, Adebayo excavates “how memory has (or has not) been instrumentalized for nation-building” and “examine[s] various memory politics, economies and frictions in post-conflict situations across Africa.”⁴ *Continuous Pasts* thus claims a spot at the intersection of Memory Studies and African Studies—a conceptual, contextual and thematic move that was long overdue. It will hopefully put Memory Studies, with all its shortcomings and potentials, firmly on the map in African Studies. Memory Studies as a relatively nascent field is indeed oftentimes preoccupied with “master narratives of memory” that do not speak and relate to African experiences.⁵

¹ S. Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* (University of Michigan Press, 2023), 46.

² See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*.

³ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 2.

⁴ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 2.

⁵ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 3.

This book offers a way of re-conceptualizing the many pasts of and on the African continent, by way of probing and putting to the test influential theories of memory that were developed in other contexts—more on this issue a little further down the line.

Adebayo curates a corpus of literary texts that engage with four distinct “post-conflict situations” on the African continent: Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ethiopia, and Rwanda.⁶ The author argues that these examples showcase the breadth and variety of tensions, conflicts and modes of violence that continue to exert their influence on the many African presents. They offer cases in point to study the entangled relation between colonial, anticolonial and postcolonial memories and politics, and how they can be mined for imagining possible futures. As Adebayo argues, “victims and survivors of political violence in the postcolony are often unable to aspire a desirable future because of the overbearing weight of the past and the ungraspable nature of the present.”⁷ The mandate to speak up about this burden of the past is relegated to literary fiction, to the novels of Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Dinaw Mengestu, Aminatta Forna, and Véronique Tadjo. The “duty to remember” as a collective endeavor rests with these authors, as Adebayo argues, because they write their stories with a view to an “African transnational memory project” that understands Africa as a “community of memory”, colonial as well as postcolonial.⁸

Continuous Pasts hence identifies African master narratives, in the ambiguous and ambivalent sense of the word: There are narratives that are imposed by specific memory politics—colonial memory politics as well as situations in which memory is used as a form of governing, e.g. in the Rwandan or South African context as cases of transitional justice.⁹ Adebayo shows how these narratives displace and silence others, but are also used as formative frameworks which invite reimagination of the plethora of African pasts with a view to their usability in and for the present. African pasts, the author argues, are usable, for better or for worse.

This study makes the case for the idea that literary texts hold the potential of critically reevaluating the continuities of Africa’s many pasts, in the form of shedding light on how colonial pasts continue to shape the present, how they stifle other memory regimes (precolonial memories come to mind), but also how certain memories are withheld, suppressed, not talked about in order to navigate the present. More often than not, these conflicts originate in colonial oppression and/or are the result of continued colonial intrusion. But they are also more than that, as Adebayo argues: They are examples of how literary texts take on the role

⁶ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 3.

⁷ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 4.

⁸ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 99.

⁹ For further reading on the notion of governmentability through memory, see e.g. M. Burton, “Custodians of Memory: South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” *International Journal of Legal Information* 32, no. 2 (2004): 417–25; R. Shaw, “Memory Frictions: Localizing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Sierra Leone,” *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 1, no. 2 (2007), 183–207; K. Antweiler, *Memorialising the Holocaust in human rights museums*, 1st ed. (De Gruyter, 2023); L. David, *The Past Cannot Heal Us: The Dangers of Mandating Memory in the Name of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

of putting notions of counter-memory¹⁰ to hegemonic memory structures onto the public map, as they serve as alternative sites of memory which operate outside the confines of what is sayable, and what is governmentable. This ability to counter what has gained status and recognition is the unique power of literature, it is the “agency of the aesthetic” that is centrally involved in forming and representing memory (politics).¹¹ Through his close readings, Adebayo effectively conceptualizes distinct forms as well as recognizable patterns of memories that circulate transnationally across Africa, and *Continuous Pasts* understands African transnational memory as “regional memory work that speaks to the ways collective memory in post-conflict African societies is produced and circulated.”¹² The memory work that the fictional texts undertake is thus on the one hand a form of “writing back” to the colonial powers, but also “writing back” to oneself, to the diverse African mnemonic communities in order to reorient the remembering gaze toward the future, and to “open up conversations on how patterns of violence can be disrupted.”¹³

Thus conceived, I understand *Continuous Pasts* as engaging in dialogue with other thinkers who have described a reorientation of the African novelistic project: In his thought-provoking study, Ewan Mwangi Maina looks at literary texts from the African continent which “further depart from the tradition of ‘writing back’ to the European colonial center by focusing their gaze on local forms of oppression that are seen to parallel classical colonialism.”¹⁴ He elaborates how “resistance to the West may be seen to reside more potently in the texts disregard or demotion of the West as the categorical and ineluctable point of reference in the presentation and self-fashioning of the Global South.”¹⁵ Mwangi’s study brings together literary perspectives of “writing back to themselves and other local contexts addressing emerging realities and to express the growing diversity of identities in Africa.”¹⁶ In a similar vein, Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ’s collaborative project “Rethinking the Global South” is not primarily interested in

sublimat[ing] or ignor[ing] the West—far from it. Indeed the West—simply because of colonialism and globalization—is a huge part of the dialogue. The goal is to be in relation with the West as with everyone else. Following Glissant, [...] there are other ways of knowing and relating. And that these other ways of knowing and relating have always been there—that is to say, they are historical and at the same time ongoing, and to ignore them is to approach the world with one intellectual hand tied behind our backs. [...]

¹⁰ M. Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Cornell University Press, 1977).

¹¹ A. Rigney, “Remaking Memory and the Agency of the Aesthetic,” *Memory Studies* 14, no. 1 (2021), 10–23.

¹² See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 13.

¹³ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 120.

¹⁴ E. M. Mwangi, *Africa Writes Back to Self: Metafiction, Gender, Sexuality* (State University of New York Press, 2010), 1.

¹⁵ See Mwangi 2010, *Africa Writes Back to Self*, 1.

¹⁶ See Mwangi 2010, *Africa Writes Back to Self*, 2.

Once we leave the relationship of, let us say, Africa and Europe via colonialism, the world suddenly becomes very vast, complicated, and scary as the knowledge of how little we know settles in. Yet, this place that is just outside of our comfort zone is a beautiful place to be in—it's a place of discovery of new ideas and seeing old ideas anew.¹⁷

This bold claim resonates with Adebayo's readings of his corpus as "post-conflict fictions of memory [that] invite unbounded readings of the sites of memory that they (re)present; they allow readers to stretch their imaginations to various zones of relationality in Africa's post-conflict situations."¹⁸ Adichie's internationally highly successful and critically acclaimed novel, for instance, "invites a multidirectional way of thinking about the memory of the Nigerian Biafra War" as it sets it in relation to European colonialism and the Holocaust.¹⁹ Tadjo's *The Shadow of Imana* "invites an African transnational reading of the Rwandan genocide."²⁰ Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution* connects experiences of migration with the Ethiopian communist revolution and sheds light on the USA's involvement in the latter.²¹ These fictional texts, Adebayo's terms, "gesture toward futurity" as the past "remains an unfinished business", but one that can only be tackled if set in relation, if understood as inherently bearing the potential to form relations, with oneself as well as with the Other.²² But the coordinates of who counts as self, and who counts as Other, are significantly challenged and ultimately altered by the novels that *Continuous Pasts* understands as fictions of relationality.²³

This relationality not only entails an identarian element but also one that is grounded in the experience of (historical) time. Especially in the chapter on Adichie's *Half of the Yellow Sun*, Adebayo puts established memory theory to the test: In his application of Marianne Hirsch's influential postmemory paradigm,²⁴ the author shows how this concept that was coined to describe how memories that are connected to lived experience can indeed be handed down the subsequent generations, and take on the status of memories in their own right for the ones who "come after." These postmemories are not tied to lived experience but to intergenerational trauma. Adebayo convincingly shows how Adichie occupies the postmnemonic subject position, as she has not herself experienced the Nigerian-Biafra war, but has grown up and into the significance of the civil war. Important to Adebayo is to uphold the notion of postgeneration that is part and parcel of Hirsch's concept, but ties it to African epistemologies of

¹⁷ Mukoma wa Ngugi, "Rethinking the Global South," *The Global South Project* (2012), n.p.

¹⁸ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 123.

¹⁹ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 123.

²⁰ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 124.

²¹ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 124.

²² See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 118. See also A. Erll, "Homer: A Relational Mnemohistory," *Memory Studies* 11, no. 3 (2018): 274–86.

²³ See also D. Mwambari, *Navigating Cultural Memory: Commemoration and Narrative in Postgenocide Rwanda* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

²⁴ M. Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust," *Gender and Culture Series* (2012).

remembering and transmission, as he coins the concept of *ancestral memory*.²⁵ Adebayo writes:

[T]he concept of postmemory does not seem entirely adequate in articulating the concatenated and cumulative memories of slavery, colonialism, and the relatively recent civil wars in the postcolony. [...] Ancestral memory [...] transcends the psychoanalytic framings of archaic inheritances. It includes, but also transcends the domains of genetic memory; it is the bequeathing of feelings, phantom sensations, and tacit knowledge to a succeeding generation. [...] It is the weight of our ancestors' traumas that we bear and in the amorphous yet definitive "memory contracts" that bind us to our progenitors.²⁶

This is where this study is at its best, and this is what Memory Studies is in need of: A claim for the diversification of mnemonic positions and theories is an easy one to voice, but not an easy one to put into practice. Here, Adebayo engages with existing notions on the functions and politics of mnemonic transmission, and develops a new paradigm for thinking about African memories, trauma, and witnessing. The notion of ancestral memory, as I am sure, will gain traction in many different contexts, such as for example cases in which Indigenous peoples engage in battles and negotiations over memory and politics. It may take on, in the words of Chadwick Allen, a "trans-indigenous" momentum.²⁷ Ancestral memory as a concept may very well follow the example of Adichie's writing, as being simultaneously intro- and extroverted. I am thus calling on Sakiru Adebayo to further develop this concept, as it takes on a central role in his readings of Adichie, but could very well developed into a more general, more encompassing Memory Studies paradigm.

There is thus so much to gain from *Continuous Pasts*: One can see that the public practice of memory, as a form of political action and government, might very well be—more often than not—in crisis, but memory fiction is not. And it has the potential to re-shape regional identities as well as broader notions of Africanness that are at play here. Ancestral memory is simultaneously a reference to African epistemologies and a testament to how vicarity is pragmatic.²⁸ While mourning and wake work are central elements of the texts presented, they are testament to the potential of fiction to do the work that societies potentially cannot do. These texts are hopefully used in many contexts around the world, not only in Africa, to foster an understanding of how pasts continue, but how they can also be used to break patterns. *Continuous Pasts* opens up the possibility to think about the "idea of an African transnational memory" while at the same time allowing for a rootedness in local and specific contexts.²⁹

²⁵ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 19.

²⁶ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 46.

²⁷ C. Allen, *Trans-Indigenous: Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

²⁸ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 21.

²⁹ See Adebayo 2023, *Continuous Pasts*, 21.

Yet, this is also where my concern rests. For all its wittiness and conceptual innovation, *Continuous Pasts* frames its argument around certain monolithic representations. While Adebayo invests in exploring the different conflicts forming the background of his primary texts in their specificity, a pan-African consciousness, if not identity, is frequently invoked. This invocation of a collective African (mnemonic) consciousness goes beyond the idea of Africa as a continent, and gestures toward a unified understanding of what it means to be African. Granted, Adebayo connects his vision of a collective African memory to conflict and the engagement with it, but as the author repeatedly states himself, the conflicts are vastly different in nature. I do not think that the invocation of a collective African memory as a gateway to a pan-African historical consciousness is neither necessary nor particularly helpful, especially if one takes into account that Adebayo goes a long way to point out the intricacies of relationality in his primary texts. There are many “complex network[s] of conflicts” at play here, and to call upon a frame as broad as “African” seems to do a disservice to Adebayo’s otherwise nuanced readings. The same holds true for the notion of “the postcolony” which appears to be functioning as a metonymy for Africa as a whole. Borrowing this term from Achille Mbembe’s influential *On the Postcolony*, Adebayo seems to be building his argument on an essence of postcoloniality that can be imposed on highly divergent contexts.³⁰ What is more, the notion of “postcolony” in singular is put to work as a way of framing a “region of memory” that is characterized by the experience of colonialism.³¹ While I understand this process of essentializing in its dimension as a rallying cry for political and mnemonic activism, I do not think that it is particularly productive. Again, if there is something that *Continuous Pasts* manages to bring out very clearly, it is the fact that memory is always highly contextual while simultaneously being impacted and formed by circulating social frames and experiences. The notion of pan-Africanness and Africa as the “postcolony” simplifies what Adebayo—and the authors he engages with—seeks to trouble. The same goes, if I may be so bold, for the notion of the “West” that is at play here. I think we as scholars need to be careful not to pit schematic entities against each other, especially in the context of colonialism, independence, and conflict. By the same token, I do not think that there is an experience or representation of (post)colonialism that holds universally true—not even if the universal refers to the African postcolony. The deployment of these notions limits Adebayo’s intellectual endeavor to highlight the embeddedness of memory in local and transnational/transcultural frameworks, and this endeavor gains its power precisely through the complication of that appears to be straightforward on the surface level.

In summary, however, I commend my friend and colleague Sakiru Adebayo for his achievement in establishing a memory lens in African Studies, and for broadening the framework of Memory Studies toward these contexts. It is a beautifully written, highly knowledgeable monograph that holds the potential to put Memory Studies firmly on the map of African Studies, and vice versa.

³⁰ A. Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (University of California Press, 2001).

³¹ S. Lewis, J. K. Olick, J. Wawrzyniak, and M. Pakier, eds., *Regions of Memory: Transnational Formations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

Furthermore, I encourage Adebayo to further develop the notion of ancestral memory in subsequent publications, for I think such a conceptualization holds a lot of potential.

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