



BOOK FORUM

Continuous Pasts: Memory as Historicity

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For both historians and literary scholars, memory and history can still seem worlds apart. In 2022, the outgoing President of the American Historical Association caused a stir when he contrasted “counterfactual” memory voyages of African Americans to West Africa with local societies’ long-standing participation in the slave trade.¹ Meanwhile, scholars such as Tim Woods emphasize that postcolonial African literature casts “memory as a form of counter-history that subverts false generalizations by an exclusionary ‘History’”.² In this view, memory and history are antagonistic forces. The former variously distorts truth or captures the voices of the oppressed. The latter either critically interrogates the received narratives we tell ourselves or has become caught up in the power structures of the state and the strictures of its own disciplinary blindfolds.

Against such dichotomies, Sakiru Adebayo’s *Continuous Pasts* reminds us that the relationship between memory and history in the postcolony has always been co-constitutive. Both postcolonial writers and historians have been engaged in a recuperatory project because “[c]olonialism, among many other things, [was] an attempt to destroy and wipe out a people’s memory.”³ From this insight, Adebayo mobilizes the fiction of four African writers who are engaged in recovering and commemorating contentious pasts to imagine novel futures. He sees the “memory frictions” these works provoke as a potential catalyst for respective societies to engage in open dialogues about the pernicious legacies of

¹ James Sweet, “Is History History? Identity Politics and Teleologies of the Present,” *Perspectives on History*, August 17, 2022.

² Tim Woods, *African Pasts: Memory and History in African Literatures* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 13.

³ Sakiru Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts. Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2023), 8.

(post-)colonial conflict and thereby to become more equitable and inclusive.⁴ In their attempt to commemorate the fallout of civil war, dictatorships, and genocide, the works reflect “a distinct memory regime” in postcolonial Africa that is characterized by “wake work,” that is, by the “process in which we think about the dead, the rituals through which we enact memory, and the avenue through which those among the living mourn the passing of the dead.”⁵

As Adebayo points out, questions of memory and forgetting have occupied a central place in African history since the professionalization of the discipline in the 1950s.⁶ Pioneering historians such as K. Onwuka Dike challenged Western orthodoxy by emphasizing that oral histories were “fairly accurate” when researchers controlled for their inherent “vanity and prejudice.”⁷ By 1985, the anthropologist-cum-historian Jan Vansina could confidently assert that the study of oral tradition, which he defined as “information existing in memory,” was indispensable to reconstruct the history of large parts of the world and to foreground the worldview of their peoples.⁸ After the advent of postmodernist theory triggered a wider epistemological transformation in the humanities in the 1980s, Africanists waged fierce arguments over the veracity of social recollections.⁹ Grappling with memory thus came to occupy the heart of an interdisciplinary field of inquiry that combined history, anthropology, linguistics and, to a lesser extent, archeology. As a result of these debates, most historians of the continent no longer claim to embody the twin ideals of complete objectivity and accuracy but strive toward an approximation of the latter through a critical reckoning with one’s inherent limitations of the former.¹⁰

Continuous Pasts engages the relationship between remembrance and history on several levels. First, Adebayo uncovers how writers become historians in their own right. Weaving together research into authors’ personal background and textual analysis, he casts the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Aminatta Forna, Dinaw Mengestu, and Véronique Tadjo as deeply personal projects of archiving, chronicling, and preserving social memories of postcolonial conflict. Faced with generational shifts and inherent silences among first-generation witnesses, authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie rely on archival study to supplement their own community-based research.¹¹ In treating his authors as historical figures that engage in this kind of archeological work, Adebayo highlights how history and literature become mutually imbricated. Historical research—or the lack thereof—structures how authors frame their work,

⁴ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 3–4.

⁵ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 10.

⁶ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 8.

⁷ K. Onwuka Dike, “African History and Self-Government,” *West Africa*, March 21, 1953, 251.

⁸ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 147.

⁹ Valentin Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988); Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Esperanza Brizuela-García, “Towards a Critical Interdisciplinarity? African History and the Reconstruction of Universal Narratives,” *Rethinking History* 12, no. 3 (2008): 299–316.

¹¹ In this respect, her work resembles other recent titles, including Abdulrazak Gurnah’s *Afterlives* and Maaza Mengiste’s, *The Shadow King*.

develop characters, and identify societal silences. Through this work of parsing, literature can provide a first historical canvas, which, for political, social, and technical reasons, can sometimes only be addressed decades later by professional historians. In reconstructing this process in the case of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adebayo shows how writers become lodestars for their societies who potentially presage the direction of future historical inquiry through their exposure of societal “memory friction.”

One way authors do so is by channeling what Adebayo calls “ancestral memory.”¹² By this he refers to “the bequeathing of feelings, phantom sensations, and tacit knowledge” as well as “the mystical and covert incorporeal bestowals that precede an individual’s birth.”¹³ Inspired by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s frequent references to her ancestors in her interviews, this concept expands Marianne Hirsch’s notion of “postmemory” beyond the successor generation to include more protracted mnemonic inheritances reaching back multiple generations.¹⁴ On the one hand, Adebayo thereby acknowledges African societies’ multilayered conflicts over history, ranging from tensions over involvement in the slave trade and legacies of the colonial encounter to the predations of the postcolonial state. On the other hand, the concept incorporates scholarship on the specificity of local societies’ relationship to the past, including through oral history and tradition, embodiment, ritual, materiality, and landscapes.¹⁵

In this respect, *Continuous Pasts* echoes John Mbiti’s seminal analysis of African timescales. Mbiti argued that despite the changes engendered by the colonial encounter, many African societies continued to adhere to a dualistic temporal frame centered around the recent and deep past, called *Zamani*. By engaging with what came before them, ordinary people define future horizons and seek to transform their societies. Adebayo illustrates how this reliance on the past to imagine the future may be disrupted in post-conflict societies because

imagining the future is a kind of luxury that many victims and survivors of historical violence in the postcolony cannot afford. The failure or inability to remember the past ... is invariably the failure or inability to imagine the future – hence, where there is no memory, there is no futurity because the future is just another kind of memory.¹⁶

¹² Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 19.

¹³ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 46.

¹⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

¹⁵ On these modes of historicity see, for example, Emmanuel Saboro, *Wounds of Our Past. Remembering Captivity, Enslavement and Resistance in African Oral Narratives* (Leiden: Brill, 2021); Emery Kalema, “Scars, Marked Bodies, and Suffering: The Mulele ‘Rebellion’ in Postcolonial Congo,” *Journal of African History* 59, no. 2 (2018): 263–82; Nicholas Argenti, *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Sandra Elaine Greene, *Sacred Sites and the Colonial Encounter. A History of Meaning and Memory in Ghana* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 120.

Adebayo thus turns the cliché of memory as the alleged eclipse of transformative utopias on its head: It is precisely because societies such as Nigeria, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Sierra Leone do not engage *enough* with their recent histories of traumatic postcolonial conflict that they lack transformative visions of the future.

Ancestral memory is thus at once specific enough to invite further analyses of memory transmission in and beyond African literature while being capacious enough to broaden our conception of African historicity beyond an inescapable relationship with past trauma. As a result, African authors' engagement with memory friction appears less as an obsessive return to the past and more as the conscious effort of specific generations of writers working at particular historical junctures.¹⁷ *Continuous Pasts* thereby provincializes the still-dominant Western tenets of psychoanalysis and trauma studies through a focus on African ontologies. The book does so most notably in its analysis of the "silent memory" in Aminatta Forna's staging of the haunting aftermath of Sierra Leone's civil war.¹⁸

Apart from highlighting literature's work of history, Adebayo also reads each author *historically*. All four are part of the third generation of African writers since independence who came of age during what Richard Werbner called Africa's "crisis of memory" in the 1990s.¹⁹ As Adebayo emphasizes, they are all eminently cosmopolitan with lives, families, and careers stretching over several continents. Amid the fallout of structural adjustment policies and Western triumphalism over the "end of history," each writer lived through or encountered the aftereffects of seminal episodes of their country of origin: Biafra and military rule in Nigeria, prolonged dictatorship and civil war in Sierra Leone, the dying throes of the Derg regime in Ethiopia, and the genocide in Rwanda either forced these writers into exile or compounded an already existing sense of postcolonial displacement. In counterposing these writers as members of a generation, Adebayo illustrates how their cosmopolitan literary practice has emerged from the protracted convulsions of postcolonial statehood and respective societies' struggles to account for the often-devastating aftereffects of nation-building. Adebayo elucidates that the potential of this generation lies in its refusal to ascribe to what another scholar of cosmopolitanism refers to as "the entrancement with the polarities of identity and difference."²⁰

Continuous Pasts encapsulates this idea in the concept of "African transnational memory." Just as the characters of Dinaw Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*, the protagonists of all four works are confronted with the seeming incommensurability of erstwhile colonial borders and the creation of inclusive and peaceful nation-states. But rather than fall into the comfort of autochthony, the authors instead leverage their cosmopolitan experience to question the exclusivity of postcolonial statehood while calling for new transversal solidarities on and

¹⁷ John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, sec. rev. and enl. ed. (Oxford: Heineman, 1990).

¹⁸ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 59.

¹⁹ Richard Werbner, ed., *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (New York: Zed Books, 1998).

²⁰ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 72.

beyond the continent. For example, Véronique Tadjo's participation in the *Rwanda: écrire par devoir de mémoire* initiative helped fashion the continent as a "community of memory" in its own right.²¹ In highlighting these writers' efforts at engendering continental regimes of remembrance, *Continuous Pasts* speaks to wider issues of historicity, authorship, and solidarity throughout Africa and the African diaspora.

At the same time, the book's prolific theory work invites further reflection. Adebayo casts African transnational memory as the antidote of fiction writers to one of the most pernicious legacies of colonialism, that is, the nation-state. Since "colonialism successfully sold the idea of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community" on the continent, it brought in its wake virulent nativism and provincialization.²² But as the work of historians such as Frederick Cooper and others has shown, the nation-state was never the proclaimed end-goal of decolonization.²³ In fact, colonial empires were often the exact opposite of the nation-state: multi-racial, multiethnic, and multi-religious. Liberal imperialism exerted a strong attraction on African intellectuals and writers, who harnessed imperial spaces as the stage of imagination and mobility.²⁴ To be sure, if colonial officials "sold" the idea of the nation-state, Africans were equal if not more skilled salespeople of this idea. Anticolonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah envisioned a family of sovereign African states as the first step in transforming the Western-dominated international system more generally.²⁵ The promise of national sovereignty also inspired solidarity between front-line states and liberation movements. In other words, Africans did not simply start remembering across borders after the end of the Cold War. The concept of African transnational memory would become even more productive if future contributions in this field incorporated historical precedent into their framework of analysis to map the shifting currency of cross-border movements of remembrance.

While the concept could thus help excavate historical traditions of mnemonic solidarity and autarky, it could equally contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the continent's political economy. Adebayo rightly casts transnationalism as a potential solution to nationalist memory silencing and postcolonial forms of exploitation. Yet he also asserts that "recent developments such as the African Continental Free Trade Agreement, the introduction of a single currency for countries that are part of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and several other initiatives by the African Union" represent a "silver lining" that could foster more meaningful mutual awareness

²¹ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 98.

²² Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 90.

²³ Frederick Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

²⁴ Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

²⁵ Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

on the continent.²⁶ However, it is far from clear that these efforts at international governance will result in new forms of solidarity. As research on postcolonial federations and joint currencies in Africa has shown, processes of transnational integration often create new inequalities, conflicts, and nativist backlashes.²⁷ If African transnational memory is to help us appraise the continent's past, present, and future place in the world economy and international politics it should be employed to critically review, rather than depend on, these political initiatives.

In this respect, *Continuous Pasts* could have expanded on the class background of the four authors under consideration. They have worked and lived abroad, either through their own volition or having been forced to, and these experiences have invariably shaped their literary style. But how have authors “left behind” grappled with the possibility of African transnational memory? What visions of continental identity do writers who work in vernacular languages other than English, French, and Portuguese foresee for commemorative practice? And what place does a critique of the economic underpinnings of remembrance—and the formulation of emancipatory and revolutionary political projects—have for this generation of African writers? Adebayo is attuned to some of these issues, as he demonstrates in the discussion of the ways in which American capitalism both fascinates and excludes African migrants in Mengestu's *Children of the Revolution*, but the question of class and inequality remains to be explored further.

A second set of open issues concerns the relationship of memory and history. Although *Continuous Pasts* demonstrates how writers such as Adichie can help recover history from silence by harnessing archives, writers' archival forays pose questions about the growing reliance of literature on one of the very institutions of colonial and postcolonial domination. As colonialism recedes further into the historical consciousness of African societies and more recent displacement and exile affect generational memory transmission, archives may become increasingly imbued with the hue of historical accuracy that they inherently lack. Rather than all-knowing repositories of information and control, colonial and postcolonial archives have always been incomplete and vague exercises in guess work, in not-knowing, and in pretending-to-know.²⁸ In the postcolony, repeated rounds of austerity have produced “dead archives” which harbor the largely inaccessible institutional memories of governance.²⁹ What does it mean, then, if the archive becomes the basis of writers' ability to deal with memory friction? Are the works by Adichie, Fornah, Kidjo, and Mengestu building blocks in their society's respective postcolonial nation-making process? Or are they critical

²⁶ Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts*, 92.

²⁷ On the Mali Federation see Cooper, *Citizenship*; on currencies see Fanny Pigeaud and Ndongu Samba Sylla, *Africa's Last Colonial Currency: The CFA Franc Story* (London: Pluto Press, 2021).

²⁸ Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. C. Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 10–26.

²⁹ Benedito Machava and Euclides Gonçalves, “The Dead Archive: Governance and Institutional Memory in Independent Mozambique,” *Africa* 91, no. 4 (2021): 553–74.

arbiters that interrogate not only their country's conflicts of memorialization but the very basis for knowing the past?

Similar issues surround the notion of ancestral memory. On the one hand, the concept underscores the centrality of oral history and tradition to African societies' sense of time. On the other hand, it risks rendering memory transmission—a process that is characterized by invention, omission, and forgery—seamless through its reliance on the affective language of kin.³⁰ My point here is not to demand a definitive (and unattainable) metric of truth for the interpretation of ancestral memories, but to insist on the necessity to include memories' gaps and failures in analyses of ancestral inheritance. Who counts as an ancestor is itself a contested issue that touches on politicized debates about race, citizenship, and land in many African societies.³¹ Do we, for instance, include the narratives of autochthony of Hutu combatants and refugees in the Great Lakes region after the Rwandan genocide under the rubric of ancestral memory?³² What are the normative underpinnings and boundaries of this form of social remembrance?

To answer these questions, the concept of “wake work” may occlude as much as it reveals. On the one hand, it effectively encapsulates the efforts of writers as well as ordinary people in commemorating the past. But its grounding in the notion of a timeless “coloniality” of memory retroactively imbues colonialism with a power over Africans' relationship with the past that is hard to reconcile with its actual place in popular cultures of remembrance. How does, for instance, the alleged centrality of “wake work” in African memory cultures fit with popular and official memories of decolonization?³³ And does the notion of mourning accommodate nostalgia for illiberal and racist regimes such as apartheid South Africa?³⁴ Finally, if wake work rests on the “coloniality” of memory, how specific is it to Africa given that formerly colonized societies across the world face similar challenges in engaging with the past?

These questions are less points of criticism than potential points of departure for future inquiries into the nature of African transnational remembrance, ancestral memory, and wake work. *Continuous Pasts* is effective because its concepts, while grounded in literary theory, speak to broader themes of temporality in history, anthropology, memory studies, and related fields. Indeed, where some works weigh disciplines against each other or tout the seemingly unique contributions of individual disciplines, Adebayo guides readers through his approach to literary criticism while incorporating the work of scholars in

³⁰ On the pitfalls of reifying the “African voice”, see Luise White, Stephan F. Miescher, and David W. Cohen, eds., *African Words, African Voices. Critical Practices in Oral History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001).

³¹ See, for example, Jonathon Glassman, *War of Words, War of Stones: Racial Thought and Violence in Colonial Zanzibar* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

³² Anna Hedlund, *Hutu Rebels. Exile Warriors in the Eastern Congo* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Lisa Malkki, *Purity and Exile: Violence, Memory and National Cosmology among Hutu Refugees in Tanzania* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³³ Carola Lentz and David Lowe, *Remembering Independence* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

³⁴ Jacob Dlamini, *Native Nostalgia* (Auckland Park: Jacana, 2009).

other “arts of memory” that have approached the problem of recurring pasts. This catholicity of thought reflects a deeper grounding in the relevant theoretical and disciplinary literatures of memory and African studies that is still as rare as it is necessary.

Author biography. Fabian Krautwald is a comparative scholar of Eastern and Southern Africa interested in memory, sovereignty, and restorative justice. He has conducted extensive archival research and fieldwork in Namibia, Tanzania, Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

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