



BOOK FORUM

## Continuous Pasts, Arrested Futures: Memory, Fiction, and the Postcolonial Condition in Africa

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I

I am grateful to my colleagues (Hanna Teichler, Chijioko Ona, Fabian Krautwald, and Chigbo Arthur Anyaduba) for finding my book, *Continuous Pasts*, worthy of their critical attention and for all the insightful reviews they have turned in for this book forum. In this essay, I respond to their reviews and also use the opportunity to further reflect on some of the critical interventions that my book offers on the subject of memory in postcolonial Africa. This essay is divided into three parts. In the first part, I reiterate the main arguments of the book while in the second I address some of the questions posed by my colleagues. Because of the constraint of space, I will not address all the questions, but I will be sure to attend the ones that cut across all the reviews. I believe that the key questions that appear in each of the reviews revolve around my conceptualization of African transnational memory (ATM), ancestral memory, and fiction of memory. Hence, the second part of this essay will offer conceptual clarifications on these terms. Lastly, the third part of the essay will offer some concluding thoughts on the book as well as the future research possibilities that it opens up.

*Continuous Pasts* sets out to investigate the representations of traumatic memories in postcolonial African fiction. This investigation is crucial because—when put in context of the numerous civil and political conflicts that beset the continent—postcolonial Africa is facing a crisis of memory. This crisis of memory, which Richard Werbner<sup>1</sup> first pointed out in *Memory and the Postcolony*, finds

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Werbner, *Memory and the Postcolony: African Anthropology and the Critique of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

expression in various forms of institutionalized amnesia, mnemocide,<sup>2</sup> state repression, and archival elusiveness that seem to be commonplace in most post-conflict African countries. As an idiolectic preference, I use the word “friction” instead of “crisis” to describe the various memories of conflict and conflicts of memory in the literary texts that I examine in the book. More importantly, because the book is primarily a work in literary analysis, the word “fiction” is encapsulated in the overall meaning of “friction.” To this end, *Continuous Pasts* examines how “post-colonial African fiction deals with, or in some cases, becomes a source of memory friction” (3).<sup>3</sup> It is pertinent to note that while the fictional works that I analyzed in the book function, in most cases, as counter-memory to hegemonic memory regimes, and while they serve as alter/native sites of memory in the face of militant memorialisms, I am under no illusion that fiction itself is incapable of producing memory hegemonies and exclusions. As Mihaela Mihai puts it, “literature [can also be] harnessed to confirm oppressive social relations” (14).<sup>4</sup> Hence, in *Continuous Pasts*, while I show the dynamics involved when fiction mirrors the frictions of memory, I do not write off the possibilities that the fiction writers may sometimes romanticize the past and infuse personal biases into their stories.

*Continuous Pasts* employs various methods of reading to “tease out different ways of thinking about conflicted pasts in postcolonial Africa” (3).<sup>5</sup> The book incorporates both intrinsic and extrinsic readings as well as intertextual and extratextual literary analyses. Therefore, to address Anyaduba’s question, the chapter on Chimamanda Adichie’s (2009) *Half of a Yellow Sun* reads “like an outlier to the rest of the chapters” because it employs some kind of biographical reading in order to reveal the inner workings of postmemory in the writing of fiction. As I made clear in the book, to do this kind of reading, one needs to go outside of the world of fiction to the world that birthed it. The broader point here, of course, is the fact that memory studies is fundamentally interdisciplinary— therefore, every cultural memory analysis is directly or indirectly applying various methodological tools and theoretical approaches. In light of that, the main task of *Continuous Pasts* is to bring memory studies and African studies—two seemingly distant fields— into dialogue. Hence, in writing the book, I was saddled with the difficult task of speaking simultaneously to an African (literary) studies and a memory studies audience. It was therefore quite gratifying to see that all the respondents agree that this concurrent engagement with memory studies and African studies is the main strength of the book.

To end this section of the essay, it is important to restate the main inferences of *Continuous Pasts*. The first being that post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa demonstrate how the unfinished business of the past produces fragile regimes of peace and asynchronous temporalities that challenge progressive historicism on

<sup>2</sup> In the essay, “Forms of Forgetting,” Aleida Assmann describes “mnemocide” as the act of “killing” the memory of an individual or a collective.

<sup>3</sup> Sakiru Adebayo, *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Mihaela Mihai, *Political Memory and the Aesthetics of Care. The Art of Complicity and Resistance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> See Adebayo 2023.

the continent. The stories analyzed in the book also reveal how the questions of justice and reconciliation in post-conflict Africa are not straight-forward but jagged and messy. The book illustrates the ways in which the memories of conflicts in most postcolonial African countries cannot be read simply as a disparate but an interconnected chain of events. For example, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* reveals how the Nigerian-Biafran war is not unconnected to Nigeria's history of colonialism while Aminatta Forna's *The Memory of Love* reveals how the silence observable in postwar Sierra Leone can be traced back to the centuries of violence that took place in the country. Therefore, post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa embody a palimpsestic assemblage of histories and a concatenation of memory traces that academic historiography might not be able to capture all at once. In the same vein, post-conflict fictions of memory in Africa shows how the past is not simply present but continues into the future. This continuity of the past into the present and the future must not be misunderstood as a progressive temporality but rather as a cyclicity of time, reversal of history, and a repetition of patterns of violence. Most importantly, the post-conflict fiction of memory in Africa is a work of mourning.<sup>6</sup> In situations where memory is policed by state apparatuses, the post-conflict fiction of memory becomes a place for acting out and working through tumultuous pasts. It becomes an avenue for writers and readers to engage in wake work—wake being the rituals through which we enact memory, and the way in which those among the living mourn the passing of the dead.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, I offer conceptual clarifications on some of the main concepts that I employed in my analyses in *Continuous Pasts*.

## II

### **Post-conflict fiction of memory**

Anyaduba's question about the distinction between "fiction of memory" and "historical fiction" (and, by extension, history and memory) is an exciting one because this same question occupied my mind when I started doing research in memory studies. During my research on *Continuous Pasts*, I quickly discovered that the history versus memory debate is an age-long debate in the field. While I will not go into details about this debate in this essay,<sup>8</sup> I will try to explain how I use the term "fiction of memory" (as distinguished from historical fiction) in the book, but before I do so, it is pertinent to mention that, overall, my work does not seek to pitch memory against history. If anything, *Continuous Pasts*, as Krautwald

<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> For more on the distinction between history and memory, see Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the 20th Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Chris Lorenz, "Blurred Lines: History, Memory, and the Experience of Time," *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 2 (2014): 43–62; and Alon Confino, "History and Memory" in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, eds. Axel Schneider and Daniel Woolf (Oxford University Press, 2011), 36–51.

rightly observes, posits that “memory and history in the postcolony have always been co-constitutive.”

The term, “fiction of memory” actually comes from Ansgar Nünning and Brigit Neumann who, in their individual works, use it to describe how fiction does not simply represent the past but also depicts the *processes of remembering* as well as the *inner workings of memory*.<sup>9</sup> Hence, fiction is a generative art of memory because it opens up critical pathways in memory analysis and provides refreshing theoretical models for doing memory work. For example, the “madeleine cake” episode in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* illuminates the idea of “involuntary memory” not only for memory and literary studies scholars but also for neurologists and cognitive scientists who are concerned with how sensations in the present can open the floodgate of memories of past experiences.<sup>10</sup> Likewise, the idea of “rememory” comes directly from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,<sup>11</sup> and it has since been taken up by scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds who are interested in exploring the possibility of remembering the residues of distant pasts that are not directly or autobiographically one’s own. Other novelists whose works have illuminated our understanding of how (human and cultural) memory functions include Kazuo Ishiguro, W.G. Sebald, and José Agualusa among many others.

Additionally, fiction is capable of reconstructing memory not only so that we may understand what happened in the past, but also so that we may see how the past is *presented* in ways that make current realities more graspable. What I am trying to say, therefore, is that while historical fiction explores a particular time and place in the past, the fiction of memory shows us how that past is imbricated in the present. Brigit Neumann (2010) puts it so well in her submission that the fiction of memory is an “imaginative reconstruction of the past in response to current needs” (5). Therefore, while most (if not all) historical fiction can pass as fiction of memory, not all fiction of memory can pass as historical fiction. In *Continuous Pasts*, only *Half of a Yellow Sun* (which is read in the book as a work of postmemory) would fit as historical fiction. The other novels analyzed in the book would not fit as historical fiction because they are less concerned about the facts of history but more about the *presenting* of history. I should also mention that in addition to revealing the traces of the past in the present, all the work of fiction analyzed in my book are, in one way or the other, gesturing toward the future. Because of the continuous presence of the past and lingering injustices in the present, survivors of civil and political conflicts are, in many cases, unable to imagine a livable and just future. It is precisely this despairing disposition toward the future that the writers of the texts analyzed in the book seek to confront. Hence, the fiction of memory is capable of recalibrating discourses of futurity, justice, responsibility, and reconciliation in post-conflict societies.

<sup>9</sup> Brigit Neumann, “The Literary Representation of Memory,” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 333–43.

<sup>10</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terrence Kilmartin, 1922–1931 (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913–1927).

<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987).

The other layer of the meaning of “fiction of memory” is in the idea that memory itself has an inherently fictitious quality to it. With evidence from neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, and cultural memory studies, I show in the book that what we refer to as “individual” or “collective” memory is always constitutive of fabricated elements. In my analyses, I show instances where individual characters’ memories (especially in *The Memory of Love*) are imbued with fabrications without losing sight of the fact that the literary texts are themselves works of the imagination. Moreover, beyond exploring the frottage of antagonistic memories in the worlds of the literary texts themselves, I also show how the texts give rise to political, aesthetic, and epistemic frictions in their representations of the past. There are many examples of these permutations of friction in the book, but because of the constraint of space, I will mention just one here. As I argue in the book, ethnic tensions become particularly fiercer in Nigeria with the publication of *Yellow Sun* and other literary texts such as Chinua Achebe’s (2012) *There Was A Country*. In fact, the Nigerian government banned the film adaptation of *Yellow Sun* in 2013 because they were concerned that it would incite ethnic violence. In response to the ban, Adichie wrote an essay, *Hiding from our Past*, as a way of challenging the Nigerian government’s suppression of memory. This is a perfect illustration of how a work of fiction can cause memory friction in a post-conflict situation. To be clear, I am not saying that Adichie’s book inspired the secessionist agitations and groups that sprouted up around the same time that her book was published (I know, for a fact, that she is not in support of secession), but I think we would be undermining the powerful influence of literature on culture if we choose to not see the compelling ways in which this novel (along with other literary texts on Biafra) provoked conversations on—and challenge hegemonic accounts of—Biafra in Nigeria.

### **Ancestral memory**

I came up with the idea of ancestral memory after I discovered in my analyses that as illuminating and generative Marianne Hirsch’s idea of postmemory is, it does not fully capture what is going on in most African fictions of memory. Therefore, as Teichler beautifully captures it, “ancestral memory is simultaneously a reference to African epistemologies and a testament to how vicarity is pragmatic.” Ancestral memory differs from plain “memory” in its “active force independent of the rememberer.”<sup>12</sup> It differs from postmemory because it goes beyond the second or third generation and because it is not always traumatic. Ancestral memory is in the embodiment of distant ancestral stories. It is about living in the emotional truths of deep histories. It is the metaphysical waking of long-buried people and the mystifying resurrection of long-forgotten things. It is a remembering of progenitorial memories. Ancestral memory is in some sense a kind of rememory, a bewildering encounter with the “still out there” impacts and experiences of those who are dead but are still living rent-free in our subconscious.

<sup>12</sup> M. P. Carden “The Dual Endings of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 45:4 (1999), 401–427.

Even though ancestral memory is elaborated upon only in the first chapter of *Continuous Pasts*, the idea, as Onah rightly observes, resonates in all the analysis chapters. For instance, while I show how Adichie, in her interviews, maintained that her ancestors chose her to write *Yellow Sun*, I also explain how the silences in *The Memory of Love* illustrate the idea that we live in the penumbra of our ancestors' time and space. In addition, I point out instances where the main character in *Children of the Revolution* has imaginary conversations with his deceased father. And in *The Shadow of Imana*, I do not only show how Veronique Tadjo dedicated the text to "all those who are dead" but also how the dead are reincarnated in it. In other words, all the texts I studied in *Continuous Pasts* are, to use Onah's clever phrase, "texts in search of ancestors." But even more, all the texts have several instances of ancestral veneration and anamnestic solidarity with the dead. Therefore, ancestral memory is, in so many ways, about searching for the dead, being with the dead, conversing with the dead, and living with the dead.

As Onah points out, my description of ancestral memory in the book is quite poetic. And now that I am revisiting the idea in this essay, I am realizing that an empirical language fails me every time I try to describe its meaning. And that is okay—it is okay that my articulation of ancestral memory troubles the epistemological boundaries and vocabularies of empire and empiricism. It is okay that ancestral memory circumvents the coloniality of memory and the many compromises of the archive.

### **African transnational memory**

All the respondents weighed in on my idea of the ATM framework in a critical yet so generous fashion, and I am so grateful to them all for helping to further complexify the idea and its analytical potentials. I want to respond to the queries on ATM by giving a bit of a context to how and why I arrived at the idea.

After my B.A. and M.A. in Ibadan, I chose to go to South Africa for my PhD instead of going to North America where most of my mates had chosen. Upon moving to South Africa, I realized that the country is actually a popular destination for a lot of graduate students from different parts of Sub-Saharan Africa. In the course of my PhD programme, I had the privilege of meeting and befriending not only South Africans but also students from Kenya, Ghana, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Congo among others. From my interactions with these fellow African graduate students, I realized that we did not know a lot about each other's countries, cultures, and histories. It was quite strange to me because I had thought everyone knew about the exploits of Nkrumah, Sankara, Cabral, and the like. I had thought everyone knew about the transnational nature of anti-colonial struggles on the continent. It was at this point that I started to imagine what it would mean for Africans to "remember together," especially in our same-fated postcolonial milieus. It was also around this time that I discovered the Rwandan Genocide Memorial Centre in Johannesburg. It was at (and with) the center, which also commemorates apartheid and Holocaust memories, that I figured out how an argument could be made for an ATM framework. But, as indicated in the book, ATM is not a new phenomenon, neither is it a watertight theory of

collective memory in Africa. One can count a number of efforts and initiatives (in the past and the present) geared toward creating pan-African consciousness and collaborations on the continent, but what I think is peculiar to ATM is the memory factor.

An ATM framework, I argue, may help us understand our connected histories, shared presents, and common futures as Africans in the world. It creates a conceptual space for thinking about collective memory and a potential commons in Africa. As anyone who lives on—or follows the news about—the continent would know, there have been a surge in xenophobic nationalisms in the last couple of decades. I argue in the book that a part of this problem could be attributed to collective amnesia (about African nationalisms of the twentieth century) and a general crisis of commemoration on the continent. This is why I offer ATM as one of the many ways to address these issues. While it is true that an ATM framework decenters the nation-state as a container of collective memory, it does not undermine the power of the nation-state and its memories, neither does it seek to homogenize Africa's past. ATM is mindful of the similarities, peculiarities, and contestations of different national memories in its subscription to the possibility of memories without borders in Africa.

Another important side to ATM, which may easily escape the notice of someone unfamiliar with memory studies, is that it is in conversation with mainstream memory studies. While memory scholarship seems to have moved from methodological nationalism to a global framework, Astrid Erll cautions that we must not overlook the significance of regional memories.<sup>13</sup> This is partly because of the tendency (within global memory) to reproduce the same exclusions that are faulted in national memory frameworks. Erll, therefore, suggests that a regional memory perspective is important because of its potential “to even out some of the failures of national and global approaches to collective remembering” (4).<sup>14</sup> In light of this, ATM is conceived as a regional memory framework that does not only speak to the ways in which collective memory is produced and circulated across Africa, but is also useful for negotiating Africa's bearings (and putative marginalization) in global memory discourses.

ATM is, most importantly, an analytical framework that can be used to dissect the movement of memory practices, cultures, and institutions across national and cultural formations on the continent. It is a framework that might be applied to the analysis of the Rwandan Genocide Centre in Johannesburg or the African Renaissance Monument in Dakar, or the Pan-African Heritage Museum in Accra. In my own analysis in chapter four of *Continuous Pasts*, I used the ATM framework to read the “Rwanda: Writing as a Duty to Remember” project which brought ten African writers from different parts of the continent to Kigali in 1998. My analysis did not only shine light on the transnational African effort at remembering the Rwandan genocide in this project, it also provided insights into the ethical dimensions involved in the production and circulation of that shared

<sup>13</sup> Astrid Erll, “Regional Integration and (trans)Cultural Memory,” *Asia Europe Journal* 8 (2010): 305–15.

<sup>14</sup> See Erll 2010.

memory. It revealed how the past lives on and is mediated through subject positions of either the victim, perpetrator, or “the outsider within.”

### III

To conclude, when I started writing my PhD (which would eventually become *Continuous Pasts*), I was only able to find four books that directly speak to the question of memory in post-conflict situations in Africa on a continental level.<sup>15</sup> But things have changed since then. We now have a couple of books that engage critically with memory in post-conflict situations in Africa, but even these new books still tend to focus on just one country (mostly Rwanda and South Africa) in their analyses. Therefore, my hope is that *Continuous Pasts* will inspire students and scholars to do more comparative and transnational studies on memory in postcolonial and post-conflict African contexts.

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Werbner, *Memory and the Postcolony* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1998); Wole Soyinka, *Burden of Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Ifi Amadiume and Abdullahi An-Na'im, *The Politics of Memory* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2000); and Mamadou Diawara et al., *Historical Memory in Africa* (New York: Berghahn, 2010).

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