

**Breaking the Silence:
West African Authors and the Transatlantic Slave Trade**

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Doctor of Philosophy

**The University of Edinburgh
September 2008**

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A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

These acknowledgements should be read as traces that reveal both presences, these overwhelming presences that undo the myth of a Ph.D as a lonely road, but also absences, *my* multiple absences from a number of sites, events, and roles. Needless to mention that this thesis wouldn't have been completed if the presences hadn't endured and forgiven my absences.

This project became possible thanks to a studentship by the College of Literatures, Languages and Cultures of Edinburgh University. There, in the English Department, I had the “fortune” to be under the supervision of Michelle Keown; if it was not for her constant encouragement, endless reservoir of faith and unswerving belief in my potential this thesis would never have been completed. Her meticulous editing of drafts after drafts, under the tightest possible deadlines, with care and patience; her genuine interest in this thesis; and her acts of “mothering”—in the most political and radical sense of this term—can not be properly acknowledged here. I also owe much to Simon Malpas, my second supervisor, for challenging me during my first year to make my language and arguments available to the average reader; for never losing his sense of humour; and, for sustaining my love for theory. I wish to express my warmest thanks for his comments on parts of this thesis, and his valuable support and encouragement on a number of occasions.

Two generous research grants from Carnegie Trust for Scottish Universities and Small Project Grants of Edinburgh University made possible my 2 month research trip to the University of Ghana. I am thankful to the “anonymous” members of both committees for deeming my project worthy of support. While in Ghana George Edison, of the International Office, proved to be an amazing host, for he had the courage to introduce me to the “unhomely” sites of Accra. Equally, I am indebted to the staff of Padmore Library in Accra for easing, with their assistance, expertise and kindness, my research. Of course, I am really indebted to Dr. Yaw Asante for embracing me, and introducing me to Ama Ata Aidoo. I can't do justice in these acknowledgements to the amount of generosity, insight and inspiration our meetings brought to this thesis; I just hope I have done, at least, justice to her text.

Sections of this study have appeared, or are about to appear, in *(M)Othering the Nation: Constructing and Resisting National Allegories through the Maternal Body* (Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), and in *Synthesis* (October 2008). I am grateful to editors and all the reviewers for their generous comments. Many thanks, too, to the Post-graduate office for funding my participation to a number of conferences, and to Ms. Kate Marshall for being patient and understanding. Anne Masson and Catherine Williamson, of the undergraduate office, have achieved the impossible: to bring sun-shine in Edinburgh, in winter, and during periods of essay marking, and this invaluable. While working at the Main Library, my colleagues have been helpful and obliging on a number of occasions. I would like to express my gratitude to Kate Macgregor for being flexible when I had to be absent due to overload of work; Duncan Macguer and Robin Oliver Campbell have done their best to do shelving in the morning a fun experience; Marjorie has been extremely helpful and willing to bend the rules at moments of crisis, and Allan has been caring and considerate like a father figure.

I would like to identify all the wonderful students I have worked with over the last three years, and have offered me on a number of occasions “ways out” of this thesis, but there are really too many. Still Claire Roberts, Anna Halliday, Brendan Perring, Jennie Smith and Heloise Allan, my “first born” children as I call them, have contributed “unknowingly” to the writing of this thesis; I would like to thank them all warmly for asking the “how is the thesis going” taboo-question every time we meet; for disagreeing and challenging me inside, and outside, the classroom; and for showing me that there are people who don’t have to be introduced to French philosophers to start “re-thinking the thinking”. In addition, if it was not for their demanding presences that forced me to stretch my teaching techniques to the limits, I would never had come with the proposal that granted me the Aluka Award for Innovative Teaching.

Of course, this thesis wouldn’t have been completed if I was not surrounded by a group of wonderful people, who have been bringing magic to my life the last years. Life in the flat wouldn’t have been the same without the “elfish” presence of Caitlin; I can’t thank her enough for making the sur-real quotidian and for assisting me thoroughly the last crazy months of this thesis. Many thanks to Tony for always “theorizing”; paradoxically enough, his love for Deleuze has made me appreciate more and more

Derrida, but this keeps the discussion/debate going, no? Life in Edinburgh would have been nothing but another mere life if it was not for Nikos, the most wonderfully eccentric person, who never forgets to smile, and who lives through “giving”. My sweetest possible thanks to Penny for all the surprises she has brought, and brings, into my life; for all the amazing dinners in her flat; and for escorting me in numerous day-dreamings. To Stella, a dear friend and flatmate, thanks for all the sharing, thanks for reading many parts of this thesis and always encouraging me, and, most importantly, thanks for the rare “gift” of a true friendship, without shadows. To Vangelis thanks for the endless discussions on modernism and post-modernism, for all the music, and for being there last summer, when the city was empty. To Maria (the neighbour), Vangelis (the neighbour) and Elpida thanks for all the cheerful and uplifting moments and for dragging me out of my theoretical mantras. To Raj and Sasha I am indebted for being always there to support and encourage me when my confidence was below zero and for being best companions in celebrations. To Antonis many thanks for reminding me that simple things like whistling, singing, and funny e-mails can bring happiness. To Stefanos, apart from tons of apologies for all the waiting(s), I owe my gratitude for making me feel this that cannot be spent; (not in the negative, but only and always in the affirmative): with you everything.

Not least, I want to express my profound gratitude to Assimina Karavanta, a mentor and friend, for all the “gifts” she has brought in my life through her teaching, writings and conversations. Her passion for “the pursue of the political” has shaped my thinking, reading and writing, and her “care and responsibility” has haunted my life in the most positive way.

Finally, this thesis would never have been taken up if I hadn’t grown up in an environment where the “other” could dwell. My parents, Matina and Manolis, and my brother, Stelios are everywhere in this thesis, and particularly, whenever concepts such as “mothering” and “forgiveness” are mentioned, for I would never have believed in these concepts’ political power and gravity if I hadn’t been “mothered” and “forgiven” by these people. I owe them much more than this, and I will always be *in debt*.

A b s t r a c t

This thesis explores how Syl Cheney Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964), Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments* (1970), and Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1979) respond to the need to revisit and re-think the history of transatlantic slavery. The texts of these four contemporary West African authors provide symptomatic instantiations of the problematic of writing silence, and narrating a history whose archives are impossible to fully retrieve. By attending to the violence and silencing committed on the history of slavery, as well as the difficulty of writing, and narrating, history from the perspective of silence all the texts considered in this study perform acts of resistance against the forgetting enacted in and among their communities, and the silencing of colonial modernity, which has turned the history of transatlantic trade into a footnote.

Although, all four authors come from different historical specificities and localities, and, thus, the ways they stage slavery in their narratives are informed by the local/historical urgencies they encounter in each contemporary political context, each, within their respective domain, provides powerful and influential examples of undoing historical silences and absences, not by imposing voices or presences, but by tracing the voids/gaps in the historical representation of slavery. The silent, but not silenced stories of the slave trade that these authors narrate in their attempts to speak to the history of slavery bring dis/order to the national and communal milieu, by unsettling a number of myths such as this of ethnic purity (Coker); of ideal "homes" for the diaspora (Aidoo); of national revolutions that putatively disrupt the colonial past (Armah); and of communal/national discourses that include the gendered racialised subaltern (Emecheta). These authors reveal the exclusionary practices of these myths, bearing witness to the fact that they proliferate at the expense of what they exclude. By bringing forth the excluded, the marginal, the "the othered" *in place* of the dominant, the central and "the same" they raise the impossible, and yet imperative, question of *justice* towards the "others".

The study intends to introduce the work of these authors to the current resurgence of interest on the literary trajectories of the Black Atlantic that tend to focus on the narratives of diasporic writers dwarfing the voices that speak from within the African continent. As I argue, close, *symptomatic*, readings of their texts through the lens of slavery attest to the fact that its spectral presence is intertwined in the cultural and communal fabric, and is used to comment and rethink issues such as questions of belonging and ethnicity, the quandaries associated with the neo-colonial condition, the role of the intellectual, violence and gender issues. Following the complexities raised by each text, my chapters explore a number of concepts such as "diaspora", "ethnicity", "trauma", "memory", "violence", "the city", "subaltern agency" and "the body" that invite cross-disciplinary links between post-colonial studies and a number of fields such as history, geography, feminism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and political theory. One of the ambitions of this study is that these initial forays into a largely unexplored field will lead to further research in African representations of the history of slavery; at the same time, its larger goal is to provide the stepping stone for trans-Atlantic dialogues between African and diasporic writers, who will re-think the history of the Atlantic from the perspective of its spectres, from the perspective of the footnoted.

“I have been to the dungeons to feed the ghosts;
Was I scared? I fear more the silence of the living”

Kwadwo Opoku Agyemang, *Cape Coast Castle*

Introduction

“over the course of more than two centuries,
 twenty, thirty million people deported.
 Worn down, in a debasement more eternal than apocalypse.
 But that is nothing yet”
 Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

If the figures of enslaved and deported Africans are to account for the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, and its haunting legacy in the present, then Edouard Glissant is indeed correct in arguing that ‘this is nothing yet’. In “Cape Coast Castle: The Edifice and the Metaphor” Kwadwo Opoku-Agyemang, a Ghanaian poet and essayist, returns imaginatively to the years of transatlantic slavery, and situates his narrative in a symbolic moment: when Olaudah Equiano’s mother returns home to find her children missing. The renowned biography of her son, who, having survived the horror of the transatlantic trade, offers an early example of a slave narrative that details the “agonies of enslavement lived from within” (26), is juxtaposed with her untold story. As Opoku-Agyemang notes, “we know Equiano’s story because he survived to write his life-story; and the story he reflects upon is the full story of Africa abroad, the history of the African Diaspora in miniature” (26). But is this the only story of transatlantic slavery? What do we know about “Equiano’s mother [who] came home from the farm one evening to find her only daughter and youngest son stolen, never to be heard from again” (26)? What do we know about “her story of grief” (26), and along with hers, the stories of the other surviving kinsfolk, who were left behind mourning over “graves without bodies” of the captured Africans (26)?

These questions provide a point of entry to the retrieval of the silent, but not silenced, stories of the slave trade that West African writers narrate in their attempts to speak to the history of slavery. The works of the four authors considered in this study: Syl-Cheney Coker, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Buchi Emecheta provide symptomatic instantiations of the problematic of writing silence, and narrating a history whose archives are impossible to fully retrieve. They all attempt to trace the spectral voices that

emanate from the fissures of slavery's history, and attend to the difficulty of writing and narrating history from the perspective of silence. Although, as we will see, all four authors come from different historical specificities and localities, and, thus, the ways they stage slavery in their narratives are informed by the local/historical urgencies they encounter in each contemporary political context, each, within their respective domain, provides powerful and influential examples of undoing historical silences and absences, not by imposing voices or presences, but by tracing the voids/gaps in the historical representation of slavery.

If West African authors do indeed return to the history of slavery, and engage with its haunting silence, how can we account for the recurring argument among contemporary critics regarding the absence of historical memory in African literatures? Achille Mbembe, for example, laments the scarcity of critical reflection on the slave trade and he argues that "In contrast to the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, there is, properly speaking, *no African memory of slavery*; or, if there is such a memory, it is one characterized by diffraction" (Mbembe, "Acts of Self Writing" 259, emphasis added). The same anxieties are shared by Opoku-Agyemang, who, in the article quoted above, argues that "the effect of enslavement has lasted this long because of *the silence that surrounds its history*" (Opoku-Agyemang 27, emphasis added); ultimately, Opoku-Agyemang urges African authors to break this conspicuous silence and to critically engage with slavery's traumatic and traumatising history.¹

If we accept this line of criticism, then transatlantic scholarship's failure to include and engage with voices from the African side of the Atlantic is justifiable. Contemporary studies on the literary representation of transatlantic slave trade, such as *The Discourse of Slavery: Aphra Behn to Toni Morrison* (1994), *Black Subjects and Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery* (2004), *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (1999), and *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (2003), to offer just a sample of the most compelling and insightful works on the field, open successful and thought provoking dialogues between and across the continents affected by the slave trade, but fail to include any representation of African voices. Similarly, in Paul Gilroy's

¹ See also Laura Murphy's excellent article "Into the Bush of Ghosts: Spectres of the Slave Trade in West African Fiction" that offers similar reviews of Mbembe's and Opoku-Agyemang's positions on the memory of Slavery in the African continent.

The Black Atlantic (1993), a seminal work on the subject of transatlantic slavery that has demarcated the Atlantic space as a fruitful site for intercontinental dialogues, and a “discourse ‘on’ modernity and a critical space ‘within’ the modern” (Baucom 4), African writers are referred to only in passing. As Charles Piot notes, we are confronted, once again, with the idea that “Africa has played little role in the development of black Atlantic cultural production, other than as provider of raw materials—bodies and cultural templates/origins” (156). Yet, in trying to account for this conspicuous “ellipsis”, the same critic comes up with the following explanation, which appears in a footnote:

I can only speculate as to why these scholars have not been more attentive to Africa, but I imagine that it has at least as much to do with the atavistic nature of much of the Africanist literature—which, until recently, paid little attention to those issues of modernity and hybridity with which diaspora scholars have been preoccupied—as with any shortsightedness on their part. (169).

Leaving aside, for a moment, the comment about the atavistic “nature” of Africanist literature, to accuse Gilroy of “short-sightedness”, or lack of sensitivity, towards the voices that write from within the continent is to dismiss altogether his immense contribution to the literary/critical field and the shaping of political thinking. This study deviates from this line of criticism, and, instead of repudiating Gilroy’s project, considers his ellipses as a challenge to engage in more dialogue, more research and, perhaps, further development of the important field he has established, which draws attention “to the ways in which some black writers have already begun the vital work of enquiring into terrors that exhaust the resources of language amidst the debris of a catastrophe which prohibits the existence of their art at the same time as demanding its continuance” (218).

Equally, the attempt to speak *to*, and not *against*, omissions in the field of contemporary postcolonial literary analysis informs my response to statements regarding the “atavistic” nature of Africanist literature and its “limited” scope that echo earlier, reductive readings of African literatures as “national allegories” (Jameson, 1986). One of the main questions addressed in subsequent chapters of this thesis is how the novelists I explore participate in contemporary critical discourses, questioning binary constructions such as the “local” and the “global”, the “same” and the “other”, “memory” and “forgetting”, “man” and “woman”, “master” and “slave”. These authors’ articulations

from the margins of global capitalism, from the “silenced” versions of authorised histories and privileged representations, offer scathing, and powerful, criticisms of colonial/capitalist modernity. In addition, as I hope to show, the four main texts examined in this study, namely *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990), *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1964), *Fragments* (1970), and *The Slave Girl* (1979) respond to and complicate contemporary discourses on hybridity. Suffice it to say that the presence of the “been-to(s)”, who exemplify the painful predicament of subjectivities caught in between cultures and traditions, of diasporic subjects who return to Africa with a certain ideological baggage and longing, and of Creole identities that problematise issues of origins and belonging, echo, but also reframe, the thematic preoccupations of other postcolonial authors.

However, what remains of primary interest is the issue of silence. If, as this study suggests, African authors have joined the Afro-Diasporic writers in raising the painful memory of slavery, how can we account for their conspicuous absence from studies on literary representations of transatlantic slavery? This study argues that the answer lies in the ways we define “voice” and “memory”, on how limited or open is our angle of seeing, and on how we expect authors of the black Atlantic to stage a history that exists only as fragments in the official and communal archives. If, for example, the point of reference is the production of slave narratives, then the African side of the Atlantic, with the sole exception of Olaudah Equiano’s work, is silent. Equally, West African authors are silent if the act of speaking to the history of slavery is confined within the generic and structural frames of “neo-slave” narratives, defined either as “residual oral, modern narratives from escape to freedom” (Bell 228), or “imaginative in ways [their] predecessors could not possibly be and yet factual and faithful to the spirit of the original slave narrative” (Beaulieu 143). Both genres emerge from a constellation of historical and political sources in the Americas that differ from the specificities of West African political and cultural landscapes.²

² It falls beyond the scope of this introduction to examine in detail the conditions of these genres’ emergence, but suffice it to say that the slave narratives responded to the needs of abolition, whereas the “neo-slave” narratives, especially from African American authors, were mobilised as a cultural tool for revolutionary movements such as Black Power, the Civil Rights movement etc. See Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3-57.

Rather than seeking to locate the effort and need of West African authors to revise and re-member the history of slavery in literary genres and modes developed in different traditions, and under different historical and political circumstances, this study follows Toni Morrison's pertinent observation, that "cultures, whether silenced or monologic, whether repressed or repressing, seek meaning in the language and images available to them" ("Unspeakable things unspoken" 31), which raises questions about the historical, political, and cultural structures that have shaped West African writers' responses to slavery. Anne Bailey's interrogation in *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (2005) of the issue of slavery's memory in the African communities, is useful here. Her research on oral accounts of the Anlo Ewe community in southern Ghana offers an aetiological account of the reasons behind the 'silence' that pertains to the African side of the Atlantic. For Bailey, issues like the social stigma associated with the slaves' status in pre-colonial communities, the feelings of disgrace instigated by the internal involvement in the transatlantic slave trade, and, finally, the succession of colonialism and neo-colonialism that have removed slavery from the centre of the region's political and historical concerns, have contributed in the repression of its historical narrative. In addition to the above, the influence of nationalist and cultural movements (like negritude) after Independence in the creation of a viable, glorious, pre-colonial past for Africa that would re-constitute the African self in history, impacted on the dismissal of the traumatic realities of the past. As we will see in subsequent chapters, all these techniques of silencing history are addressed in the texts I have chosen; however, what is important here is that West African authors' responses to the history of slavery have been *shaped, informed and conditioned* by this silence. Thus, their attempts to piece together a history that exists only as "absence" and "silence" not only in the Grand narrative of history, but also in the communal archives of their communities, elicit, and invite, the tracing of absences and silences encoded into the politics of memory and representation. Their painful inventory in the politics of silence, and silencing, points to these gaps and absences of historical and communal memory, struggling, at the same time, to widen the cracks and fissures from which repressed histories emanate.

And as this study suggests, the four authors' radical efforts to unearth not only what has been silenced, but also to disclose and criticise their structures and sites of silencing,

makes their historical revision and reconstitution even more powerful. For their re-reading and re-thinking of slavery's history performs a "symptomatic reading" that according to Louis Althusser's definition in *Reading Capital* (1970): "divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads, and in the same movement relates to a different text, present as a necessary absence in the first" (28).³ Their tracing of the symptoms of historical accounts enact a "'going beyond' of the text to that absent-presence which it implicates but cannot name" (Hall, "Why Fanon?" 35), and create "unspoken" texts out of the site of silence. This method of historical revision justifies and explains their tendency to critically return to a wide spectrum of historical moments when the act of silencing was taking place, instead of the actual historical period of the transatlantic slave trade. By returning to a number of historical moments and revising the politics and "points of emptiness" (23) of cultural and historical discourse, they shed light on the initial acts of silencing and forgetting, both by local and global forces, and, at the same time, they allow the silenced ghosts of slavery to speak, by demonstrating how they continue to exert their active, yet unseen, influence in the cultural, political and social realm. Their examination beyond the site of silence excavates "voice[s], bod[ies] that [are] no longer physically resident but whose echo[es] or shadow[s] burden space in the present" (Onuweme 159).

Thus, what brings these authors together is their symptomatic reading of silence and absence which begins not with answers, but with *questions that were never posed* (Althusser 6). These questions, "the haunting questions", as Radhakrishnan calls them in *History, the Human and the World Between* (2008), problematise and channel the question of "'what is thinking?' that is to say, what is right thinking and what is wrong thinking", in the wake of colonialist predication, through "a correct and authoritative understanding of the past" (77). To offer a correct and authoritative understanding of the past is to rethink slavery, as Mbembe suggests, "not merely as a catastrophe of which [the Africans] were but the victims, but as the product of a history that they have played an active part in shaping" (260). In this way, the authors considered in this study assume *responsibility*, to invoke Maurice Blanchot's formulation, of the injustices of the past. In

³ I am grateful to Assimina Karavanta for drawing my attention to Althusser's concept when she was revising the paper I submitted for publication to *Synthesis*.

The Writing of the Disaster (1986) Blanchot defines responsibility as a political stance that

withdraws me from my order—perhaps from all order and from order itself—responsibility, which separates me from myself ...and reveals the other *in place* of me, requires that I answer for absence, for passivity. It requires that is to say, that I answer for the impossibility of being responsible—to which it has always already consigned me by holding me accountable and also discounting me altogether. (25)⁴

As we will see in the following chapters, the authors' call for a responsible stance towards silenced historical narratives brings dis/order to the national and communal milieu, by unsettling the myths of ethnic purity (Coker); of ideal "homes" for the diaspora (Aidoo); of national revolutions that putatively disrupt the colonial past (Armah); and of communal/national discourses that include the gendered racialised subaltern (Emecheta). These authors reveal the exclusionary practices of these myths, bearing witness to the fact that they proliferate at the expense of what they exclude. By bringing forth the excluded, the marginal, the "the othered" *in place* of the dominant, the central and "the same" they raise the impossible, and yet imperative, question of *justice* towards the "others".

In attending to these authors' efforts to undo the forgetting enacted in and among their communities, and the silencing of western history, which has turned the history of transatlantic trade into a footnote, I have opened a dialogue between African writers and thinkers, and western theorists, such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gayatri Spivak, Stuart Hall, Edouard Glissant, Carole Davies Boyce, Michel de Certeau, Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, and Yuval Davis, to name just a few. Further, following the complexities raised by each text, my chapters explore a number of concepts such as "diaspora", "ethnicity", "memory", "trauma", "violence", "subaltern agency", and "the body" that invite cross-disciplinary links between post-colonial studies and a number of fields such as history, geography, feminism, psychoanalysis, philosophy and political theory. The politics and the ethics of such an eclectic combination of approaches have been contested by a number of post-colonial critics and writers, who warn of the potential

⁴ See also Karavanta's reading of Blanchot's term in "The Global, the Local and the Spectral: Contemplating Spectral Politics" that has paved the way for my use of the term.

danger of western critical hegemony over post-colonial texts. Kenneth Harrow, for example, in *Thresholds of Change in African Literature* (1993) notes that

change and a literary tradition are inextricably linked. To deny African literature the emergence of its own tradition is to deny it the power to differ from world literature, or European literature. And to accept that difference without accepting the process of emergence is to impute stagnation to one corner of literature while generally accepting the power of writers to create tradition elsewhere. (4)

Similarly, Ketu Katrak in “Decolonizing Culture: Towards a Theory for Postcolonial Women’s Texts” (1989) criticises the theoretical silencing of writers from the peripheries of western academia by literary critics who “ignore postcolonial writers’ essays, interviews, and other cultural productions while endlessly discussing concepts of the ‘other’, of ‘difference’, and so on” (158).

I value and share the anxieties of these critics, and especially Katrak, but at the same time, I side with Peter Hallward’s argument that even though “everything exists as specific to a situation this does not mean that its significance and complexity is reducible to a function of (or in) that situation; that every event has its specific occasion does not mean that its significance is exhausted by that occasion” (39). In other words, to examine post-colonial texts outside the grid of western colonialism and the asymmetry of relations it has created is in many ways to de-politicize their works and to reduce them to interrogations of local, regional concerns. The challenge here is “[n]ot to shy away from literary theory, but rather to translate it into the black idiom, renaming principles of criticism where appropriate, but especially naming indigenous black principles of criticism and applying these to explicate [their] own texts” (Gates xxi). Taking into consideration that “we all have been touched by the West” and that the critical post-colonial task “is not about ontological purity, but about strategies of using the West against itself in conjunction with finding one’s own voice” (*Theory in an Uneven World* 157), this study *invites* and *necessitates* the presences of voices from outside the African continent. This invitation is not only predicated on the basis that slavery, as Hortense Spillers reminds us in “Changing the Letter”, was the product of “a cultural synthesis” (28) of forces, but also on the fact that slavery is considered as one of the “dark undersides of the European passion for progress and scientism—the hallmarks of the

project of modernity” (Ashcroft 70). As I have mentioned already, the authors considered in this study engage in a rethinking of slavery’s history that addresses their respective localities and the politics of repression enacted in each site, but also expand their critique into a reconsideration of the site of colonial modernity, exposing its inherent politics of exclusion. The western critics I draw on in this study have equally taken up the task of responding to the need to explore the silences, and rethinking the role of history as a grand western narrative initiating “a radical restructuring of the traditional perspectives, norms and assumptions which form the basis of Western thought” (Young 172). As William Spanos evocatively notes in *America’s Shadow: An Anatomy of Empire* (2000), and I quote at length:

‘the other that remains other’ (Emmanuel Levinas), ‘the negative’ (Theodor Adorno), ‘*the différance*’ (Jacques Derrida), ‘the aporia’ (Paul de Man), ‘the *differend*’ (Jean Francois Lyotard), ‘the invisible of the invisible’ (Louis Althusser), ‘the deviant’ (Michel Foucault), ‘the catachrestic remainder’ (Gayatri Spivak), ‘the rhizomatic’, ‘the deterritorialized’ or ‘the nomadic’ (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari), ‘the hybrid’, ‘the Third Space’, or ‘the minus in the one’ (Homi Bhabha), and so on [...] testify to the *spectre*—that which, to the metaphysical eye, is *not*—that menaces the triumphalist thinking of modernity. (195-6)

Within this context, this study maintains that western and African writers are important for each other, for although they come from different locations and ideological terrains, they are politically and historically related because of their implication in the criticism of colonial modernity and their respective, and yet intertwined, problematisation of history.

Having said this, it is equally important to emphasise that by no means does this thesis claim to provide an exhaustive survey of West African authors’ attempt to return to the history of slavery. As this study on representations of slavery in the West African literatures is novel, and has been burdened by the scarcity of critical material on the issue, I necessarily had to set limits and boundaries, not only to contain the research, but also to make its central arguments persuasive. My first limitations were those of genre. Although there are some references to poetry, especially in the first chapter, where Syl-Cheney Coker’s ongoing preoccupation with the history of slavery is traced through his poems, I have mainly focused on two forms: the novel and drama. This choice does not, however,

result from a paucity of poetic responses to the history of slavery. Poetry collections like Busia Abena's *Testimonies of Exile* (1990), Kofi Awoonor's *House by the Sea* (1978), Kwesi Brew's *The Shadows of Laughter* (1968), Opoku-Agyemang's *Cape Coast Castle* (1996), and Kofi Anyidoho's *Ancestral Logic and Caribbean Blues* (1993), to name just a few, constitute powerful attempts to account for the trauma inflicted by the transatlantic slave trade, and its lingering afterlife in contemporary local and global politics. The second limit set on this thesis was geographical. I have chosen to focus on the works of authors from nations such as Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria, leaving aside other countries—such as Senegal, Guinea, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Togo and Benin—that were major targets of the transatlantic slave trade. The main reason behind this choice is linguistic, as this thesis focuses on Anglophone writers, and not on Francophone, or writers who choose to write in their indigenous languages.⁵

These geographical boundaries also inform the structure of this thesis, whose three sections imaginatively follow the slave routes of the European ships as they were loading human cargo before embarking on the crossing of the Atlantic. Thus, each section symbolises one stop at the coastline, one more dropping of the anchor in yet another gulf, while awaiting the boats from the coast that would fill the ships' bellies: starting from Sierra Leone, which is located at the Northern part of West Africa, they would then move to the interior of the "slave coast", to Ghana, and, finally, they would end up in Nigeria. Each section offers close readings of an author from this region, with the sole exception of Ghana, where I discuss two authors. This structure does not reflect a decision to abide by rigid national definitions. Rather, my choice follows Stephanie Newell's appropriation in *West African Literatures* of Arjun Appadurai's concept of '-scapes'—developed in "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy"—in order to examine the West African region as a 'slave-scape'. The "slave-scape" knits together "individuals and groups who occupy their own specific histories" (14) through the "traumatic and collective narrative[s] of slavery" (12). However, this approach does not dismiss the "cultural differences and development" that separate these Anglophone West African

⁵ Although I am aware that this choice perpetuates a critical tendency to neglect Francophone authors (Newell 21), and authors who write in their indigenous languages, to address the issue of translation in the wake of contemporary theories and strands within the field of translation studies, would have taken this study in exciting, yet altogether different, directions.

states (Newell, *Ghanaian Popular Literature* 17); rather, starting from this premise, it aims to highlight cultural affinities and points of intersection between these authors and regions. Finally, although each chapter highlights the ongoing commitment of West African authors to recover the narrative of slavery by offering overviews of each author's oeuvre, as well as the work of other authors from the same area, I focus my discussion primarily on a close reading of a single text in each case. This choice does not reflect a dearth of primary material on the historical recovery of slavery, but rather is motivated by the exigencies of focusing my argument on a limited number of 'representative' texts which I consider best illustrate my overall thesis. The hope is that these initial forays into a largely unexplored field will lead to further research in this area.

Having raised the above points by way of prologue, I would also like to offer a brief account of each chapter's structural and thematic composition. The first chapter opens with an analysis of Syl-Cheney Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, an epic/magical realist novel that directly addresses the legacy of the history of slavery in Sierra Leone through the historic and geographic tracing of the lives of the first ex-slaves who return to West Africa in 1787. Coker's engagement with the critical revisiting of the past is construed as a radical praxis, whose importance lies not only in reconstituting slavery's forgotten and stigmatised history, but also in gesturing towards alternative visions of communal belonging that cross gender, ethnic and racial borders. Writing from a moment of transition, when his country was about to be ravaged by the ten-year civil war, Coker's novel rethinks issues of "identity", "hybridity", "gender" and "belonging" that have been constitutive in the spread of civil warfare, from the position of difference embodied in diaspora. Thus, his historical inventory is galvanised, like that of the other authors considered in this study, by his unmitigating criticism of two phenomena: colonial modernity (which is rendered accountable for the predicament of the returnees), but also the rigid, unaccommodating attitude of local communities towards racial, ethnic, and gendered others. Tracing Coker's painful insistence on unveiling the "bitter" realities of the past through his disavowal of essentialist, pan-African ideals of "return to the source" and his tentative witnessing of the difficulties that surround and haunt diasporic subjectivities, this chapter concludes with an analysis of his alternative political vision as encoded in the life and actions of Fatmatta (one of his heroines) whose interventions

continue after her death. Having occupied, and challenged, multiple sites of the production of otherness (such as patriarchy within her community in Sierra Leone, and capitalist/colonial modernity during her time as a plantation slave in the Americas), Fatmatta's spectre returns, after her death, to give voice to these multiple, historically conditioned subject positions, and, at the same time, to disrupt the construction of otherness in history. Her spectral reappearances haunt rigid binary oppositional systems that produce "otherness", and at the same, put forth the possibility of alternative collectivities that are shaped through a shared experience of marginalisation, and "responsibility" towards others.

The second chapter focuses on Ama Ata Aidoo's theatrical play *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, and builds on the themes of haunting and return deployed in the first chapter, but explores them from the perspective of "silence" and "trauma". Following the trajectory of the play's plot, this chapter explores how the return to Ghana of the African American Eulalie Rush presents the local community with a number of ethical and social dilemmas: that of determining an attitude towards the diasporic community and, most importantly, of addressing the "silence", "forgetting", and "denial" surrounding its history—namely, the Atlantic slave trade. In keeping with Coker's challenging of afro-centric returns to the source, Aidoo's play also problematises and eschews the simplicities of essentialised "returns to the source", by traversing the uncharted territory of the "return of the repressed", the traumatic, and silenced memories of the ghost of slavery which resurface with the return of the diaspora: namely, the community's evasion of responsibility towards those who were taken as slaves to the Americas. Examining the tradition of theatre in Ghanaian communities, and particularly, the structural aspects of traditional "dilemma tales", whose evasion of closure invites the audience to participate in psychic unsettlements, I read Aidoo's play as a "diasporic space" that invites the local community to rethink its history and identity through the repressed history of slavery. As I argue, Aidoo's engagement with slavery's historical re-inscription, through Eulalie's ghostly return, queries the possibility of recovering slavery's occluded history in ways that evade its appropriation and effacement. Dismissing the possibility of therapeutic exorcisms of ghosts promulgated in certain branches of psychoanalytic (particularly trauma) theory, which effaces those traumatic returns that are an excess of any act of mourning, Aidoo's

play presents the audience with the impossible, and yet imperative, need to remember and yet live, live in the present with the ghost of the past.

The spectre of slavery's history equally haunts Armah's depiction of Ghana's transition to 'postcoloniality' in *Fragments*. As this chapter will suggest, the silencing of slavery in Armah's text is addressed with the same intensity and urgency as in Aidoo's play, but it takes a different direction, in that Armah considers that this act of forgetting has expedited neo-colonial incursion into the country in the post-independence era. If in Aidoo's play the repressed narrative of slavery resurfaces as a ghost that claims its right to memory and representation, and invites the audience to acknowledge its traumatic and painful legacy, Armah's novel highlights the urgent need for such an acknowledgement by exploring the detrimental effects of "forgetting" in the present. Attending Armah's call to politicise memory, this chapter reads the community's amnesia towards the history of slavery not only as a symptom that reveals Ghana's perennial subordination to Western powers, but also as a tool that facilitates the exploration of significant historical patterns that resurface and characterise the neocolonial present. As I suggest, Armah's reclamation of painful versions of the past that the community prefers to forget, such as the internal complicity with the Western slavers, provide "negative historical models" that expose the banality of the present ailment, (to invoke Hannah Arendt's formulation), and set in motion the process of historical revision. The tracing of slavery's traumatic imprints in a number of contexts - such as the slave-castles that overshadow Accra's capital, and the irruptions of violence that take place in its streets; the thwarted attempts of "mute agents" to transmit the fragments of its history; and finally, the impossibility of the artist to articulate its meaning and signification through conventional discursive means - constitute a constellation of fragments that acknowledge how the past repeats itself in present socio-political relations, and furnish the post-Independence community with the necessary historical data to eliminate such repetitions.

The theme of internal complicity with the transatlantic slave trade, one which also informs the other three works explored in this study, is considered in the fourth chapter on Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, which focuses on the historical conditions that surround the internal slave markets. If Coker raises the questions of slavery's history through the site of the returnees, Aidoo through the return of trauma that the diasporic

subject evokes, and Armah through a constellation of political, social and cultural fragments that shed light on the circumstances of neo-colonial incursion, Emecheta disrupts the silencing and forgetting of slavery through the exposition of an equally silenced and forgotten site: the female enslaved body. *The Slave Girl's* narrative returns to the context of slavery and re-writes its history through the forgotten stories of the slave woman, inviting an exploration of slavery as an allusion to female subjugation and as an embodied material experience. Striking a balance between a consideration of the novel's focus on gender, and its exploration of the materiality of slavery as an internal institution, this chapter construes Emecheta's theorisation and historicisation of the black enslaved body as an act of resistance against forgetting the history of slavery. Tracing Emecheta's attempt to bring these bodies into history, I begin with the exposition of a number of acts of forgetting conducted either in the name of capitalist modernity and materialism, or in the context of phallographic structures. Having discussed the novel's exploration of women's struggle to survive and their submission to various hegemonies, I then draw on biopolitics and political theory to approach the predicament of the enslaved body, ending with a meditation on the question of political agency through the site of the spectre, of the enslaved body that returns to claim the right to life of which it has been violently deprived.

Chapter 1

The Return of the Footnoted: Diasporic Hauntings in Syl-Cheney Coker's *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*

“The dangers of Chauvinism and xenophobia... are very real.
It is best when Caliban sees his own history
as an aspect of the history of all subjugated men and women”
Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*

Syl Cheney-Coker's epic/magic realist novel *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* (1990) opens and closes in present day, post-Independence Malagueta, an imaginary African country that is based on Sierra Leone. The opening lines dramatise events that allude to the failed coup against Siaka Stevens' dictatorship in 1968. His fictional double, Sanka Maru, has arrested General Tamba Masimiara, who, having discovered the dictator's corrupt dealings with the American government, engages in an abortive attempt to overthrow him. In the epilogue, the narrative returns to the general as he walks to the gallows. The transition from contemporary turbulent politics to the history of Malagueta, which comprises the rest of the novel, is facilitated by the locus of General Masimiara's confinement: an old slave castle. In particular, his imprisonment in a place that “had not been used since that memorable morning of expiation, when the slave traders had sent the last slaves away, washed their names off the wall and thrown their chains into the sea” (ix), emphasises that history repeats itself, implying that the savagery meted out to the slaves has been duplicated in the present by contemporary rulers. This repetition will open the path for Coker's radical engagement with the task of re-writing the occluded records of transatlantic slavery's history, aiming to restore the “erased” names in history and exhibit their importance to, and synchronicity with, the cultural context of Sierra Leone.

Coker's pre-occupation with reviving the haunting stories of slavery can be better understood if we take into consideration Sierra Leone's rather idiosyncratic relationship to the Atlantic slave trade. The first encounters of the region's habitants with European conquerors are marked by the same history of ruthless exploitation that characterise other

countries of the West African region. Invaded initially by Portuguese traders in 1482, Sierra Leone's main pole of attraction was its rich reserves of gold and ivory. Later on, the establishment of European plantations in the New World in the 1550s and beyond attracted other European traders, who turned Sierra Leone into one of the most vibrant centres for the trafficking of slaves (Alie 33-4). The uniqueness of Sierra Leone with regards to slavery commences, paradoxically enough, with its abolition. In particular, under the initiative of British philanthropists such as Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, Henry Thornton and others, who wanted to relieve the horrors of the slave trade, Sierra Leone was selected to host the first community of freed slaves. In 1787, the so-called "Sierra Leone experiment" (Spitzer 9-13) was set in motion, when 411 ex-slaves were sent out to what was termed "The Province of Freedom". A few years later, in 1792, they were joined by settlers of African origin from England: these were Jamaican as well as American freed black slaves who had served with the British forces in the American War for Independence in exchange for their freedom (Walker 5-8), and had been despatched to the British colony in Nova Scotia by its end.

Consequently, Sierra Leone's relationship to slavery differs from the other countries in the region in that the haunting ghost of slavery's ramifications became a material reality. For countries like Ghana and Nigeria, slavery made and makes its presence felt through the rhetoric of absence and silence: absence of those who were violently wrenched from their land, and silence over their responsibility to protect them. In contrast, for Sierra Leone the horror and trauma of the transatlantic slave trade was brought back home, embodied in the presence, lives and memories of the first returnees. And as we will see, this situation has given rise to a number of complications with respect to the fashioning of a national collectivity, for Sierra Leone was forced to encounter a comprehensive vision of culture and identity that would include not just the indigenous population, but those who returned from the diaspora.

With respect to the peculiarities of Sierra Leone's cultural syncretism, its impact on the identity politics of the community, and its signification for the composition of the novel, Coker has commented that:

I am a Sierra Leonian with roots in the history of the middle passage. Initially, I was trying to define what that history has meant for me and how in some ways it makes

me slightly different, or so people feel, from other West African Writers. It is clear that if you are dealing with other West African Writers who write in English, their mindsets, the traditional norms and forms that make themselves known in their poetry now and then, image clusters so to speak which they have inherited, have remained intact. But in my case it's quite different because I'm having to contend with the admixture of an African life and the history of slavery—what those two have meant for us Sierra Leonian Creoles. (Cooper, "An Interview" 11-12)

Coker's preoccupation with the role of slavery in inscribing and defining the cultural identity of Sierra Leone is manifested, apart from in his novel, in the majority of his poems. For him the community's story begins with the moment of rupture, when the West African region was depleted by European slavers. As he characteristically describes in his poem "The Traveller,"

O my Portuguese conquistador
do not speak to me about my genealogy
a slaver's knife chewed my umbilical cord
twenty-five drops of my blood Pedro da Cinta

1462 means nothing to me the sea to rock the belly. (5, emphasis added)

In this poem, the evocation of slavery comes to signify a form of geographical and cultural dislocation. The beginning of his community's genealogy is identified in the moment of disruption, when the ancestors' long journey across the Atlantic Ocean was about to commence, rendering elusive the act of searching for origins in a specific locality. The same idea, that is, the impossibility of tracing the community's roots outside their transatlantic routes is further problematised in the poem "Exodus" from the collection *The Blood in the Desert's Eyes* (1990). The fact that Sierra Leone comprises Africans from different ethnic groups comes to attest to the predicament of cultural hybridity that sustains the concept of roots and forges new solidarities under the aegis of slavery's shared experience:

Everything echoes of the past:
The chains of the slave, the march of the Jew
...
The black brother driving out the black brother

all along the coast, all over the desert
 they go these bundles of rags, the Ghanaians and the
 Tuaregs
 the beggars of Niger with their skeletal bones
 into the desert
 where death awaits
 them at the appointed time. ("Exodus" 49)

Coker considers slavery, and its ensuing hybridity, as a major component in the formulation of Sierra Leone's cultural identity; however, its impact on the consciousness of his community is not experienced as a comfortable state of being. On the one hand, when it comes to his poetry, hybridity is experienced as a condition of crisis, as a constant clash between two conflicting elements. Any attempt at negotiating the multiple identities results in accentuating the pain of alienation and dislocation; "and I am stripped of my vanity my love my joy / my vanity for wishing to marry two continents in love" ("Concerto for an Exile" 20). The same sense of incompatibility is reiterated in the poem "Hydropathy":

the plantation blood in my veins
 my foul genealogy
 I laugh at this Creole ancestry
 which gave me my negralized head
 all my polluted streams
 not one river shedding its pain
 to cleanse me behind this bush of thorns. (7)

However, although slavery, and its resultant hybridity, is perceived as a sign of cultural disinheritance in Coker's poetry, it takes an interesting turn in his novel. As Coker has admitted, creole identity formed a source of inspiration for *The Last Harmattan's* composition:

By telling the history of what slavery produced in Sierra Leone, however fictional it was going to be, but along historical lines, I wanted to show how these remarkable people, in two hundred years (mind you it's longer than two hundred years in my novel) did so much, not just for Sierra Leone but for West Africa. It was for me an act

of celebration. I think in some ways I was trying to do what in a much larger context Derek Walcott has done in his poetry. (Cooper, “An Interview” 12)

Eustace Palmer traces Coker’s and his contemporaries’ shift of attitude towards the implications of creole ancestry to a strong reaction against what he terms the “entire slave-syndrome” (37) that was ravaging the literary community in Sierra Leone. As he suggests, before and after Independence, the majority of Sierra Leonian writers felt like “cultural orphans”. The peculiar historical circumstances that defined their cultural identity denied them a firm tradition on which they could draw. They were alienated both from African and Western traditions and they could not “take much pride in the tradition of slavery” (37), since it was associated with the stigma of inferiority. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, things changed with the resurgence of “popular Krio” literary works that embraced creole identity and started promoting “cultural self confidence” (37). However, what Palmer defines as a literary movement’s reaction towards the inferiority of the slave syndrome, Brenda Cooper translates within the rhetoric of “defensive Africanization” (119). Appropriating Leo Spitzer’s treatise on the specificities of Sierra Leonians at the beginning of the eighteenth century, who in an attempt to redress their inferiority complex started “constructing healing myths of origins” that were located “back to the glories of Roman Africa, ancient Egypt, and the greatness of the biblical Middle East” (119), Cooper argues that a similar motif can be traced in Coker’s oeuvre. As she suggests, the mythic recovery of the past, the “ambiguous recourse to a romanticised and essentialised mother Africa” (119) functions in his work as an antidote to creole rootlessness and disconnection. Cooper justifies such arguments by maintaining that the “mythic recovery of the past is of course at the heart of the ‘decolonising impulse’” (119).

Cooper’s interpretation acquires validity when examining some of Coker’s poems. Indeed, as she has shown in her readings, some poems are shadowed by this tendency.⁶ However, when it comes to the novel, any expressions of lost origin or uncontaminated essence are highly criticised. This idea becomes clearer once we consider that—as Coker himself suggests in the interview cited above—he undertakes to re-write the history of Sierra Leone’s “coming into being” from the perspective of the ex-slaves: that is, from

⁶ See in particular Cooper’s readings of poems such as “Freetown” in *Seeing with a Third Eye*: 119-120.

the perspective of a diasporic community. In posing diaspora as “agent of historical re-memoration” (Spivak, “Acting Bits/Identity Talk” 788), Coker legitimises slavery’s history as a crucial component of Sierra Leone’s historical and political becoming, and, at the same time, he invites Sierra Leoneans to rethink their attitudes towards ethnic variation and mutability throughout the ages. And if, as Sarah Brenton suggests, “a story of origin of the nation is always of its moments. But it always reveals the character of the nation, explains a conflict, proposes its destiny, justifies a current action” (27), then it is from the emergence of Sierra Leone as a national entity that we should begin our exploration, seeking to access what continuities Coker traces between the past and the present. For *The Last Harmattan* is written at a moment of crisis, when the outbreak of the 1991 civil war was imminent, and Sierra Leone was forced to contemplate long postponed questions regarding the contested terrains of *ethnicity*, *belonging* and *gender* (Keen 14-35). The novel’s narrative re-members the past from this vantage point, and by re-membering, seeks to explore alternative paths that could have forestalled the current political tragedy. This intention attests to Coker’s distancing from rigid constructions of national collectivities based on return to an authentic (essentialised) blackness, a return to the Black continent that is re- or mis- interpreted as a legitimate origin. My critical response to the novel suggests that Coker eschews the reductive aspects of Afrocentrism by way of traversing the anti-essentialist ground of the Black Atlantic, and adopts a critical “voice” that opts for the exploration of the tension between “roots” and “routes”, to evoke Paul Gilroy’s metaphor. As I will show, these alternative paths are identified in the possibility of alternative sites of communal belonging that repudiate the rigid formation of national identities born out of the myth of “purity”, and reveal what has been “othered” and excluded from the Grand Narratives of History.

This chapter begins with a reading of Coker’s novel through Edouard Glissant’s critical re-reading of the epic as a genre of mobility and “routes”, rather than fixity and “roots”, to foreground Coker’s rethinking of history through the prism of “relation” with the “others”. His problematisation of concepts such as “roots” and “origins” is first traced in his critical depiction of the returnees’ longings of return to the source that expose how the contested cultural space of “home” assumes mythic proportions in the diaspora’s search for cultural wholeness. The difficulties the returnees encounter upon their return

are read through a historical detour to the conditions that surround the traditional communities on the coast prior to colonial incursion. This turn to the pre-colonial past exposes the rigidity of the coastal communities' political and social structures in relation to gender and difference, and, at the same time, anticipates future intolerant attitudes towards the hybridity of the returnees. Thus, the pre-colonial community's attempt to normalise Fatmatta, a radical woman who challenges patriarchal structures and claims her right to difference, is echoed in the enforcement of ethnic cleansing rituals from the impurities of slavery that some of the returnees undergo. In the last section of the chapter I return to Fatmatta, and I read her presence as an instantiation of irreducible "otherness"; her subjection to multiple sources of exploitation links her predicament with that of the returnees, and paves the way for the gravity of her spectral re-appearance that returns to haunt the logic of a number of oppressive structures and to demand a rethinking of thinking, a rethinking of difference.

Imaginary "Homecomings" and "Unhomely" Shadows

"The unhomely is the shock of recognition
of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world"
Homi Bhabha, "The World and the Home"

In *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*, the history of Malagueta unfolds through the complicated, symbolically loaded lives of the founding families, such as the Cromantines, the Martins, Fatmatta and other freed slaves. We first encounter them when they are about to embark on their return journey to the African coast. Each family tree witnesses movements across time and space, and covers the chronological gamut of two hundred years, from slavery through colonialism to the post-independence period, and the geographical environs of three continents: from Africa to America, through the middle passage, and then back to the African coast of Kasila, through England.

During the reverse crossing of the Atlantic, one of the tales that unfolds is the story of Fatmatta, the bird woman. Fatmatta transfers the narrative back to the pre-colonial coast of Kasila, introducing characters like her mother Mariamu and her father Sulaiman the Nubian, or Alusine Dunbar, a prophet and time-traveller, who patrols the centuries and who foresees all the unfolding events of the novel. At the same time, her crossing of

the Atlantic will expose the horror that accompanies the middle passage and the concomitant conditions of plantocracy. This particular chapter of history—the conditions of slavery in the plantation farms of Virginia, Carolina and Mississippi—is revisited through the flashback life stories of the other returnees, such as Sebastian and Jeanette Cromantine and Gustavius Martins. The latter’s love for Isatu, a local woman, introduces a dominant issue in the course of the novel: namely, the tension between indigenous Africans and the returnees, a tension that culminates to the demise of the settlement.

Malagueta is revived nine years later, when a new wave of former slaves lands on Kasila’s coast: these include Thomas Bookerman along with 1200 other men and women. The novel follows the live-stories of the new settlers, such as that of Phylis Dundas and Louisa Turner, and also these stories of the new generation born in Malagueta: key figures here include Emmanuel Cromantine, son of Sebastian and Jeanette, and Garbage Martins, the offspring of Gustavius and Isatu. Significantly, the development of the community is hindered by the prejudices of the locals and the legacy of colonialism, embodied in the person of Captain Hammerstone. His colonial domination leads Thomas Bookerman, Phylis Dundas and Emmanuel Cromantine to self-imposed exile and those who stay behind, the children and grandchildren of the founding families, “form the embryo of what will become the nationalistic educated elite” (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 116). As the community is ravaged by neo-colonial incursion, new disastrous adventures arrive in the form of Arab travellers, and their stories will “carry over [Malagueta] to the crest of modernisation” (344), approaching the present. They collaborate with the British, and their leader, Ali Baba along with forty African Ministers, eventually come to rule Malagueta. Their corruption motivates the benevolent Captain Masimiara, who is linked to the founding families, to overthrow them. Sanka Maru is invited to head a new civilian government; however, his tyranny prompts Captain Masimiara to attempt a second coup. The novel ends with Captain Masimiara’s death penalty and with a scene where Sanka-Manu encounters Dunbar’s retributive justice: the seer flying on his magic carpet unleashes a Harmattan that condemns the tyrannical dictator to “eternal public disgrace” not in the “public world of the *realpolitik*” (Wright 9) but in *The Last Harmattan*’s closing sentence.

The appearance of magic carpets and epic figures in the midst of events that outline Sierra Leone's political and historical drama (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 117), bespeak *The Last Harmattan's* generic blend of magic realism and epic. The blending of historical facts with legend, myth, folklore and magic highlights Coker's intention to stretch the narrative form to "new kind of directions" (Cooper, "Interview" 10). This tendency comes as a reaction to the either/or mentality that chains the African writer to narrow conceptions of creativity. As Coker has said in the same interview, in Africa "either you had a sociological view of the novel within the Achebean definition, or you were a political novelist within the Ngungian concept of it" (10). Denying to be cloistered within pre-described forms, Coker goes for more "energetic interpretations of life" that risk experimentation and celebrate "the great coalescence between life and death, between the past and present" (Cooper, "Interview" 10-11). With reference to the experimental tendencies of Coker and his contemporaries, Newell suggests that far from suggesting tedious exercises in the aesthetic field for their own sake, these innovations retain a political character, since although they "have made a break with realist modes of narration, this break is not thematic so much as stylistic" (185). Indeed, in *The Last Harmattan* we can trace a number of themes that are shared by other African novels: clashes between the new and the old, anxieties over political corruption, the rights and roles of women, the ongoing struggles for freedom and dignity and the haunting sense that history repeats itself and many others. At the same time, although filtered through the prism of the magic, the mythic and the epic, throughout the course of the novel we find sporadic references to pivotal historical events that have shaped Sierra Leone: there are abundant references to the conditions of plantocracy and the American War of Independence; the settlement of a British colony in the region and the conflicts with the native population; the First World War and the turbulent politics of the post-independence period. However, for Paolo Bertineti history is "presented in a dimension in which the historical accuracy is irrelevant and the atmosphere is that of epic" (200). But are the historical references of a novel the only aspects that betray or hint towards its politicised axis? Or, to put it differently, does the prioritisation of aesthetic forms like the epic detract from the novel's political commitment?

With reference to the political potential of the epic form, Edouard Glissant argues that one cannot ignore its totalising, gendered or atavistic parameters, but he identifies an important feature of epic that has escaped the notice of other critics. In particular, he notices that

epic books that found humanity are books that re-assure the community on its own fate and that consequently, tend, not in themselves but by the use made of them, to exclude the other from this community. I say not in themselves, because the great books that found and root communities are in fact books of wandering. (*Poetics of Diverse* 120)

According to Glissant, the critical reception of epic works has overemphasised the importance of “roots” and overlooked that fact that this concept is in fact predicated upon the experience of “routes”. Ultimately, for Glissant, the repetitive motif of exile and wandering opens up the epic genre to readings that highlight the heroes’ *relations* with other cultures. The concept of *relation* is crucial for his theoretical formulations as it entails a system of interpersonal and intercultural exchange that accommodates the irreducible difference of the Other. *Relation* is, in the first place, “a relation of equality with and respect for the Other as different” (Britton 11).⁷ Glissant recognises that Western manifestations of the founding epics were informed and served the imperialistic project’s “idea of civilisation” that “helps hold together opposites, whose only former identity existed in their opposition to the Other” (*Poetics of Relation* 14), and that every contact with the Other was mainly structured around the idea of domination, reinforcing the opposition between centre and periphery. This is why he gestures towards a re-constellation of the epic form “that would use a similar dialectics of rerouting, asserting, for example, political strength but simultaneously, the rhizome of a multiple relationship with the Other and basing every community’s reasons for existence on ... a Poetics of Relation” (*Poetics of Relation* 16). In its contemporary transformation, the new epic unsettles the discourse of “sameness” and embraces the difference within sameness, articulating the experiences of footnoted and marginalized subjects. In this way, it

⁷ Along with Britton’s illuminating reading of Glissant’s “relation”, see also Peter Hallward’s fascinating chapter: “Edouard Glissant: From Nation to Relation,” in *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001): 66-126. In this chapter, Hallward stresses Glissant’s anti-essentialist politics through a mapping of his “evolutionary schema” that moves from national liberation to post-national affirmation.

recognises the value of diversity, allowing the creation of a relation that sees the Other as equal and as a presence that is necessary because it is different. Operating according to the dictum of diversity rather than unity, “the new epic literature will establish relation and not exclusion” (*Poetics of Diverse* 121).

It is with regards to Glissant’s arguments on “relation” and “inclusion” as key elements of the epic form that I would like to situate *The Last Harmattan*’s narrative, arguing for the importance of its political agenda when it comes to narrating the history of his community. In particular, Coker’s novel confronts directly what has often been forgotten or marginalised: the experience of slavery and its constitutive role in formulating the identity and consciousness of the community. Similar inclusions, in a manifest or latent way, but still quite distanced from Coker’s epic breadth, can be traced in other Sierra Leonian novels. To name just a few, Yema Lucilda Hunter’s *Road to Freedom* (1982)⁸ concerns the early settlement of Krio society in Sierra Leone during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Hunter offers insightful information on the Creole community’s coming to terms with identity when they arrived in Freetown, but the chronological span of the novel reaches as far as the living conditions for the freed slaves in the settlement of Nova Scotia and closes with the turbulent launching of the colony in Sierra Leone. Additionally, Sarif Easmon’s collection of short stories *The Feud and Other Stories* (1981) focuses mainly on the specificities of the colonial era. Although Easmon’s work has been described as comprising stories that “hinge upon basic human passions, not politics” (Hunt & Sengova 64), there are a number of narratives that tackle with slavery’s complex legacies in contemporary Sierra Leone.⁹ However, *The Last Harmattan* differs from these and other novels of the West African region in that it explores the ramifications of slavery in a much wider historical context and seeks to trace its pre-histories, its history and, of course, its meta-history.

In *The Last Harmattan* the story of slavery begins with what existed prior to the moment of rupture. By remembering this particular historical moment, Coker revisits the contested cultural space of “home” that assumes mythic proportions in the diaspora’s

⁸ I am particularly thankful to Dr. Stephanie Newell for drawing my attention to this novel.

⁹ It falls beyond the scope of this chapter to engage in readings of these short stories that will counter Hunt’s suggestion; however, for readings that comment on the politicised axis of Easmon’s collection, see Eustace Palmer comments and particular his readings of stories like “Koya” and “For Love of Therese”.

search for roots and cultural wholeness. Being the product of separation, dislocation and dis-memberings, the first settlers of Sierra Leone sought re-connection with the land of their origins. As Stuart Hall notes in “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, there are two operative vectors that frame the diaspora’s reconnection with Africa. The first is achieved through the imaginative re-discovery of the land of origins that homogenises diaspora identity “in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one self’” (223). Being grounded on the illusion of “oneness”, cultural identity remains unmediated by the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of actual history. Advocating an uncomplicated sameness, such formulations articulate identity as proceeding in a straight unbroken line, from some fixed origin in the African continent. As Hall explains,

Africa is the name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning, which, until recently, it lacked. No one who looks at these textual images now, in the light of the history of transportation, slavery and migration, can fail to understand how the rift of separation, the ‘loss of identity’, ... only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place. Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of past. (224-225)

Within this formulation, the ghost of Africa predates history and culture and celebrates a fixed essential identity that persists from time immemorial without significant change or alteration (Gilroy 25). Hall recognises the undeniable intellectual and political achievements facilitated by these formulations of the diaspora paradigm: employed at a particular fertile moment in the civil rights and Pan-African movement this formulation helped to increase racial consciousness and solidarity in confrontation with racism and colonialism (224). However, Hall rejects the authority of this model on the basis that it seems to appropriate the essentialist racial categorisation of white supremacists, resulting in ethnic absolutisms that reify the very categories of racial oppression. If Africa is present through its absence, then the only possible space it can occupy is that of a “spiritual, cultural and political metaphor” (231) that it is frozen in the unchanging zone of the past and upon which the desires of the displaced communities are projected.

The Last Harmattan is positioned in the centre of Hall’s criticism of the imaginative re-discovery of Africa and exposes the serious ramifications of the “if” hypothesis once

tested against the material dimensions of “return” to Africa. For in *The Last Harmattan* the ghost of Africa incarnates into a geo-political reality that will challenge, unsettle and problematise utopic theorisations. To begin with, the nostalgic dimensions of return and their gradual erosion are illustrated in the character of Sebastian Cromantine, one of the founding members of Malagueta. While still a slave, Sebastian is haunted by his dead father’s ghost. Recalling the conditions of the first appearance of the ghost, Sebastian reports the sound of a “voice he remembered from another time, deep and lonely. It had the faraway gravity of a rootless man burdened by his inability to find a resting place” (9). According to Sebastian’s interpretation, his father’s spirit will be appeased only if his bones are buried in the land of his origins, and it becomes his sacred mission to bury them in Africa. Thus, during the reverse crossing of the Atlantic, Sebastian carries his father’s skull, a possession that enables him to “evoke a lineage that was not defined by time, but by the spirit, by the force of all eternities and the running music of ancestral water that coursed through his blood”(14). David Parkin suggests that the transitional objects carried by diaspora subjects in crisis “inscribe their personhood in flight but offer possibility of their own re-personalisation afterwards” (303). Being loaded with memories of the life before, these objects are mementoes of sentimental and cultural knowledge; at the same time, they function as the basis and framework for future re-settlement. In Sebastian’s case, the act of re-personalisation in Africa is orchestrated around the ethics of intergenerational links with his ancestral lineage. The presence of the skull loads him with hope for what will come, and he feels “buoyed by the potency of the black man’s sperm that had begun to explode and generate its force in the universal womb of a woman” (14-15). Clearly, the lineage established here is a kind of “blood knowledge, unmediated by experience or historical time” (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 121).

However, Coker distances himself from essentialist models of re-connection with the land of origin, through the tools of ‘irony’ and ‘sarcasm’ (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 121). Sebastian’s biological drive for return to the land of his roots and its promised embrace is undermined, when we are offered the descriptions of the other returnees who, like Sebastian, “had brought the bones of their dead ones which they were hiding under their bunks so that the crew would not find them. During the periodic storms at sea, the

rattling of the bones on the bags helped to reassure their owners that they would make it to shore” (15). Here, the concept of spiritual guidance offered by the dead ancestors and the mystic communication with their spirits is reduced to wishful projections of the returnees, who in their angst over their adventures in Africa, interpret the most natural phenomenon as a mystic experience.

A similar motif of exposition and then undermining of the diasporic community’s hunger for return to the land of origin is reiterated through Fatmatta’s aspirations for return to the coast of Kasila. The first time she makes her appearance is when, along with the first returnees, she undertakes the reverse crossing of the Atlantic, from America to the African coast of Kasila. She is presented as “the oldest passenger on board” (16) and as one of the few who has a direct link with the African coast. While on board, she longs to return to the place of her “origins” and she has a vision of

a long ancestral bridge with a lot of people crossing from one end to the other; and suddenly everything was clear to her. ... she knew that she would return, shed all signs of degradation and abuse ... the great bird had come to take her home to that land where her navel string was buried. (67)

Once again, the image of the return to the source is entwined with “the linkage between Fatmatta and the land, her umbilical cord pulling her urgently back” (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 122). However, this imagery, which seems governed by the nationalistic yearnings of biological and essential links with “mother Africa”, is violently subverted by Fatmatta’s sudden death two days before the ship reaches her destination. As we will see, the symbolic connotation of this unexpected development opens up the road for Fatmatta’s radical spectral presence in the novel, suggesting that her story, along with those of other returnees, will not be accommodated within conventional ethnic and nationalistic imaginings. However, leaving Fatmatta’s story aside for a moment, it is important to focus on the community’s aspirations over the process of “homecoming”, as these scenes adumbrate what awaits the up-rooted community once they land on shore. It is there that Coker openly voices his disillusionment and disappointment with the proponents of negritude and Afro-centrism who promised diasporic Africans a homeland in the Motherland and total assimilation and identification with their long-lost African

brothers and sisters. For upon arrival, the romantic reveries give way to a quite different reality, unsettling Sebastian's and the rest of the community's desires.

The tension between the two communities surfaces in their first meeting. The newcomers may have Africa in their blood, but they are ignorant of local customs, as becomes clear in their negotiations with the local King. Their request to buy a piece of land is rejected on the basis that "here, no one owns anything, not even the stones" (70). The king grants them all the land that they need to use, but they are warned that they will have to "respect the laws and the men keep off our women" (70). The message that "they are strangers" (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 122), and that the process of assimilation will be harder than imagined, is emphasised here. At the same time, through the first encounter Coker reveals the underbelly of essentialism and romanticization. Blind to the first negative signs of his community's status in the land of origin and adhering to the belief of harmonious cross-cultural co-existence, Sebastian Cromantine remains faithful to his desire for "rooting". Among other things, this desire is enacted in his attempt to monitor the growth of the coffee trees discovered on one of his expeditions around the territory. If, as Philip Whyte suggests, we accept Stefan Helmreich's claim that the etymology of the word diaspora is to be found in the Greek 'speirein', meaning to sow, in the sense of sowing seeds, then "obvious parallels may be made between Sebastian's desire to re-establish contact with the land of his origins and literally to engender a new sense of community out of the old" (56). Thus, he collects the fruits, he toils the land, but when he is ready to harvest the crops, "the unruly and treacherous" land initiates him to his first "baptism in Malagueta" (86). A great hurricane almost blows Malagueta off the face of earth, and the crops are only saved by community's intervention at the very last moment.

However, although the natural calamity had been successfully surmounted, the settlers' sense of relief will not last for long, for shortly after new adversaries emerge. The stresses of reintegration re-surface due to a "malaria scourge" that ravages the region. The fear of contamination will fire the paranoia of the locals, who, applying an age-old deductive logic, assume that the settler's new- imported seeds are responsible for the disaster. As we learn:

The plague that had been killing the settlers had spread to their neighbours. At first they had not thought much about it. But when their children succumbed to death soon after eating the sweet potato which the foreign woman had planted, they deduced with an age-old logic, contrary to reason, that the seed of the settlers' misfortune had been planted in their world, which not even the totemic power of their gods could halt. (101)

Arming themselves with firebrands and axes, the locals pillage and set fire to Malagueta, destroying all that the new arrivals have worked so hard to establish. Thus the settlers, subjected once more to the experience of enforced dislocation, withdraw to the forest. Malagueta's demise comes to elaborate the ramifications of Helmreich's metaphorical pattern of foreign seed grown on indigenous soil and to problematise the contested terrain of "home". For contrary to their expectations while crossing the Atlantic, the settlers encounter a situation where their "homely" aspirations give way to what Bhabha terms as an "un-homely" experience. Although for Bhabha the unhomely "has less to do with forcible eviction and more to do with the uncanny literary and social effects of enforced social accommodation or historical migrations and cultural relocations" ("The World and the Home" 445), his model can be appropriated to describe the predicament of the settlers because their unhomely moment "relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (*The Location of Culture* 11). And the locals' unwelcome treatment equates the settlers' predicament with the belated repetition of the violent history of un-accommodated and de-homed diasporic communities, touching even upon the trauma of their ancestors' displacement in the first place. Since the "unhomely" has taken hold, the borders that separate "home", the serene, the peaceful and the comfortable from the "unhomely", the uncanny and the dreadful, become confused and attenuated. At these moments, "home" is associated with dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror" (Bhabha, "The World and the Home" 445). This terror signals the sense of being unwelcome on the basis of "racial difference" as well as the realisation of being subjected to the discourse of "sameness" that excludes displaced differences from the landscape of origin. In order to understand the root causes of the locals sclerotic attitude, we must return to Fatmatta's story, for it is the memory of her encounter with an albino "that made all strangers suspect" (100).

Before the Rupture: Tracing the “Roots” of Ethnic Animosity

If things aren't going too well in contemporary thought,
It's because there's a return...to abstractions,
back to the problem of origins, all that sort of thing...
Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*

Fatmatta's story is situated within the changing forces of pre-colonial Sierra Leone, when the community is about to be invaded by colonialism. Although her status as a woman within the communal system is not informed by the same oppressive dichotomies of colonial or national order, and there existed strong social spaces and spheres of autonomy she can claim,¹⁰ it is still circumscribed by a set of pre-determined roles, such as wife and mother. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie's analysis of the conditions of women in Africa avers that in the pre-colonial past “gender hierarchy or male supremacy ... was known or taken for granted” (133). Similarly, Filomina Steady informs that contemporary scholarship on the pre-colonial communal systems in Sierra Leone and Liberia has brought into light the existence of “age mates units” that “were mainly responsible for the *collective socialisation of adolescents into adulthood*. They also provided *institutionalised means* of mutually sanctioning the behaviour of members of the opposite sex” (6, emphasis added). Although Steady's overall argument aims to highlight the equal status of women—in economic, social, ritual and political terms—her observation attests to the idea that these systems were structured around a rigid gender oriented nucleus. The fact that the adolescents were inculcated in gender specific discourses, and thus internalised particular gender norms, exemplifies a tendency towards normalisation and indoctrination that intends to minimise or preclude any possibility of resistance or challenging. And when it comes to women, their role as “reproducers”, which apart from materialistic carries also symbolic and metaphysical connotations, was clearly highlighted. Thus, contrary to imaginative re-coveries of pre-colonial Africa as an ideal topos, its examination from the gender perspective comes to reveal its aberrations. And these aberrations reveal a way of “thinking” that carries the seeds of allergic attitudes towards the different, or the “other”.

¹⁰ For studies that raise this argument, see Terborg-Penn Rosaline and Rushing Andrea Benton's excellent edited collection *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: a Reader* and in particular essays like Niara Sudarkasa' “The “status” of Women in Indigenous African Societies” pp: 73-88.

The rigidity of the pre-colonial system, along with Fatmatta's 'radical' operation within its frame, is anticipated during her outdoor ceremony, when the women of the compound gather to bless the new born girl and her mother, Mariamu. The expected celebratory remarks that should accompany Fatmatta's birth are replaced by a "collaborative storytelling" (Davies 6) that records and documents in a single narrative the vicissitudes of the female predicament as identified in "the same circle of child-bearing, of waiting for husbands who went away for long periods and of being discarded after they passed childbearing usefulness" (32). However, although the women of the village offer a critique of the traditional, instrumental function of motherhood, their conception of womanhood appears to have no space for Fatmatta's difference. As soon as Fatmatta starts her questioning and challenging the practices of the community, she will be ousted and treated as the "other".

Her first deviant acts take place when she is about to become a speaking subject and submit to the "rules of language". Instead of articulating structured sentences, Fatmatta speaks an "undecipherable" language (32) that confuses her mother.¹¹ Her symbolic belatedness in surrendering to patriarchal linguistic system, and by extension these laws and restrictions that control desire and the rules of communication, tag Fatmatta as "unnatural" and "aberrant". These prejudices are intensified when, soon after, the "scorpion with the predatory claws of ill-omen and the colour of golden cobra" (32) appears in her eyes. On a first level of interpretation, the scorpion in Fatmatta's eyes testifies her magical heredity; being the product of Dunbar's and Mariamu's illegitimate union, she has inherited the former's supernatural powers. At the same time, her Medusan gaze incarnates all that can be seen as monstrous and threatening in a woman who defies conventions, namely her untamed sexuality. The community registers Fatmatta as a "Goddess, Devil, Temptress, one of the breed of beautiful, supernatural women who torment men" (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 123), and fails to recognise that the

¹¹ For Lacan to become a speaking subject, one has to be subjected to the laws and rules of language, which are seen as specifically paternal. He calls the rules of language the Law of the father for "It is in the name of the father that we must recognize the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history... has identified his person with the figure of the law" (*Ecris* 74). Refusal to succumb to the Law of the father signals aberrant behaviour, for it constitutes the necessary "pact which links... subjects together in one action. The human action par excellence is originally founded ...on laws and contracts" (Freud's Papers 230). Through acknowledgment and recognition of the Name-of-the-Father, one is able to enter into a community of others.

scorpion in her eyes constitutes her best defence against a system that sees her femininity as a threatening force and encodes her transformative vision of traditionally regulated relationships. Contrary to their expectations, the scorpion in her eyes functions as a re-instatement of her visionary role, since only a powerful visionary figure can see beyond, and thus resist, the rigid structure of patriarchy, whose systems of social and sexual relationships rigidly define a woman's place.

As Fatmatta grows up, her transformative vision is systematically revealed and among its first manifestations is her act of barring Mariamu from her role as a "mother". We are informed that "Mariamu felt uneasy about her daughter, especially as she was unable to reach her, to be a mother as she has dreamed" (33). Fatmatta's contestation of the very foundations of the mother-daughter relationship is interpreted by Mariamu as a "traitorous act" (Nasta xv). However, what she wrongly construes as a personal rejection constitutes Fatmatta's rebellion, signalling her urge to break away and seek her individual identity. Fatmatta's "matrophobic" behaviour, which according to Rich "is the fear ... of *becoming one's mother*" (*Of Woman Born* 235), contests Mariamu's complicity with patriarchy. Additionally, Mariamu fails to realise that Fatmatta's 'traitorous act' has opened the space for her own liberation from the rigid confines of her community that had "raised [her] with the idea of pleasing men" (47). Free from the emotional bonds that the role of a "caring mother" prescribed, she decides to prioritise her desires and sets herself "free of society, free of tyrannical men and tradition, free of that parsimonious society that had taken her away the one relationship that had aroused her to the limits of her desire" (47). She will become the mistress of Antonio the mulatto, a man with whom she will "settle down to a kind of marital bliss" although she "vowed never again to get married" (49).

Thus, her symbolic clash with the maternal figure signals her distance from the traditions of her community that aim to interpellate her subjectivity as a woman within rigid confines. Realising that "the only woman who had any sort of freedom to fundamental choices for themselves were those who had 'no proper' place in that society" (Ahmad 117) she undergoes her self-imposed exile and lives isolated at the margins of her community. Her dwelling at the margins, a topos of "contemplative performance" (113) as Assimina Karavanta has astutely noted, allows Fatmatta to re-read

a set of principles and values and detect their sclerotic mentality that rejects women's right for self-determination. Suffocated by this realisation, she "felt that she had to go beyond the bonds of clan and country, that a new comet bearing her name had to be explored before she could allow herself to be stamped by anyone's narrowness and demand... they belonged to the terrifying stagnation of the past, of the present" (52). Hence, when Ahmed, her fellow villager, proposes marriage, Fatmatta refuses, for she can foresee that this marriage threatens to chain her into the conventional path of the obedient wife and mother. Instead, Fatmatta celebrates her freedom and keeps on "bathing naked like a child in the river" (34) at the age of sixteen, scandalising her community for "they had never seen the like of it before" (34). When the love-struck Ahmed reprimands Fatmatta for her liberties on the basis that they are creating rumours within the community, Fatmatta holds firm to her right to "do her own thing", asserting in a pertinacious way that "What I do is none of your business, and for that matter is no one else's" (39).

Having refused the predetermined position of a caring daughter, conventional wife and mother, she decides to leave the territory of her community and marry Camara, the first "stranger" who appears in the village. Being inscribed as the "other" Fatmatta feels attracted to Camara's ostensibly "different race" (52), described thus:

His face was of a different race, alien to those men and women who were accustomed to the different races of the area, to the stock of men who had ridden on camel and mule backs in search of gold and been lost in the evaporating forests. His head was round and unusually large, but he was handsome in the way the barbarian gods were handsome... his face was nectarine, and he was black and golden at the same time, tall with elegant hands. (53)

Camara's "different race" (52) opens up a number of possibilities to Fatmatta, namely the chance to leave her community. However, on the first night of her marriage, she realises that Camara is a grotesque albino, who had borrowed "the face of another" (56) to deceive her; after their love making, Camara dies and his beautiful face is transformed into a skull.

Nevertheless, the failure of her marriage cannot be accommodated under the Tutuolan model/tale of "rebellious women in traditional folklore", who at some point will pay the

prize of their rebelliousness and comply with the structures of their community (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 123). For in Fatmatta's case, it is the people of the community, who being enthralled by the *wealth* of the "stranger", turn "the wedding into the investiture of a prince and a princess", allowing Camara to escape "the haranguing over his origins" (57). The community's materialistic drive, which results in the evasion of responsibility towards one of its members, instantiates the introduction of the new capitalist modernity that will contaminate the region. At the same time, it prefigures future "betrayals" that will take place on the altar of materialism, when for instance Captain Hammerstone's tantalising promises for capital cause the people of Malagueta to denounce Thomas Bookerman's ideals and fight instead by the side of the conqueror, surrendering Malagueta to the hands of British Colonists.

Yet, the failure of her marriage is less significant for Fatmatta when one considers the potential growth and insights her experience has brought forth. For she realises that the assertion of freedom is an individual enterprise and cannot be mediated through a man. After the fiasco of her wedding night, Fatmatta returns to her village, but not with the objective of staying there. Such a decision would frame her into the Tutuolan myth, offering evidence to the fact that "she has been brought into line and has learnt her lesson" (124). Instead, Fatmatta returns to Kasila and agrees to marry Ahmed, but this decision "bore no relationship to what she was thinking" (60). For Fatmatta, as soon as she recovers her strength she starts viewing "with an unshakable inevitability the prospect of leaving Kasila" (60). One day, Fatmatta disappears "without warning" (61) and after a week "Ahmed resigned to the truth that she had gone for ever" (61).

Interestingly, the signification of Fatmatta's radical challenging of the patriarchal values, which exposes the pre-colonial society's inability to accommodate "otherness" will be dismissed from the memory of the community. Instead, as we have seen in the episode with the returnees, what remains inscribed is a discriminatory attitude towards whoever does not comply with their criteria of "sameness". And this is what unites Fatmatta with the different—yet related—experience of the returnees. In different historical circumstances both represent manifestations of otherness, localised either on gender norms or ethnic origins. Both demand from the local community to re-assess, re-think and re-define its attitudes towards difference. And finally, both threaten

polarisations between “male” and “female”, “us” and “them”. In Fatmatta’s case, the threat is treated with her “quarantine” at the margins of the community and then, when the first chance appears, with “rushed” procedures that promise deliverance from her “errant” presence. In the returnees’ case, the threat imposed by their hybrid identity is dealt by their removal to the outskirts of the region and as we will see, with further attempts at normalising their difference.

Through these attitudes towards the ex-slaves’ creole identity Coker captures and exposes the bitter predicament of diaspora’s hybridity. For although critics like Homi Bhabha celebrate the condition of hybridity as a relatively comfortable state of being, for Coker the condition of his community’s hybridity is described as “expressions of extreme pain and agonising dislocation, as frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity” (Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Meditations* 159). In a similar vein, Brent Edwards argues that the materiality of diasporic “exchange is never a neat and happy call and response between blacks in different places in the diaspora. It is equally shaped by a profound series of misapprehensions, misreadings, persistent blindness, and solipsisms, a series of self-defeating and abortive collaborations, a failure to translate even a basic grammar of blackness” (“Three Ways to Translate the Harlem Renaissance” 291). Although Edwards’ arguments concern the interaction between various diasporic communities, once paired with Radhakrishnan’s criticism they raise an important consideration for theorisations of diaspora, namely the politics of “reception”. For the actual experience of diaspora entails its endorsement and relationship with the hosting community. And if this community is permeated by nationalist or ethnocentric ideas, then diaspora’s hybridity becomes a threatening element that cannot be embraced.

This idea can be further illuminated through Yuval-Davis’ comment that “ethnicity relates to the politics of collectivity boundaries, dividing the world into “us” and “them” usually around myths of common origin and/or destiny and engaging in constant processes of struggle and negotiation (“Beyond Ethnicity” 170). Diaspora’s hybridity goes beyond the duality of reified realities and upsets these rigid boundaries. Consequently, the hosting of diaspora within the frame of a national community that struggles to withhold these binarisms is demarcated by tension and hostility. Speaking

about the strategies of ethnic movements in Europe—but with Afro-centric contexts in mind—Hall states:

The new nationalists are busy... trying to play the highly dangerous game of ethnic cleansing... there, real dislocated histories and hybridised ethnicities are subsumed by some essentialist conceptions of national identity... which recasts cultural identity as an unfolding essence moving apparently without change, from past to future. (“Culture, Community, Nation” 356)

He thus suggests that national and ethnic politics negate the conditions of displacement and cultural exchange through which diasporic identities and cultures have been formed. Following Hall’s criticism, Edwards Brent’s recent formulation of diaspora in *The Practice of Diaspora* as “*décalage*,” emphasises precisely the difficulties encountered in the formulation of collectivities when ethnic essentialism intervenes and exposes its attempts at homogenising diaspora identities. Edwards coins this term from Léopold Senghor’s conception of the difference between black Africans and African Americans: “*un simple décalage—dans le temps et dans l’espace*” (13), and he defines *décalage* as follows:

...*décalage* in its etymological sense refers to the removal of ... an added prop or wedge. *Décalage* indicates the reestablishment of a prior unevenness or diversity; it alludes to the taking away of something that was added in the first place, something artificial, a stone or piece of wood that served to fill some gap or to rectify some imbalance. ... *décalage* is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that refuse to pass over when one crosses the water. It is a changing core of difference; it is the work of “differences within unity” an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed. (14)

The meaning of *décalage* approximates “incommensurability” (Bewes 53). For Edwards, any attempt at articulating diaspora in such a model would signal the articulation of the haunting of “the repressed other of articulation” (53), which is whatever has been “propped up” to accommodate the totalising drive of imaginary coherence in racial/cultural formations. Such an effort invites a new focus on the effects of this process and looks for the traces of such haunting.

In Coker's novel, Hall's and Brent's theorisations are illustrated through the imagery of the impurities of the diaspora, which have to be purged in Africa itself through a return to spiritual 'roots', and it is embodied in the marriage between Gustavius Martins and Isatu and the circumstances surrounding the birth of their son, Garbage. In what follows, I will engage in a close examination of the scenes that frame Garbage's birth to show how Coker criticises the politics of ethnic essentialism. Interestingly, Brenda Cooper and Derek Whyte analyse the same scenes in their respective studies of Coker's novel, but although I follow their readings up to a point, I conclude with different interpretations that highlight Coker's warnings, rather than ambivalence, towards the dangers of discourses of ethnic origins and cultural purification.

In order to begin, Gustavius and Isatu's union is described in terms of a balanced and healthy relationship. For Isatu the marriage with Gustavius

had made her aware of things that would otherwise have escaped her: the equal role of women in the building of a community; the importance of believing in individual efforts for the good of the community; and how it was possible to arrive at the conclusion of an idea without having had a clear understanding of the idea in the first place. (191)

At the same time, Isatu has restored for Gustavius "the resources of a heritage to which he had lost all claim to knowledge, but also the bright fires of her enthusiasm for life and adventure" (188). This reapproachment is different from the ethnic fusion envisaged by Sebastian Cromantine. On the one hand, we learn that Gustavius was happy to have a wife "who respected the supernatural extremes of her world and had bridged them together" (188); additionally, Isatu's cultural knowledge is not restricted to spiritual matters; rather, it extends to practical issues as well. During the years of wandering after the first settlement's demise, she "showed such a resourcefulness of doing practical things, for inventing new methods of doing old", such as how to find food, water and build protection from diseases and wild animals, "that she had virtually assured the survival of the exiles" (188).

However, the marriage between Isatu and Gustavius, a union that symbolises the aspiration to the harmonious co-existence of returnees and the locals, is regarded with distrust and prejudice from the respective members of each community. Isatu's father

strongly opposes the prospect of their marriage and “threatens to expel all the settlers from Malagueta, if she went ahead with the marriage” (94). It is only after Isatu’s insistence that he gives his permission, but still he feels that he has sacrificed his daughter to “what he called the Oporto, the white/black people” (199). Similarly, there are voices from within the community of the returnees that regard their union as anomalous and aberrant. These voices start surfacing when the couple has to encounter their first and only crisis: their unsuccessful attempts at having a child. In spite of Isatu’s valuable contribution throughout the years, during these moments she becomes the outsider and sole target of blame for the failure to conceive. An old woman’s comment of “Dat’d what he gets for marrying a woman who done bring him a lotta harm and no chillum” (187), exposes the community’s biased position towards Isatu.

The couple’s bareness is also regarded as a bad omen “directly related to the problematic co-habitation of the two communities” (Whyte 58), by Mobida, the magician Isatu visits and seeks for advice. Among the first questions he poses is one concerning Gustavius’ bond with the land. The fact that he is “a foreigner, a man without any claim to this soil” (192) and Isatu’s subsequent distancing from the land of her family after the marriage, seems to be the source of the problem. For Mobida, the marriage between an ex-slave and local African cannot be blessed with a child unless the contagious elements brought forth by the stranger are purified. Thus, he advises Isatu to go back to her roots and get cleansed of all the impurities with which the foreigner has contaminated her.

Upon the arrival of the couple in the village, Sawida Dambolla, Isatu’s mother, introduces them to the idea of spiritual cleansing, by asking to wash Gustavius. Although Gustavius doesn’t understand the signification of this articulation, he is soon introduced to the theory that, as Cooper suggests “a woman’s fertility is linked to the African soil and traditional customs” (*Seeing with a Third Eye* 131). Thus, the first stage of the couple’s spiritual cleansing process entails their direct and actual bonding with the land:

the couple from Malagueta became farmers in the translucent world, surrounded by the ghosts of the founders of that town, who had achieved a permanence among the trees and the fields, and who made the burden of the transformation easy for the Martinses. Six months later, when the dry clouds had sucked up the rain, they looked at the field and were content with their labours. They had restored the trees

to good health, planted three varieties of rice, got the cows milking again, and had the potatoes, yams and corn ready for the harvest. (203)

As Cooper notes, “this return is redolent with essentialist connotations of the biological and natural cycle of things with which they had to be in harmony before being able to participate in the human natural cycle of reproduction” (*Seeing with a Third Eye* 131). The completion of the purifying initiations’ first phase is sealed by Sawida’s Dambolla’s gesture of recognising Gustavius as a member of the community and welcoming him “home”. The phrase “Welcome home, son” (202), signals his acceptance within the frame of the community and the wider family of the African ‘tradition’ and ancestors.

The next stage involves their spiritual purification, and it will be conducted with the help of two androgynous dwarfs, who, referring to each other as male and female, are believed to have the ability to contest evil, ancient customs and possess supernatural powers, as “they had discovered the herbs that could prolong life, shorten the forms of people, and allow them to be in several places at the same time” (205). Declaring from the beginning that they were “bringers of fortune to whoever would have them”, they claim that they “could get a person to do anything they so desired” (204). They choose Gustavius and Isatu on the basis that besides being “tainted by the garbage of [their] union” (132), they are pure at heart. The garbage refers to the cultural impurity of their union and it is attributed to the fact that Gustavius, being away from the African soil for such a long time, “had lost the power to understand the origins of man” (132), and as a result had contaminated Isatu. So, they conduct a cleaning ritual that will wash away the garbage of their union. The ritual is described thus:

A week later, Gustavius and Isatu Martins stood naked in front of a boiling cauldron, inhaling the pungency of leaves and roots which the dwarfs had gone to the forest to find. Spirals of smoke rose from the pot, and the senses of the man and the woman were filled with a vapour that made them innocent and childlike in the baptism of their second coming. When they were beginning to feel their feet moving into the territory of their regeneration, the dwarfs touched them with the tails of horses soaked in the cauldron. The voices of the dwarfs spoke as if in a dream, and the woman felt the encrustation of the dirt and garbage that years of marriage to a man without the roots of the forest had imposed on her, while the man

felt the garbage of the world across the sea of blood rubbing off his body, so that they were one again, cleansed of all impurities, and touch each other with their feathery hands which had been anointed, and with their bodies which had been repossessed by new seeds, so that the fecundity of the woman could respond to the male power of the husband. (206)

This scene of cultural purification echoes Hall's remarks about ethno-nationalistic process of clearance and Edwards' formulation of *décalage*. It entails the couple's cleansing from all the foreign elements that alienate them from the African roots and aims to their normalisation. Being cleansed by the marks of slavery on Gustavius body and mind, and consequently, his personal "alien" history, he then can re-unite with Isatu and have a child. In this context, slavery, as well as the acquired experiences related to its conditions is seen "as the debris, as the rubbish of their lives" (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 133). Thus, they have to be forgotten and erased and their vacuum has to be filled in by the new "prosthetic" vestige of oneness with the African soil.

Derek Whyte, in his reading of this scene, suggests that Coker seems to support the idea of cultural purity that abides by the dicta of Afro-centric theories on the issue of cultural identity. In particular, he avers "a certain ambivalence in the narrator's attempts to come to terms with the potential threat represented by the growing stream of exogenous elements flowing into Malagueta's evolving community (Whyte 58). Similarly, Brenda Cooper responds to the cleansing episode along the lines of "a quest for a mythical kind of cultural purification, stripped of the history of slavery, of change and of fertility mixture of multiple experiences (*Seeing with a Third Eye* 133). Echoing Whyte's objection, Cooper explains that she "take[s] issues with Coker when that supernatural world is romanticised as spiritually superior, as that Coalescence between mortals and spirits, as the spiritual life-blood of humanity, which is lost away from Africa and only be restored on returning and, more than that, by ritual cleansing of the impurities contracted by exile" ("Cultural Identity" 175).

However, upon closer scrutiny, there are two elements that come to problematise such readings. The first one concerns the outcome of this ritual and in particular the birth of the much desired child. Isatu Martins does indeed give birth to a child nine months after the cleansing ritual, but the child is named Garbage, "so that it will never forget his roots"

(208). This conspicuously weird choice is justified by the instructions the dwarfs had given before the child's birth, dictating that once it is born "it must be thrown at the foot of the plants, near the garbage, where Santigue Dambolla was found dead" (206). The underlying signification of these directions suggests that the child must be immersed in the land, the roots of its origins. However, the fact that the specific roots happen to be near the garbage unsettles the very idea of roots as a cultural symbol of purity that banishes all exogenous elements. Rather, it voices in the most suggestive way Coker's idea about the validity of social formation once it is informed by these ideological systems, namely that it is "rubbish".

At the same time, although the circumstances of his birth lend to Garbage tremendous authorial weight as a character, "his strange name simultaneously suggests ironic distancing from this authoritativeness" (Cooper, *Seeing with a Third Eye* 133). For once he grows up he becomes Malagueta's national poet and will be in the avant-garde of the anti-colonial elite. His poetry commemorates the courageous attempts of the returnees, his relationship with his mother and the heroic figures of Thomas Bookerman and Phylis Dundas and incites the workers and the students to revolt against the British Colonialists. However, being carried away by the "laurels of his poethood" and persuaded that his poetry "was more dangerous weapon than a whole army" (351), he fails to organise the masses, who during the riots they are all killed by the police, adding one more bloody chapter in the history of Malagueta.

Apart from the specificities surrounding Garbage's birth and his role in the building of the community, the cleansing scene and its yearnings for nationalistic ideas of return to the roots is further problematized once placed within the wider context of the novel. For Gustavius and Isatu's attempts at being purified by slavery's impurities take place after the British Colonist Captain Hammerstone's first abortive attempt to conquer Malagueta. The peaceful atmosphere in the city that follows this incident coincides with Gustavius' blissful feeling of being purified and having a son. However, no sooner does Coker describe Gustavius' re-born self and his altered attitude towards life, that he comes to interrupt it, stating that "it was an illusion" (215). For as long as Gustavius was busy cleansing himself from the impurities of slavery, as long as he was trying to erase the

exogenous elements of his identity, the real enemy, the real “exogenous” element was lurking in the forest. As we are informed in a highly apocalyptic paragraph:

For many months, beyond the fringes of that forest, five hundred men had been training for an attack on Malagueta. They were the forgotten remnants of the forces of Captain Hammerstone, backed by four hundred recruits from the rugged region of the Foutah Djallon mountains: men for whom the idea of profit from the pillage of cities and towns served as the only reason for fighting war. (215)

Two things are important in this scene. Firstly, it exposes the limitations of essentialist theories of identity; the community consumes time and energy in pursuit of authenticity and adopts a myopic stance towards the real danger that threatens to encroach. The second is that this incident echoes the pattern followed in Fatmatta’s story, and it is to Fatmatta that we have to return in order to understand what Coker’s position is towards the fashioning of collective identities. For if the nationalistic/essential yearnings for the construction of national collectivities are rejected, what are the alternative communal definitions? Or how does he position his narrative within contemporary debates over the gendered parameters of nation building in conjunction with diaspora discourse?

Fatmatta’s Haunting: Towards New Configurations of Communal Belonging

“one does not yet know or one no longer knows which is
the country, the place, the nation, the family, the language and the home in general
that welcomes the absolute arrivant”
Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*

Coker attempts to write his community’s history by criticising nationalistic models of fashioning collective identity but also, by redefining the very boundaries of this collectivity through the renegotiation of gender stereotypes. By disrupting the accepted notions of gendered community, Coker’s novel offers alternative possibilities for definitions of community gleaned from the experience of diaspora. Being the site of multiple oppressions and “otherings”, diaspora rejects a collectivity structured along gender, class, or race lines and comes to haunt the structures that promote such binarisms.

When historical revisions bare witness to the predicament of gendered, racialised subjectivities, the act of historical reconstitution entails the re-thinking of the structures that define national belonging, and the unearthing of the politics of exclusion that silence and marginalise female voice and experience. Benedict Anderson's idea of the nation as an "imagined political community", in which its members imagine themselves as part of a larger yet finite and sovereign community (6-7), has been challenged by Partha Chatterjee's important question: "Whose Imagined Community?", that exposes the processes of "othering" of those gendered or racialised constituencies that don't fit into the imagined communities. Feminist critics' further questioning "of *whose* gender?" (Probyn 55), that follow Chatterjee's criticism, have explored how nationalist discourse is not only predicated on relations of alterity with those who lie outside its borders, but also on gendered and sexist ideologies "as structure[s] of interior exclusion of women generalised to the whole society" (Balibar 57). Also, as Lois A. West emphasizes, in moments of crisis such as colonial struggles, women are "caught in the struggles between men, not as powerful symbols in their own right" (xviii), that reduce women to "objects of exchange, evidenced in processes like the feminization and eroticization of the land and of the colonial subject" (Chun-Ink 788).¹²

The iconography of black women as national and continental mothers encodes the gendered Manichean allegory entrenched in these narratives, which, by seeing the world as divided in mutually exclusive opposites, reproduce women as the "other" and enforce their subordination. At the same time, it points to a contradiction embedded in nationalist discourse, where the female "is the strength or virtue of the nation incarnate, its fecund first matriarch, but it is a role which excludes her from the sphere of public national life" (Boehmer 6). Rajapolan Radhakrishnan identifies the root causes of this contradiction as well as its repercussions for the women's polity in the "schizophrenic vision" of the rhetoric of nationalism, where "woman takes on the nature of a vast inner silence not to be broken onto the rough and external clamour of material history" (193). Following

¹² Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias indicate the ways in which women have typically participated in nationalist/ethnic processes as follows: as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities; (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups; (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture; (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national difference—as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction, and transformation of ethnic/national categories; (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

Chatterjee's analysis on the complexities between the woman question and nationalism, Radhakrishnan explains that nationalism, like colonialism and patriarchy, operates and assigns gender roles according to the inside/outside oppositional binary, where the female is associated with the inner self of the nation's identity and remains unaffected by the changes of the world, whereas the male is associated with the material sphere and has to be in tune with progress. The problematic permeating this dichotomous structure is that freezing women in a timeless realm undermines their role as historical and political subjects. Thus, deprived of historical roles, women are idealized as long as they serve the nationalistic yearnings to literally and figuratively reproduce the nation.

The representation of female figures whose role is essential to the transmission of the nation's communal ideals takes the form of a caricature in Colonel Lookdown Akongo's mother. Colonel Akongo visits and seeks his mother's advice about whether he should stop General Masimiara's coup against the dictator Sanka Maru. In an ecstatic monologue that commemorates the dictates of nationalistic discourse, the conspicuously un-named mother probes her son to effect the coup and urges him to:

do it for your mother, son. This is your chance! ... Show them that you came from my belly, let them know that you sucked my breasts for 12 months, yes, twelve months at these breasts! That I did not put some of my milk in your nostrils to turn you into a fool! Show them that you are a man. (xv)

In response to this model, where women are imprisoned in their historical invisibility/passivity and remain confined to biological production and the cultural indoctrination of the nation's sons, Coker juxtaposes a series of female figures whose presence inscribes their community's history through their active participation in their community's formation. Through this venture, Coker distances himself from other African writers, who, in their imaginings of the nation, have often appealed to its mythologized femaleness, establishing connections between the racialized female body, the land or the nation.¹³ Contrary to this model, Coker's insistence on recovering the women's contribution in the building of the community implicitly challenges the nation's definition of itself through the reclamation of the past and the canonisation of heroes. For

¹³ For examples of African authors who have used the Africa Mother Trope in their anti-colonial or national imaginings, see Florence Straton's chapter on the "The Mother Africa Trope" in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (London: Routledge, 1994) 39-57.

“the stories that are sung aloud, telling us of founding fathers and enduring nationals, are often in successful wars against *an outside enemy*” (Benton 27, emphasis added) and as we have seen already, in *The Last Harmattan*’s narrative, the “true” enemy is rarely coming from the “outside”; rather, it encroaches within and it gradually invades and spreads, occupying more and more space. Thus, denying from the beginning the authority of “generals” to “make history” (x), a large portion of the history of this fictional community is not presented through battles or leaders but through the history of women and their “equal role ... in the building of a community” (191).

This history starts with slavery and the years spent in bondage in the plantation farms. It is in this context, that Coker re-introduces Fatmatta and unites her predicament with this of the returnees. In particular, as we learn, while in transit and away from the safe territory of her community, she is captured by a slaver, who, being motivated “by what the kidnapping of the citizens represented in terms of its commerce” (62) puts her on a slave ship and sends her to the other side of the Atlantic. There, in a plantation in Virginia and under the ownership of Andrew McKinley, who had “decided that she had the body to breed a dozen plantation slaves fathered by himself” (62), Fatmatta is acquainted with the institution of slavery and the significance it bears for her role within its framework. As Angela Davis states, slave women “were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labour force. They were breeders—animals, whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (7). The female body was the best practical source of increasing and replenishing the pool of slave labourers, guaranteeing the financial prosperity of the plantocracy. Christian’s assertion that “American slavery revealed one of its most significant elements- that women are not valued for themselves but for the capacity to breed, that is to produce workers” (219) encapsulates the dual nature of female reification, since slavery did not lay claim only on their role as profitable labour units, but also on the reproductive capacities of their bodies.

Fatmatta, having already evaded her community’s oppressive parameters, is perceptive enough to realise that her body is destined to perpetuate and strengthen the very same institutional forces that enslave her, and she therefore resists. Refusing to reduce her womb to a “workshop” (Spivak 81) that will safeguard the financial and

political interests of the machine of slavery, she recovers the power of her “untamed sexuality” and emasculates all men who “tried to turn her into a rabbit that bred other rabbits” (62). It’s worth noting a number of critical studies have been conducted that warn against uncritical celebrations of slave resistance and resilience, fearing that such claims risk overlooking the conditions of subjugation and dehumanisation that in many instances prevented an opposition to slavery, overt or otherwise. Saidiya Hartman cautions against overestimating the subversiveness of everyday acts of resistance in the face of the terror and cruelty suffered by slaves and the constraints placed upon their agency (54-56). Similarly, Jenny Sharp, in discussing on the slave women’s practices of abortion or infanticide that diminished their owner’s profit at the cost of their lives, problematises further the applicability of the paradigm of resistance to the conditions of slavery. However, Sharp’s astute acknowledgement that as long as the term remains strictly defined within the frame of “antislavery activity... [it]cannot explain how slaves sought to improve their lives even if their actions did not attack slavery or lead to freedom”(xv), offers an invitation to consider resistant attitudes within a different context that would acknowledge the discrepancy of power between master and slave, and thus acknowledge the latter’s impossibility to overthrow this condition, but at the same time, will be able to account for actions that contravened the master’s will, without fundamentally altering their condition.

This context is potentially offered by Michel de Certeau’s formulation of “tactics” and it is within this space that I would like to situate Fatmatta’s resistance for it historicises acts that have been omitted by the grand narratives of History. Michel de Certeau makes a useful distinction between strategies that have the power of institutions behind them and other ordinary actions of resistance, which he calls “tactics”. In the *Practice of Everyday Life*, he defines “tactics” as the “art of the weak”, for, as he explains, they comprise the everyday practices of people who are disempowered to find a place for themselves within a system they are not free to oppose. Rather than possessing a power of its own, a tactic operates where no autonomous basis for action exists:

A tactic is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus... The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus, it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organized by the law of a foreign power... What it wins it cannot

keep. This nowhere gives a *tactic* mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any given moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches in them. (36-67)

As actions that “encroach on the power of the dominating class”, tactics “do not constitute conventional oppositional practices” (Sharpe xxiii). Rather, primarily because they are drawing from a power that is external to them, tactics manipulate the rules of the dominant order: basing their operation on a “seize the moment” doctrine, they take advantage of any “cracks” in the system and they temporarily shift the balance of freedom and power from “the dominating class to the dominated” (Sharpe xxi). And since they do not ensue from organised attempts of self-empowerment, and they are not self-evident in historical records.

In *The Last Harmattan*, there are references to Fatmatta and other slave women who, in their attempts to evade slavery’s commodification of their bodies, resort to actions such as “drinking poison to abort the child or dream[ing] to raise children who will cut the throats of the slavers/owners” (6). Sophie Mahogany, Jeanette Cromantine’s mother, gives her daughter away for adoption to a free black preacher “to be saved from the fate that was hers” (4). Under the preacher’s care and “upholding a tradition traced back to Africa” (4), Jeanette is raised by a community of women who take turns in her nursing. Although the pain of separation from her daughter—both physical and emotional—accompanies Sophie to her death, torturing her with nightmares about “an evil woman who was trying to kill the child” (5), the fact that plantocracy had been deprived of another profitable unit appeases her. Significantly, Fatmatta herself manages “to avoid the circle of bringing mulatto children in the world, who themselves would be slaves” (67). She is sold and resold to “a dozen plantations in two years” (66), as the scorpion in her eyes creates “the belief that *she was a creature not of this world* but of one where men would be tormented ... and tainted for ever by the curse of impotence once they had forced themselves upon her” (66). Fatmatta and other women, do not necessarily challenge the institution of slavery or escape bondage; however, taking advantage of their power within this system, their ability, that is, to reproduce its livestock, they “upset” its

operation. Within this critical framework, their agency can be read as a performance that exceeds strictly defined roles assigned to them and as actions through which they re-appropriate the place of their subjugation.

Coker's insistence on documenting, chronicling and thus historicizing the "unrecorded" stories of female experience, continues as some of the women return to the African coast and engage in the project of building and bringing into life the city of Malagueta. Jeanette Cromantine, for example, sets up a small enterprise that instructs women in the delicate art of sewing, and thereby contests the ethnic division between the local and the newly settled population, setting the foundations that will unite all the women under the name of the "community". Later on, the art of sewing and especially the making of puppets plays a crucial role in anti-colonial struggle, when, for instance, on the occasion of the carnival two women direct a puppet-show that dramatises the British Colonists' violent expulsion from the region. When the puppet that represents Thomas Bookerman starts kicking the puppet who stands for Captain Hammerstone, the crowd started yelling "kill him, kill him, kill him, as if the festival was real" (284). The women's show invigorates the crowd's revolutionary and resistant feelings to such a degree that a group of soldiers arrive and order them to halt the performance. However, "they had barely given out their orders when the crowd fell upon them. The hot sultry heat of their anger exploded in the most violent confrontation that Malagueta had ever seen" (284).

Similarly, when later on in the novel the British colonialist Captain Hammerstone conquers Malagueta and imprisons all the men, it is Isatu Martins' revolutionary speeches that incite the mothers to storm into the garrison to set the men free. While the men are imprisoned, the women form a co-operative to help each other. In one of these gatherings, they decide to break into the garrison: "Forgetting that they were facing men who had only recently killed in battle, Isatu Martins, the mothers, wives, and sweethearts forced the gates open and entered the garrison" (248). Further, it is the whores of the Yellow House, Malagueta's brothel, who not only decline to sleep with any of the Captain Hammerstone's men, but also co-ordinate the underground front of resistance during the reign of the British colonialists. They use the brothel as a cover to establish a network of communication between the two exiled men, Captain Hammerstone and

Emmanuel Cromantine, and the Malagueta community. Through these women, Coker shows that the “mothers of Africa” have voices, anger, and agency and importantly, they are as much the subjects of communal history as their nationalist sons. His vision of a Sierra Leonian collectivity includes women as active and, more importantly, equal participants with men. Thus, he contests notions that confine women to supportive and nurturing relationships to men, illustrating how viable community dynamics can be accomplished even when traditional gender roles are disrupted.

What unites the predicament of all these women—both those in the plantations farms and those who returned to Kasila—is their shared experience of multiple “oppressions” and the condition of diaspora. The figure that will come to articulate their stories of endurance and dynamisms, but also of “oppression”, anxiety and distrust is Fatmatta. For after her death, which, as we saw, takes place at an early stage in the novel, Fatmatta’s spectre returns to haunt the community. The fact that Fatmatta returns as a spectre is important for two main reasons. On the one hand, the presence of a spectre challenges the “schizophrenic vision” of the rhetoric of nationalism, which casts women as the mute but necessary allegorical grounds for the transactions of nationalist history (Radhakrishnan 192). It is the spectre’s ability to cross over borders and binaries, oscillating “between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and not-being” (Derrida, *Spectres* 12) that prevents it from being subsumed within the fixed categories of inside/outside that can be allegorised to reinforce nationalist objectives.

At the same time, her return as a spectre, and not as a spirit or ghost, signals the nature of haunting she will perform. For as Derrida has noted, the difference between the spirit and the spectre is that the spirit is deprived of any corporeal dimension, whereas the spectre “assumes a body, it incarnates itself” (*Spectres* 4). And the very presence of a corpse “implies a lived experience”, entailing the presence not of a myth or a mere idea but of a “historical subject that suffers in performing a certain kind of logos” (Karavanta 116). As we have seen, Fatmatta’s lived experience has shown how “difference is constructed differently within various discourses” and has outlined the machinations behind various institutions’ “differing political strategies and outcomes” (Brah 58). Thus, through her life she has uncovered the ways in which patriarchy, slavery and capitalism seek to exploit the female body, and her spectre will point towards a differentiated history

as experienced from the “margins”, a site that criticises the politics of exclusion of these institutions. Fatmatta’s spectre will come to articulate the very experience of “otherness”, of the aberrant, the peripheral, and the errant. By appearing at moments when the “others” are threatened, and fighting for injustices of all kinds, she re-enacts a form of caring-for-the-other that resists “that which would destroy life” and nurtures “that which would support and develop life” (Christian 118).¹⁴ In particular, Fatmatta’s *mothering* dramatises the dynamics of motherhood as experience, which evades essentialist interpretations in that it creates the conditions for new communal definitions that defy the limitations of national and patriarchal collectivities, and puts forth the possibility of a collectivity that crosses gender, ethnic and racial borders since it is formed through a shared experience of marginalisation.

The difference between the haunting of the spectre and this of a ghost is illustrated in the different ways Fatmatta and Dunbar operate in crucial moments in the novel. As we will see, although Fatmatta’s lived experience urges her to intervene in focal moments, Dunbar’s distance from life chains him in passivity. For Dunbar, had seen it all:

the octoroon woman who would bring the potato plague, the albino who would marry the most beautiful woman in the world, the man who would use the skull of his father as a guiding light, the one-eyed man who would lead the a great mission in the atmospheric darkness of the forest tracing the first strangers who would be wiped out because of the potato plague, (25)

but he has not experienced neither the pain or the agonies of these events because he was all the time protected behind “his mirror glass” (25). Enjoying the comfort that the barrier of the glass provides, Dunbar foresees Malagueta’s history, gets acquainted with all the characters, but fails to merge into their lives. His vista is limited and framed by what come only as reflections or shadows and, as a consequence, the grandeur of his *outlook* shrinks into a mere look, because it is constantly focused “inside” the glass. And I think

¹⁴ See also Stanlie James who observes that different forms of mothering “may serve as an important Black Feminist link to the development of new models for social transformation in the twenty-first century” (45). Mothering and other-mothering, as James refers to some aspects of the black phenomenon, are parts of an indigenous system that has buoyed up the community. “Mothering: a possible Black Feminist Link to Social Transformation?” *Theorizing Black Feminisms*, eds. Stanlie M. James and Abena D. A. Busia (London: Routledge, 1995) 44- 54.

that Derek Wright has this flaw in mind when he contests Dunbar's authority suggesting, "Coker's ageless sage serves...as a touchstone for a disillusioning history which has failed to mature and fulfil its early promise (8). If maturity presupposes the embracing of life and the risk of relating with the "others", then Dunbar's fascination with his looking-glass has barred him from growing up. Remaining underdeveloped, he still believes in the disillusioning history of the "pan-African heritage" (Wright 9), whose discourse of return is constructed, as we have seen, on the basis of Africa's abstract idea, not on the empirical experience of what an actual return to its soil ensues.

Contra to Dunbar's ghost, which doesn't take any course of action throughout the novel, Fatmatta's spectre appears and acts and becomes the eternal revenant who returns to haunt the community of Malagueta. One of the first times that Fatmatta's apparition returns is when Jeanette Cromantine is about to give birth to her first child. At a crucial point, when Jeanette is in a state of limbo between life and death and the "pains had begun to tear at her insides" (109), Fatmatta's spectre appears and urges her to "Move over" (109). In a gesture of empathy that transcends the empiricism of "what is" or "what was" and points towards an understanding of *what could be*, she holds Jeanette's hand and "as if she was transmitting her strength to the woman who was losing hers, Fatmatta the Bird-Woman began to rub the belly of the woman, who was thrashing on the bed" (109). By assisting the very experience of motherhood, Fatmatta's spectral body enacts and supports a new configuration of its meaning outside monolithic interpretations, bringing to the surface its political potential as ratified through acts of *caring* for the "other". For through her presence she has performed a symbolic birth and has inaugurated a new genealogy of mothers that are situated outside the violent and binary oppositions of patriarchy in that mothering comes as a conscious act, which is not dependent on biological allegiances. The choice of Jeanette for this new genealogy is not accidental; on the one hand, their bond was sealed while on board, when Jeanette was taking care of Fatmatta before her death. But besides this, Jeanette herself has been raised in an environment that considers motherhood outside the restrictions of biology. Having experienced motherhood through a community of women, Jeanette's acts of mothering will not be restricted to her son, "the first man to shoot a white governor" (96), but will

be expanded to the community as a whole, politicising in this way the women's relationship to their society.

Fatmatta's fostering of a community in which the ethnic "other" is not marginalised is demonstrated in her second apparition at a moment when the settlers confront the xenophobic menace of Kasila's indigenous population. As we have seen, the occasion that fires the locals' paranoia is the epidemic of malaria that ravages the region. Applying an age-old deductive logic that has its roots in the memory of "the albino that made all strangers suspect" (100), they assume that the settlers' newly-imported seeds are responsible for the disaster and attack. Significantly, when the settlers evacuate the village and rush to the forest to save their lives, "the voice of Fatmatta the Bird Woman [is] guiding them through the perilous forest" (101). The spectre's intervention is motivated by insight into the root causes of the locals' behaviour. Being the incarnation of a historical subject that has been constantly "marginalized" and "ousted" for not abiding by the norms of the "same", Fatmatta's spectre detects and resists the seeds of ethnic and racial purity that motivate the locals' actions, providing for "the ethnic" others a safe place where they will be able to settle.

Similarly, Fatmatta's spectral apparition resists Colonialism, whose "negative dialectic of recognition" (Hardt & Negri 128) produces intolerance of the "others" and leads to their treatment as a homogeneous group of colonial subjects. When the British colonists, under the leadership of Captain Hammerstone, attempt for the first time to establish their rule in Malagueta, aiming to exploit its human and natural resources, they encounter Thomas Bookerman's front of resistance. The encounter is sparked by the occasion of a funeral procession, which in its way to the cemetery crosses the "prohibited" zone, symbolically occupied by Captain Hammerstone and his men. At a decisive moment, when Captain Hammerstone aims his gun at Bookerman, Fatmatta's spectre appears, making him miss his target:

But instead of Bookerman, he saw the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, looking straight at him with the deadly eyes of a scorpion. He heard the bullet ricochet against the shell of an animal that had swam in the deepest rivers, over the longest resources of time, before surfacing to the shore to torment men like him and

others who had the temerity to interfere with the dance of the spirits on their journey to a different home. (169)

The funeral impresses on the community the importance of continuing the dead man's struggle for freedom, against any attempt of conquest, so that it "would not die with him" (168). The cause of freedom has driven and marked Fatmatta's life, so her apparition takes the side of the community, punishing those who hold no respect for life.

As the novel traces events of the recent past, Fatmatta's apparition fades away. Dunbar himself laments the fact that the future generations "are going to see such changes here that nothing would be left of the memory of Fatmatta the Bird-Woman" (295). These changes entail the invasion of the Arabs, the domination of British Colonialism in the region, the anti-colonial struggle and finally the failure of the post-independence government to materialise the transformative rupture with the political and ideological baggage of the colonial order. However, although Fatmatta may be forgotten as time passes, the logos of her spectre cannot be forsaken, because it has addressed a complex network of socio-political and gender problems that inform and haunt Malagueta's present. In particular, the spectral aura of her history has "sketched the traces of figures that come to us only as disfigurations not in order to restore the original figures but to find the limit of foundations in shadows that the disfigurations themselves outline" (Prakash 496). In other words, as Derrida notes, her spectre has exposed, and at the same time interrupted, the construction of otherness in history inviting the community to "learn to live with ghosts... to learn to live otherwise, yet better. No, no better, but more justly ... and this being-with spectres would also be, not only but also, a *politic of memory*" (*Deaths* 66, emphasis added).

And it is on the basis of Fatmatta's spectral haunting that General Masimiara organises the coup against the dictator Sanka-Maru, once he is informed about "how for the sum of twenty-five million dollars the president had agreed to have the toxic waste dumped in the waters of his country, and kill off all the children" (xi); it is on the basis of Fatmatta's spectral haunting that Dunbar himself performs his retributive justice towards Sanka-Maru; finally, it is on the basis of Fatmatta's spectral haunting that Coker himself recovers her occult history considering it contemporaneous with the ten years of civil war that will torment Sierra Leone. All these events share the same a common denominator:

the construction and perpetuation of a rigid binary oppositional system that produces “otherness”, whether it is on the basis of race, ethnicity or gender. Fatmatta’s spectre, having occupied all these sites, perpetuates returns to haunt Sierra Leone’s past and present, forcing it to confront its true evil: the absence of responsibility toward the “others”, who were and are abused in the name of colonialism, nationalism and patriarchy.

**Towards a “Theatre of Impossible Forgiveness”:
Ama Ata Aidoo and *the Dilemma of Slavery***

“In learning to live with specters, one learns to live with the other,
neither before nor in relation to, but with. It will be a reliving
of what emanates from the events that mark the silence of the silenced,
the pain of the oppressed”
Assimina Karavanta, “Rethinking the Specter: Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa*”

If, in the previous chapter, the presence of the first returnees invited a focus on the materiality of slavery’s history in Sierra Leone, in this chapter the absence of the legacy of slavery from Ghana’s actualities necessitates an engagement with the reading of silence. As I have mentioned in my reading of Coker’s novel, Sierra Leone’s specificities with regards to the return, and settlement, of the ex-slaves interweaves slavery’s history with questions of ethnicity and belonging that troubled the past and continue to pre-occupy the contemporary political scene. Slavery can never be forgotten, for its ramifications have shaped the community’s past and present. By not being an event that can be classified in the past, but rather a reality encountered daily in the faces of all those who survived the horror of the “peculiar” institution, and returned from the other side of the Atlantic claiming a space, and representation, slavery’s legacy becomes a painful lived experience. It is through the fissures of this lived experience that, as we saw, Fatmatta’s spectral performance haunts the present demanding a form of communal belonging, which will re-think the politics of exclusion that made slavery possible in the first place.

Yet, what happens when slavery, as a historical event, has not left visible traces in the communal fabric? Is it forgotten, or does it occupy a silenced space in the communal memory? And if it is constituted as the History of absence and silence, does it return to communicate its lessons to the present? And most importantly, how can absence return and how can silence speak? For, in Ghana or Nigeria, as we will see in this and the last section respectively, the History of slavery has left a silent gap in the collective memory. Yet, this absence of representation in the “mnemonics” of the present voices a traumatic memory, even nowadays. This unspoken and unacknowledged trauma haunts, as we saw in the introduction, the site of colonial modernity that has reduced slaves to ghostly

footnotes in the Grand Narratives of history. At the same time, they symbolise the remains of the most enduring and impossible legacy of the European slave trade in Africa and the diaspora: the recovery of an unforgivable history, whose horror, guilt and shame fractures the politics of memory and representation.

In this chapter, I will focus on Ama Ata Aidoo's play *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) as a symptomatic instantiation of the problematic of writing silence, and of narrating a history whose archives are impossible to fully retrieve. Aidoo's *The Dilemma* is haunted by the silenced history of slavery, whose unrepresentable horror takes the form of a ghost that lingers at "the junction" between the ethical and the political, silence and voice, memory and forgetting. Its presence is evoked by the marriage of the African American Eulalie Rush to the young Ghanaian Ato Yawson, and her subsequent return to his native land. The play unfolds through a number of conflicts and dilemmas such as Ato's failure to function as the mediator between pairings of seemingly unreconcilable parties: his traditional family and his Western educated wife (witnessed in his family's inability to accept Eulalie—a stranger and descendant of slaves—as their daughter in law) and, equally, his wife and his 'home' society more generally (witnessed in Eulalie's difficulties in adapting to the society into which she has entered, and the thwarting of her romantic idea to finally "belong" somewhere). Rather than simply narrating the ramifications attendant upon the "return of the been-to", *The Dilemma of a Ghost* is set in motion by focusing upon the return of the *diasporic* subject. Thus, along with a number of complex and disquieting questions raised in the play regarding issues of gender, identity, and the clash between tradition and the neo-colonial present, the staging of diaspora's return at the centre of the drama energises the play's engagement with the community's role in the history of transatlantic slavery and its irrevocable trauma. Seen in this way, Eulalie's presence confronts the local community with a number of ethical and social dilemmas: that of determining an attitude towards diaspora, and, most importantly, of addressing the silence, forgetting and denial that surrounds its history.

The challenges posed by addressing such a controversial theme have been described by Aidoo in an interview with Vincent Theo. In particular, Aidoo not only acknowledges the dangerous terrain she has entered by dealing with this highly sensitive issue, but she also admits being intimidated by the prospect of addressing such a subject again: "Now, I

won't have that political courage, you know, to write a play like that" (2). Aidoo grounds her political courage in her blunt confrontation with the "whole question of Africa and black Americans in those stark terms" (5). As she elaborates, "the play is very very harsh on everybody, both the Africans and the black Americans, that, you know, nobody escapes. And it is this kind of courage to do this kind of work that I am talking about that I myself don't have any more" (5). In order to understand the courage such an enterprise involves, we have to place Aidoo's text within the historical specificities of the period of its production, particularly, within the nationalist or pan-Africanist discourse that her country espoused in the Nkrumah years and beyond. For whereas Ghanaian cultural production has generally been focused upon construction of a homogeneous nation-state that should be proud of its past, with Ghana posited as the nation of all diasporic black subjects,¹⁵ Aidoo's play unearths a part of its history that has been silenced and forgotten: its role in the transatlantic slave trade. Contra to tendencies of nationalistic narratives that attempt to "restore the *same*" and thus safeguard the "interior unity" of the nation (de Certeau 83), Aidoo resists the homogenizing tendencies of History towards the "othered" aspects of its narrative, and approximates the Foucauldian constellation of a counter-history (or genealogy) that dismantles (rather than unifies), and brings to the forefront the silenced and forgotten. This part of history "introduces discontinuity into our very being", since it "unearths the periods of decadence and if it chances upon lofty epochs, it is with suspicion—not vindictive but joyous—of finding a barbarous shameful confusion" (Foucault 88). In a similar vein, Aidoo is suspicious towards the fact that "oral tradition can tell you about migrations that happened about a thousand years ago, and yet events that happened two to three hundred years ago are blackened out" (Vincent 7), and feels "intrigued by what processes of forgetfulness the people here used to prevent us from knowing about slaves and the slave trade because they must have done something" (6). In her attempt to inscribe the reality of Africa's silenced history and to reinstate at the centre of communal memory what the majority would like to forget, Aidoo unearths those social

¹⁵ For Nkrumah's Pan-African ideas, see his speech in the First International Congress of Africans, where he urges those gathered to be "be determined to pool immense knowledge of Africa for the progress of Africans. Efforts mark a renaissance of scientific curiosity in the study of Africa and should be directed at an objective, impartial scrutiny and assessment of things African. While some of [them were] engaged with political unification of Africa, *Africans everywhere* must also help in building the spiritual and cultural foundations for the unity of the continent (qtd. in Gouridine 35-36).

and ethical issues that were buried or muted and invites their embrace as part of Ghana's post-colonial heritage. In this way, Aidoo's return to the ghost of slavery acquires further importance as she is a black woman writer whose act of "rememory", to invoke Toni Morrison's term, is a double act of resistance: first against colonial modernity and the forgetting of slavery, and then against her community's forgetting of their complicity with it, and their facile embracing of the national agenda and the myth of a pure nation.

Aidoo's return to the History of slavery is manifested, apart from in *The Dilemma*, in a range of her other works. Her second theatrical play *Anowa* (1970) takes place against the backdrop of the Atlantic slave trade and rising British colonialism in late nineteenth-century Ghana. The main protagonist, Anowa, is a rebellious woman, whose restless mind questions not only dominant definitions of womanhood and wifehood, but also her community's complicity with the slave trade. Anowa defies her parents' advice and marries Kofi Ako, the man of her choice, and together they establish a monkey skin trade that provides them with money and a home. However, Kofi becomes involved in the slave trade and starts selling his own brothers and sisters to the white slave traders. His financial success earns his community's respect and Anowa's rejection, for she is the only one who can foresee the repercussions of his actions. Anowa's criticism leads Kofi to suicide, and she, in her turn, drowns herself, having first revealed her community's murderous complicity with the horrors of the slave trade. The theme of slavery is also taken up in Aidoo's short story "For Whom Things Did Not Change" (1970), but in a metaphorical way that exposes the legacy of slavery in contemporary Ghana. The story is set in contemporary Ghana, and through Ziguru and Petu, a pair of elderly house maids, Aidoo unveils the working classes' internalisation of, and indoctrination in, the slave mentality, and criticises hypocrisy of the new liberators, who retain the "slave-master" binaries in post-independence Ghana.

It is in the light of Aidoo's constant commitment to "create absences", to evoke de Certeau's words, to expose slavery's displacement and "othering" from Ghana's history, that her repudiation of the "Historian[s]" (Aidoo, Interview 7) role should be interpreted. Aidoo's concern with the spectral role of slavery's History suggests a different engagement to that of the historian, in that she is not concerned with the Grand Narratives of History, but with its ruins and fissures, its untold and incomplete stories. In

centralising the marginal and silenced, she “carnivalizes”¹⁶ western history by telling the story of its margins. In this way, she writes a new history, the history of silence, which brings forth what had been excluded, and opens up a space for the exploration of these historical omissions’ traumatic haunting. Aidoo’s “turn” to the past is not a nostalgic turn but a political gesture contingent upon the present. It is a turn for the present, in the present, against the forgetting that is taking place in the present. In particular, describing the denial of the fact and lasting effects of enslavement as an “open wound” that swallows up the community, she associates her preoccupation with slavery’s occluded narrative with its potential healing dynamics: “You can’t cover up history. You know it is like a bad wound. You have to open it up and treat it. The scar would be there, but at least it would heal” (Vincent 7). For Aidoo history, and particularly the traumatized history of slavery, has a way of erupting and resurfacing when its lessons are ignored or forgotten. Her attempts at reconstituting its narrative do not aim to erase the marks of its trauma, for the scars will always be there, but rather to expose the root causes of the eruptions and their damaging effects on/for the community.

Aidoo’s views on slavery’s traumatic imprint point to the benefits, but also the limitations, of psychoanalytic discourse to account for the specificities of the historical haunting she explores; for, on the one hand, as Cathy Caruth notes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), trauma theory could contribute to the “unsilencing” of slavery’s history by “permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (11), yet, the therapeutic exorcism of the ghost, purported by psychoanalysis,¹⁷ fails to take into consideration ghostly returns that, as Derrida has pointed out in the *Spectres of Marx*, “the worldwide work of mourning cannot get rid of, whose return it runs away from” (126). The traumatic dimensions of these ghosts are always in excess and they invite “a mourning in fact and by right interminable, without

¹⁶ Aidoo’s tendency to “carnivalize” Western History refers to Nietzsche’s carnivalesque understanding of History in *Untimely Meditations*, a text Michel Foucault relies on to develop his theory of effective history cited above.

¹⁷ I refer here to Freud’s theorisation on “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), where mourning comes to an end once the subject has resolved its emotional attachment to the lost one. Although Freud revised this position later on in “The Ego and the Id” (1924), there have been theorists of Cultural and Literary studies who have implied the need and possibility of a work of mourning. See, for example, Dominic LaCapra: *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Julia Kristeva: *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*; and Peter Sacks: *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre From Spenser to Yeats*.

possible normality, without reliable limit, in its reality or its concept, between introjection and incorporation” (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* 121). As Ranjana Khanna has noted in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (2003), the exorcism of these historical ghosts would signify an “impossible and unethical assimilation of otherness” (24), in that it would bring a closure to their disquieting presences, “which gives one the most to think about—and to do” (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx* 122). Similarly, as we will see, Aidoo proposes a different relationship with the remainder of trauma, a relationship that embraces its interruptive presence, for it speaks “the unspeakable, releasing silence in a disruptive way that does not let her community be comfortable in its forgetfulness” (Karavanta, “Rethinking the Specter” 117).

Taking its cue from these problematics, this chapter focuses primarily on Ama Ata Aidoo’s play *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, seeking to attend to the silenced, but not silent, stories of the transatlantic slave trade that Aidoo narrates in her consistent attempt to speak to the history of slavery. By focusing on the trope of “silence”, deployed in the play as the hidden story of slavery’s history in Ghana, and its eventual haunting, I will explore how Aidoo’s play recovers the “othered” narratives of history, and invites the community to engage with its ghosts. As I will argue, Aidoo’s retrieval of slavery’s silent, but not silenced, stories in ways that evade their appropriation or effacement involves a rigorous act of forgiveness that perpetually negotiates two ongoing issues: the political praxis of “unsilencing” and “unforgetting” the repressed history of slavery, and the ethical responsibility of maintaining a relation with the silenced ghosts of the past, while acknowledging the impossibility of correcting History’s shameful crimes.

The Dilemma as a Site of “Uncanny” Dislocations

If the other is not my enemy ,..., then how can he become
the one who wrests me from my identity and whose proximity
(for he is my neighbour) wounds, exhausts, and hounds me,
tormenting me so that I am bereft of my selfhood and so that this torment,
this lassitude which leaves me destitute becomes my responsibility?
Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

In reading *The Dilemma of a Ghost* as a play that both represents the trauma of slavery and speaks to the injustice that characterises its history, it would be useful to examine the

conditions of performance. That is to say, why has Aidoo chosen the theatrical form to enter into the public sphere and offer her counternarrative? This question acquires further pertinence once we take into consideration that both times that Aidoo has engaged with the trauma and the silences surrounding the history of slavery—in *The Dilemma of the Ghost* and *Anowa*—she has chosen the dramatic form to communicate her message. As we will see later in this chapter, by bringing “into vision what escapes sight, those phantoms of trauma that always pack more intensity than can be had in the moral real” (Murray 39), Aidoo invites the community to engage with the haunting of its *phantoms*, with its shameful past that has been veiled in silence and insists on returning.

Yet, another factor that sheds light upon Aidoo’s choice of the dramatic form can be traced in the genre’s predominant position within the specificities of the Ghanaian context.¹⁸ The historical roots of the theatre’s performative aspects are located in the pre-contact years, and particularly in cultural manifestations such as the tradition of storytelling, religious ceremonies, and rituals of socialization (Ogunda & Irele, 57-9). Commenting on the role of the precolonial performance Ngugi underlines that:

it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community. It was an activity among other activities, often drawing its energy from those other activities. It was also entertainment in the sense of involved enjoyment; it was moral instruction; and it was also a strict matter of life and death and communal survival.” (37)

Later on, with the advent of colonialism, the discursive practices of performance undergo a number of transformations. Although traditional theatrical practices continue to serve religious interests “theatre begins to be used as a medium of popular resistance to the cultural repression and socioeconomic exploitation faced by Africans under colonialism” (Desai 66- 67). Theatre’s role as a forum of political reflection is further solidified after

¹⁸ By no means should the brief review on the long lasting tradition of performative aspects in Ghana that follows be interpreted as a comprehensive guide that captures the richness and variety of performative Ghanaian traditions, as well as the mutations and developments they have undergone with the passage of time and with the multiple crossings from one region to the other. Rather, my attempt here is limited to the tracing of how specific elements of performative aspects were always part of communal life. Additionally, as James Gibbs acutely notes, in his introduction to Ghanaian theatre, the full coverage of the developments of Ghanaian theatrical tradition would be an impossible task due to the lack of research on the plethora of ethnic groups and diversity of languages that remain unexplored and unrepresented “in the scholarly analysis of Ghanaian culture” (160).

Independence, when it becomes the medium through which people ponder on their current condition, define their cultural agenda, and invent themselves and their world. During this period “theatre experiences a turning point which coincides with a new sense of practical, shared enterprise—a sense of collective identity that... was able to explore itself freely and be explored” (Chapman 7-8). The long lasting tradition of African theatre practices ensures the familiarity of the audience with its expressive means, making it an accessible and forceful medium to instigate critical dialogue *with* the community and *within* the members of the community. It is with reference to the participative relationship between theatre and audience that Gilbert and Tompkins assess “its capacity to intervene publicly in social organisation and to critique political structures” as “more extensive than the relatively isolated circumstances of written narrative and poetry”, because the acts of “political subversion” and “historical intervention” (3) are performed in front of an audience.

As a paradigm of precolonial, colonial and post-colonial realities, African theatre practice has simultaneously been “*working on* history as well as being *worked by* it”, producing “a theatrically mediated understanding of reality” (Quayson 47). Concentrating on the theatre’s ability to refract, negotiate and disseminate a wide range of social relations and historical processes, Quayson, borrowing Higgin’s term, has suggested its examination as “an intermedium”, as a cultural site that “brings together disparate genres and material without necessarily subjecting them to a hierarchised system of signification, thus forcing the audience to participate in *a process* of deriving meaning from the performance” (50). For Quayson the plays that secure the audience’s active participation in the process of meaning-making are not the didactic plays that “move towards a moral conclusion” or seem to propose “organicist forms of closure” (50), but rather plays that rehearse their “unresolved contradictions not only in conceptual terms but also in terms of the range of cultural material brought forward” (51). The elusiveness of closure that obstructs the audience’s desire to realise an ending presupposes an interpretive and interactive community—rather than an “audience of disciplined applauders” (Tiffin 915)—that will re-visit the plot and re-invent the meaning of the play; similarly, the incorporation of disparate cultural elements creates alienating effects that conduct a form of political and social critique.

Aidoo's use of *The Dilemma of the Ghost* as an intermediary space by which the community is invited to ponder on the trauma of slavery and gradually reconstitute its memory is foregrounded in the title of the play. The reference to "Dilemma" suggests thematic and structural allegiances to the traditional oral genre of the "dilemma tale" which is rooted in precapitalist, precolonial African societies' modes of production. Being an internal part of moral and ethical training in many African societies, the traditional dilemma tale exposes "that in human affairs there are often no answers but only difficult choices which call into play conflicting moral values" (Bascom 97). Thus, rather than having an instructive or moralistic character, it throws the floor open to debate. As Abraham has argued, "even when a moral 'last word' does arise, it commonly is at once so divisive and open-ended in its implications that it calls for further discussion" (Abraham qtd. in Odamtten 20). Its resistance to providing satisfactory answers to the exposed dilemma probe the audience to contemplate on the "not-said" of the play's content, on what has been implied and suggested, "resolv[ing] what is unresolved in the performative outside the theatre or text" (Odamtten 20). Its incorporation within the specificities of the postcolonial era, far from constraining the text within teleological interpretations of "golden ageism" (Kerr qtd. in Quayson 47) that aim to re-produce the lost indigenous ethos, projects theatre as a dialogical space between multiple historical processes. The adaptation of a pre-colonial form to the actualities of the present reflects Ghana's position "at the crossroads between traditional rural society and urbanization" (Bryan 16), and is employed in the service of re-thinking some crucial issues that have come to occupy the community in relation to the need for reassess identity, history and race. The very act of initiating "rethinking", and not stating or dictating, is further reinforced by "the contextual qualities" of the dilemma tale that intends to "stimulate serious, deep-probing discussions of social, political, and moral issues that confront human beings in their everyday lives" (Odamtten 18).

The importance of shifting the responsibility of the drama's outcome to the audience is better appreciated once we consider the thematic pre-occupations of the play. For, on the one hand, in so far as Aidoo attempts to dissolve the silence that surrounds the trauma of slavery, keeping slavery's History open-ended then clears the way to start deliberating, creating the conditions to "perpetually initiate rather than conclude the argument so that

every new generation may visit it to quarry its lessons” (Opoku-Agyemang 28). To break the haunting silence just once is not to speak at all. Aidoo is aware that the recovery of trauma is an arduous task that takes time, repetition and continuous engagement with what is yet to be thought, acknowledged and articulated. At the same time, since Aidoo’s play engages in a process of exposing slavery’s forgotten history through the return of Diaspora, the evasion of closure invites the audience to participate in a kind of psychic unsettlement that enacts Diaspora’s destabilisation, dislocation, and resultant alienation. Being left with a possibility of answers that defy the either/or mentality, the audience is forced to re-locate its identity, history and nationhood by constantly shifting between, and through, oppositions: the same and the other, the native and the stranger, men and women, present and past. The opening of a space where the audience engages in a perpetual act of “rethinking” transforms the site of performance to what Avtar Brah calls “a diaspora space” (181), a fertile territory “where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed” (208). A similar approximation of the theatrical stage as a “diaspora space” has been offered by Griffin in her article “Constitutive Subjectivities”, where she explores how British and Asian women playwrights articulate a diasporic experience that deploys the intricacies of hyphenated identities in the “here” and the “now”, exposing Britain’s diasporic reality, a reality that is silenced not only by the dominant culture, but also by those who write from the ex-colonial sites. Griffin’s contribution is important in that she brings to the surface voices of women playwrights that have indeed been consistently marginalised by critical and theoretical commentators, but I disagree with her claim that writers who write from the “margins” tend to maintain a colonial cultural imaginary “as opposed to articulating diasporic experience” (389). Through my discussion of Aidoo’s play, I hope to show that there are writers from the margins “who play out colonial conflicts and their legacies” (Griffin 389), but, at the same time, attend to a diasporic space, a space where the “*native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*” (Brah 209, sic). Central to Brah’s theorization of “diaspora space” are the notions of metaphorical and actual mobility or crossings, “which seriously problematise the subject position of the “native”. Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of “us” and “them,” are contested” (208- 209). Similarly, the act of

deliberation that ensues the play's ending contrives a number of metaphorical journeys in between positions and oppositions that disrupt sclerotic articulations, and allow the audience to imagine cultural and psychological landscapes through a different perspective.

The issues that have to be rethought, but remain conspicuously “un-said”, as well as the promulgation of the play as a “diaspora space”, are hinted at the prelude of the *Dilemma* through the narrator's opening address to the audience:

I am the Bird on the Wayside—
 The sudden scampering in the undergrowth,
 Or the trunkless head
 Of the shadow in the corner.
 I am an asthmatic old hag
 Eternally breaking the nuts
 Whose soup, alas,
 Nourished a bundle of whitened bones—
 Or a pair of women, your neighbours
 Chattering their lives away. (7)

The narrator's ambivalent identity, both in terms of time and belonging, becomes suggestive of her tale's complexities. On the one hand, in identifying herself as the “bird on the wayside”, she assumes the role of a historical subject that has borne witness to a number of events, and has access to the world of ancestors and tradition. At the same time, her familiarity with the past that has shaped the community is coupled with the contemporaneity of her simultaneous identity as a “pair of women” who are preoccupied with present day issues, and will take her place as 1st and 2nd Woman when she disappears from the stage. Her location within different historical moments implies that her story is old and new, forgotten but still manifested, in a latent way, in contemporary life. The narrator's crossings between these historical realms and identities embody and display the processes of “*multi-locationality across geographical, cultural and psychic boundaries*” (Brah 194) that her story will engage in, and prepares the audience for similar psychic and cultural movements.

It is this ability to dwell in multiple spaces at once and to bridge their seemingly conflicting terrains that gives the narrator the ability to furnish the audience “with reasons why/ this and that and other things/ Happened” (7). However, as long as the narrator has asserted her creative power along the lines of the traditional raconteur, she rushes to disclaim her competence to continue with her narration, for there seem to be some stories that evade the means of articulation:

But Stranger,
 What would you have me say
 About the Oduman Clan? ...
 Look Around you,
 For the mouth must not tell everything.
 Sometimes the eye can see
 And the ear should hear. (7)

The appellation “stranger” renders—ironically enough—the audience an outsider, and invites it to follow her story not from the secure position of their native localities, but from a fluid “diasporic space” that will interrogate these localities. This invitation to participate in a kind of psychic displacement foregrounds the displacements that will take place in the actual play. Additionally, it frees the “socially conditioned phenomena” her story will deploy “from the stamp of familiarity which protects them against [the audience’s] grasp” (Willet qtd, in Odamtten 25). The resultant alienation of the outsider’s position enjoins the audience to “be attentive, critical, distanced” (Odamtten 26), to think, rather than become too involved in the story line, and to identify with the characters. For her story, as the mentioning of the family’s name indicates, is not a product of fiction; it is rather a complex issue that has come to puzzle the local community, and urgently demands articulation and consideration. It is because of this issue’s complexity that she exhorts the audience to be attentive to the meaningful silences that lurk in the play, to what will not be clearly stated but will be presented as something that the community has to revise.

The complexity of her story is grounded in the unexpected developments that will accompany the return of the “been-to” Ato. As we will see in the next chapter, the characterization “been-to” refers to a person of African descent, who has been to the

Western World either for education or for employment, and returns back to the country of his/her origins. The “been-to” has become a trope in African Literature, and its deployment varies from criticisms of the educated elite’s neo-colonial mentality, to the resultant conflict of being caught in-between cultures, but also to the critical insights and “re-readings” this in-between position can offer. Aidoo’s engagement with the critical possibilities the “been-to’s” status can offer for the post-colonial condition is apparent, apart from *The Dilemma*, in her novel *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). There, by having Sissie, a female “been-to”, as the main narrator, she exposes all the aforementioned positions, and offers a social critique of colonialism’s legacy, not only in Ghana, but also in Europe. Similarly, in *The Dilemma* Ato’s “been-to” status will function as a tool to comment on the conflicts ensued by being in-between cultures, and the materialistic drives of the Westernized elite, but his return will be interweaved with another crucial issue, namely, the return of the diasporic subject.

The cataclysmic presence of the “been-to” is highlighted by the chant that follows the return of Ato: “We came from left/ We came from right...We are of the vanguard/ We are running forward, forward, forward...” (7-8). Similarly, the audience’s familiarity with the “been-to’s” status, is revealed in the family’s preparations for his return.

Thus, it is only to be expected that they should reserve the new addition to the house for the exclusive use of the One Scholar. Not that they expect him to make his home there. No... he will certainly have to live and work in the city when he arrives from the white man’s land. But they expect him to come down, now and then, at the weekend and on festive occasions like Christmas. (8)

Being aware that the new “scholar” will return altered from his crossing of the Atlantic, they accept that he will dwell in the city, whose emergent neo-colonial socioeconomic order provides a number of possibilities for his professional development. However, the narrator’s utterance that “the Day of Planning is different from the Day of Battle” (8) paves the way for the unexpected developments that will surround the unravelling of the “been-to’s” return. For in Aidoo’s play, Ato Yawson does not simply return back home with the ideological and cultural baggage of the West; he is also accompanied by a “radical” guest, whose presence will lay claim, among other things, to a long history of silence, whose story is yet to be told. These developments become apparent when the

“bird of the wayside” fades away from the stage, having first transferred the audience to the other side of the Atlantic on a “University Campus” (8). The ensuing snapshots of Ato and Eulalie’s conversation about their impending return to Ghana functions as the platform upon which the play’s main dilemma will be displayed.

Problematising Diaspora’s Return

“What happens to those who were taken Away?
Do people hear from them?”
Ama Ata Aidoo, *Anowa*

The seemingly colloquial discussion between Ato and Eulalie that the “bird of the wayside” introduces comes to function as a microcosmos that deflects the main problematic of the play, making it clear that the been-to’s return is interweaved with the diasporic subject’s return. What starts as an intimate discussion between the couple culminates in a discordance that transgresses the boundaries of the marital space and “directs itself to a dilemma which has had deep repercussions for Africa and its diaspora” (Wilentz 46). Their dialogue raises questions about Diaspora’s “homing” desire, and the viability of return to the place of ancestral origins. Like Coker, Aidoo will problematise such possibility, especially once conducted in the name of the “black racial” family that ignores the subject positions of those who return. Eulalie’s migration to Ghana necessitates the incorporation of gendered identities in any discussion of return to an imaginary home, and exposes how her gendered experience complicates linear teleologies of return to a cohesive homeland.

Aidoo’s problematisation of Diaspora’s return is even more crucial once placed within the corpus of work produced by her male contemporaries in Ghana. Kofi Awoonor’s *Comes the Voyager at Last* (1992), for example, crosses back and forth the Atlantic Ocean, and spans the period of over two hundred years through the stories of three men. The opening story of an African slave, who is dragged across the desert to the one of the slave castles and then to the Americas, is constantly interrupted by the narratives of Sheik Lumumba Mandela, a young African-American and supporter of Malcom X’s organisation of African-American Unity, and a conspicuously nameless

young Ghanaian, who experiences the resultant disillusion ensued by Nkrumah's overthrow in the post-independence era. Sheik Lumumba Mandela returns to Ghana driven by the awakening he had experienced after his father's death over the "historical wilderness in which he and his people had lived" (21), as well as by Malcom X's polemic presentations of Africa as "the spiritual birthplace of all black folk" (85). There, in a bar in Accra, he meets the young Ghanaian and they get involved in a violent episode with two Europeans that Lulumba attacks with a knife. Being left with no other choice, they run away. They find refuge in an isolated village where both of them try to recover from the shock of the event. After a couple of days they attend a "medicine ceremony", where a young girl, in a Dionysian ecstasy, recognises in Lulumba's face this of "her husband having come home from the journey to the forest and desert land" (121). Lulumba is thus embraced by the African family, and finds a new home, having first completed the ritual of return through the rehearsal of children's songs that he sings "as if he had been familiar with them all his life" (126). At the end of the novel, the rupture inflicted by the middle passage is not only presented as reversible, but is fully restored through a poetic closure that brings all the voices together and interprets the return to Africa as the beginning of a new story, for there "was infinitely more than that" (138). As Smith McKoy suggests in "This Unity of Spilt Blood: Tracing Remnant Consciousness in Kofi Awoonor's *Comes the Voyager at Last*", the possibility of diaspora's return to the gulfs of the African family is predicated on the fact that "Home becomes defined by remnant consciousness: the ontological, physical, and spiritual manifestations of reclaiming an African cultural heritage despite the complexities of what passes as African given the multiple ways in which —and the multiple audiences for which—Africans identify themselves" (195). Smith McKoy defines remnant consciousness as "embod[ying] this hunger for a remembered home that is situated in the desire for cultural wholeness" (196), and is invested with the possibility of creating an "ontologically whole space" for the diaspora consciousness. Indeed, Lulumba's return to Ghana is predicated by his "remnant consciousness", but his welcoming is facilitated by a "moving sense of solidarity and *brotherhood*" (*Comes the Voyager at Last* 89, emphasis added) he experiences during his first meeting with the young Ghanaian. But would his return be complicated if he didn't have access to the "brotherhood"? Or, in other words, would his

experience of “wholeness” be different if he was a woman attempting to make a home in Africa?

Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith’s introductory note to a special issue of *Signs* on “Gender and Cultural Memory,” pose a number of resonant questions that reveal the complexities that emerge when attending to stories of female migration: “How, for instance, does the position of finding oneself on the threshold of a new citizenship shape the assumptions about gender and sexuality? How do old and new world constructions of gender collide in this space of transition? How does the role of the female witness or agent of transmission differ from that of her male counterpart?” (2). Hirsch and Smith’s interrogations over the female subjects’ migratory experiences map a space where race, culture and gender intersect and demand, in Carole Davies Boyce words, the rethinking of “totalising discourses which can tolerate no different articulation and operate from a singularly monolithic construction of an African theoretical homeland” (49). Rather, female accounts and experiences of women’s migration complicate nationalistic narratives and imaginings, and contest the ideal representations of return, because for them:

the mystified notions of home and family are removed from their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways.

This complicated notion of home mirrors the problematizing of community/ nation/ identity that one finds in Black women’s writing from a variety of communities. (21)

Homogenising racial discourses of return forget women’s “migrations horror stories” (Davies 5), and “turn quickly to exile and prove to be ineffective as mechanisms for constructing a black identity, which encompasses gender as well” (Williams 55). For black women’s migrations and crossings are shadowed and haunted by their roles as female subjects in the “hosting communities”, and have to negotiate their sexuality, their roles as wives and mothers within the frame of oppressive or patriarchal cultures. Aidoo’s play, through Eulalie’s return, exemplifies the difficulties inherent in female migrations and contests nationalistic constructions of home that submerge and silence the specificities of gendered experiences.

In marrying Ato and agreeing to go to Ghana, Eulalie Rush, the African-American “daughter of slaves”, seeks to re-establish herself and find her roots. Her desire “to

belong to somewhere again” underpins her marginalisation and uprootedness as an African-American woman within the political system of the United States. The politics of racial exclusion she has been subjected to are emphasised through her testimony that her father or mother could be beggars in the street, and, in a later section of the play, when Eulalie recollects her mother’s caution about the unattainable dreams of black girls:

sugar, don’t let them do you in...Sugar, don’t sort of curse me and your Pa every morning you look your face in the mirror and see yourself black. Kill the sort of dreams silly girls dream that they are going to wake one morning and they find their skins milk white and their hair soft blonde like the Hollywood Stars. (24)

Operating against the background of racial oppression in the white man’s land, encapsulated in her question of “How one can make a family out of Harlem?” (24), her desire to return to the source is buttressed, as we saw in the previous chapter in the case of the returnees, with ideal representations that take the form of romantic reverie. Eulalie’s idealisation of the return to Africa culminates in an idealisation of Ghana as a utopian space. Its identification with exotic scenes of “palm trees, the azure sea, the sup and golden beaches” (9) and its construction as the land of the “tourist brochures” (9), dramatises the way in which the memory and trauma of the Middle passage has created for the black diaspora an imaginary African “home”. Yet, if, as Eulalie has stated, there is no possibility to create a “home” out of Harlem, can this “imaginary home” provide the conditions for a viable sense of belonging?

For Brah the imaginary “home” is “a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of origin” (192). As she explains, diaspora as a conceptual tool implicates “the politics of location” (180), which inform, and shape, diasporic subjectivities, complicating thus not only rigid articulations of subject positions but also a sense of belonging to a single place. Following Gilroy’s argument regarding the importance of “roots” and “routes” in identity formation, Abrah reminds us that diasporic subjectivities are constituted by “both” (192). That is, diasporic subjectivities are driven by a “homing desire”, but the cluster of positions that inform their identities such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, what Stuart Hall calls “the continuous play of history, culture and power” (Hall 225), interrupt discourses of single and “fixed origins” (Brah 193) and problematise settlements in a place that can be “claimed

as one's home" (193). Similarly, in *The Dilemma* Eulalie's longing "to create a paradise" in Africa is overshadowed by her position as an American woman. For the claiming Eulalie will engage in will not be only in the name of her ancestors' forgotten History, but also in the name of the present, and her role as a female, diasporic subject within its frame.

The first signs of Eulalie's gendered claiming can be traced during the discussion she has with Ato, when still in University campus, about their pending return to Ghana. Her impatient questions about the possibility of happiness in this imaginary "home" irritate Ato, and fuel a tension that exposes the clash and differences "between her people and his people":

Ato: Do keep your mouth shut, if you please.

Eu: I suppose African women don't talk?

Ato: How often do you want to drag about African women? ...Ah yes, they talk. But Christ, they don't run on in this way. This running-tap drawl gets on my nerves.

...

Eu: Look here, I don't think I'll stand by and have you say I am not as good as your folks....I only speak like I was born to speak—like an American. (8- 9)

Eulalie's identification as an American articulates her identity not only as an ethnic or racialised subject, but as a gendered subject. Apart from revealing, for yet once more, the set of misconceptions she has about Ghana as a savage place, this utterance foregrounds the clashes she will bring forth, and encounter, upon returning to "the source".

This extract, and a number of others that will be explored later in this chapter, is notable because it can function as a response to the criticism Aidoo has received on the grounds of an essentialist Pan-African nationalism that she is supposed to advocate.¹⁹ As Karavanta has suggested, Anuradha Dingwaney Needham in *Using the Master's Tools*, for example, follows Neil Lazarus' reading of Frantz Fanon's national consciousness and suggests that "unlike Frantz Fanon, for whom anti-colonialism is a 'liberation, anti-imperialist, nationalist internationalism', Aidoo often inverts her anti-imperialist, anti-Western critique to the celebration of an essentialist Africa" ("Rethinking the

¹⁹ Apart from her two plays *The Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*, another work that has been attacked by a number of critics for advocating a Pan-African/ Nationalist agenda *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977). See for example Cooper and Needham. For responses to these critics, see Karavanta "Rethinking the Spectre".

Spectre”112).²⁰ He calls this technique “inversion” (77), which he defines as an “instrumental part of anti-colonial nationalism” (77) but still “preserves the structures within which its object of critique is embedded” (Needham qtd. in Karavanta 112). Although Needham’s criticism is mainly focused on Aidoo’s *Our Sister Killjoy* it finds resonances in other critics’ readings of *The Dilemma*. Gourdine, for example, reads Aidoo’s *The Dilemma* through Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness and Nkrumah’s Pan-African statements, and construes her work as bordering on the latter’s quandary (36).

A closer look at Aidoo’s *Dilemma* sheds a different light on this criticism. For passages like the one analysed above, far from fulfilling the Pan-Africanist perspective of the “Back to Africa movement”, that is, the return of diasporic Africans to a continental homeland, problematise and question the feasibility of such project. Rather, as Chapman has suggested, Aidoo in *The Dilemma* demonstrates how:

The experience of a black American is inevitably different from that of an African, despite their common ancestry. In the eyes of many Africans, particularly those on the countryside, black Americans have more in common culturally with white Americans than with Africans. The American black has been removed from Africa for a long time; contrary to what many romantically inclined Garveyites would like to believe, a return to the source is a much more difficult task than its fascination may suggest, for it would mean returning to a culture never experienced in fact. (4)

The essentialised, homogenous ideas of “blackness” that could potentially unite both sides of the Atlantic are problematized through Eulalie’s statement on the basis that they ignore the different gendered, cultural and historical spaces black subjects inhabit. To forget the multiplicity of the black subjects’ identity, the very condition of “post-modern blackness” in bell hooks words, “the complicated ways in which other positions—those of gender, class, sexuality, nationality, and so on—inform and determine the performance of African American identities (hooks qtd. in Tate 6) is to perpetuate western ideologies of racial exclusion that reify and “represent blackness one-dimensionally” (hooks 133).

²⁰ I follow Karavanta’s excellent challenging of Needham’s position here for her objection and consequent correction/re-reading touches upon a common misunderstanding of Aidoo’s works; see her “Rethinking the Spectre: Ama Ata Aidoo’s *Anowa*,” *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 34. 4 (2001): 112.

Rather, my critical response to the play suggests that Aidoo emphasizes, as Gilroy has noted in *Against Race*, the imperative to find new ways out of “the sedentary poetics of either soil or blood” (11) that will function as alternatives “to the stern discipline of primordial kinship and rooted belonging” (123).

After the newly-wedded couple’s settling in Ghana, Eulalie realises that her return to the “source” has left her “poorer” than if she had stayed “in New York City” (47). Eulalie’s enhanced sense of being even poorer bespeaks her failure to become integrated into the African family. Her marginalisation within the Ghanaian community is fed by her inability to “forget” her American identity, and to operate in Ghana’s cultural milieu outside cultural and gendered modalities. This inability results in her complete isolation. Thus, although Michael Echeruo in “The African Diaspora: The Ontological Project”, defends racial essentialism by arguing that apart from all the differences, apart from the fact that he, and the rest of the diasporic community, “drink coca-cola” (14), they are still “identical and African” (14), in Eulalie’s case the consumption of coca-cola, along with her drinking and smoking habits, become symbolic instantiations of the barrier that separates her from the local community. For Eulalie coca-cola, and the capitalist, materialistic ethos this commodity represents, becomes a memory of home and is consumed “for sentimental reasons” to appease her feelings of “homesickness” (26). And the consumption of “coca-cola” doesn’t come alone; rather, Ato showers her with a number of commodities, from gifts to machines, which are intended to make her life in Ghana more bearable. In this way, as Karavanta has noted, they end up “barring themselves from the community behind the Western gadgets that Ato buys for Eulalie in his attempt to recreate her American environment”, and their materialistic ethos “blind[s] them to the local community’s values and tradition, which Ato’s family represents” (“Rethinking the Spectre” 113).

The criticism of materialistic ideology is apparent, not only in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, but also in the majority of Aidoo’s works. In *Anowa*, for example, the materialistic drive of Kofi blinds him to slavery’s threatening consequences for himself and his community, and seduces him in selling his compatriots to white slavers. In *Changes* (1991), Esi, the heroine, allows her lover Ali to shower her with expensive gifts that blind her to the incommensurable differences that exist between them, vis-à-vis his Muslim

identity and his first marriage. Esi, despite her independent and assertive character, marries Ali and enters the system of polygamy without understanding her action as a facile surrender to the position of a sexual object that Ali acquires by giving Esi all the material she needs, from decorative gifts to a car. Similarly, in *Our Sister Killjoy* (1977), the critique of this materialistic drive is explored when her narrator rigorously reprimands her countrymen who stay in the west by allowing themselves to be lured by what appears to be progress but is actually nothing more than blunt materialism.

In *The Dilemma* Eulalie's and Ato's consumerist habits are criticised by the chorus of the 1st and the 2nd woman, and are connected to the issue that will dominate the play, namely the position of a childless woman within the Ghanaian community. The women's commentaries on the play's action frame every scene, and as Gay Wilentz suggests, come to function as "the community's voice" (49). Their use as a device that ensures "the audiences' interest and involvement" in the play (Adelugba 77) is secured by their opposing positions with regards to motherhood. As we learn at the beginning of Act One, one is barren, and the other fertile, and this contrast informs as Gay Wilentz suggests, their "different points of view towards the action of the play", problematising the "role of women in the society" (Wilentz 49). In *The Last Harmattan*, we saw that Fatmatta's questioning of biological motherhood opened the way to further question and resist her role in the patriarchal system of her community, and the dehumanising conditions of the plantation farms; in *The Dilemma* the 1st Woman's empathy with Eulalie's barrenness motivates her criticism against the biases of the community towards women who don't have children. Although up to that point Eulalie was condemned for her extravagant habits, once the 1st Woman is informed of Eulalie's barrenness, she identifies with her plight and prefigures her marginalisation within the communal frame.

If it is real barrenness
 Then, oh stranger girl...
 I weep for you.

 For my world
 Which you have run to enter
 Is most unkind to the barren. (39- 40)

For the 1st woman Eulalie's "machines that cook", and her "machines that sweep" (39) cannot bridge the gap between her and the community, for within the Ghanaian context Eulalie is perceived as Ato's wife, and potential mother of his children. As Williams Piper Kendrix has argued the very conditions of motherhood and "wifedom becomes a condition of homelessness, not unlike the one that first motivated Eulalie migrations" (76). As long as she fails to comply with these standards of womanhood, she will be ostracised.

Although Eulalie initially questions the validity of their decision to postpone having children on the basis of the possible negative implications it may have within the African community, Ato tries to alleviate her concerns:

Lalie, don't you believe me when I tell you it's O.K.? I love you Eulalie and that's what matters. Your own sweet self should be O.K. for any guy. And how can a first-born child be difficult to please? In fact, they will make me jealous. I couldn't bear seeing you love someone else better than you do me. Not yet, darling, and not even my own children. (10)

Ato's dismissal of Eulalie's fears "reflect both his cultural-nationalistic arrogance and his male chauvinism" (Odamtten 35), and reaffirm "the impression about his reluctance to honestly confront his history" (35). Although he is fully aware of his community's attitude towards motherhood, and he can predict that this decision will cause tension when they return to Ghana, he hides behind his newly educated status and makes Eulalie believe that all these obstacles will be bypassed.

Similarly, Ato continues to downplay Eulalie's fears and doubts about their decision not to have children, once they have reached Ghana. One evening, Eulalie is alarmed by the sound of the drumming as she thinks that they signify "witch-hunting" (24), and she runs to Ato for protection and re-assurance. Ato teases her about her naïve ideas about "his primitive culture" (26), and remarks that "after all, only a witch should be afraid of witch-hunting. For the rest of the community, it is a delightful sport" (25). Ato is maybe justified in mocking Eulalie's impressions about life in Ghana, yet if as Boyce, citing Gauthier, has noted "witches are the most deliberate violators of societal tradition" (74), he forgets that Eulalie's birth-control violates his community's cultural conventions. Interestingly, after this scene, Eulalie suggests re-thinking their decision, and introduces

the idea of whether it is time to start a family, as she “got a feeling...”, but Ato’s answer “Heavens, women! They are always getting feelings” (26), leaves no room for further deliberation.

Yet, Ato’s reassuring comments on Eulalie’s anxieties will prove to be wrong. One of the play’s climactic moments comes when Ato and Eulalie have a violent disagreement that transcends the boundaries of their fractured marriage, and comes to represent a number of wider cultural issues explored throughout the play, such as the unresolved tension between traditional and Western values, and the unreconcilable estrangement that the history of middle passage has created between the continental Africans and those in the Diaspora. The conflict begins when Ato’s people put pressure on the couple to have children. Witnessing the couple being married and still childless, the family assumes that Eulalie is infertile, and they propose to solve the problem through a traditional, cleansing ritual that involves washing her belly with herbs. The ritual is supposed to be conducted on a day that “drives all evil spirits, ill luck and unkind feelings” (44) away, for they believe that the couple is haunted by a “foreign, evil spirit” (45). Diaspora’s association with impurities, and infertility, a theme we explored in the previous chapter, through the cleansing ritual of Isatu and Gustavius, is reiterated in Aidoo’s play, and like in Coker’s novel, Aidoo reveals that the root of the problem lies elsewhere. Not only is Eulalie not subjected to this sort of “cleansing”, but, as we will see later in this chapter, Aidoo turns the focus onto her community’s “impurities” in relation to the History of slavery. When Eulalie hears about the reason of the family’s visit, she inquires whether Ato explained that they are using “birth control”. Upon Ato’s answer that “They simply won’t understand that one should begin having children only when one is prepared for them” (47), Eulalie condemns Ato’s people for only understanding their “own savage customs and standards” (47), and exclaims “Have they appreciation for anything but their prehistoric existence? More Savage then dinosaurs” (47). Ato’s response to Eulalie’s accusations imitates, both in tone and content, her racist discourse and answers: “Shut up, how much does the American Negro know? (87). The argument ends violently, with Ato slapping Eulalie, and her rushing out of the house.

The Irreducible Ghost of Slavery and the Politics of Forgiving Memories

“...what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps within us by the secrets of others”

N. Abraham & M. Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel*

“the political is at the limit of psychoanalysis, or is its limit:
its origin, its end, and the line of an intimate fold which crosses it”

Lacoue-Labarthe & Jean Luc Nancy, “La Panique Politic”

“a forgiveness without power...
since the hypothesis of this unspeakable task announces itself,
be it as a dream for thought, this madness is perhaps not so mad”
Jacques Derrida, “On Forgiveness”

Although the opening dialogue between Ato and Eulalie is permeated by the former’s attempt to evade the customs and traditions of his community, to deny his “Africaness” and to re-invent himself as a member of the newly educated elite, the only moment when Ato shows signs of recognising the risk of returning back with Eulalie is when she questions the possibility of whether his “Ma could be her Ma too” (9). Ato replies, yet once more, positively, that “Sure she can” (9), but his affirmation is preceded by Aidoo’s stage direction that the answer should be made “[Slowly and Uncertainly]” (9). Ato’s uncertainty, expressed through a momentary pause, intensifies into a permanent paralysis once he and Eulalie return to Ghana. Throughout the play, Ato is presented as a subject caught at “the juncture” of the conflicting cultures he comes to represent, inviting critics to associate the dilemma of the title with the predicament of the “been-to”. Thus, according to Odamtten, Ato’s uncertainty is grounded in his condition as a “sujet-en-soi”, a condition that renders him incapable of balancing the polarised cultures he has been exposed to. For Odamtten, the “sujet-en-soi” is characterised by “the lack of critical self-consciousness that allows the individual-as-subject to grasp fully the nature of his or her conditioning by different and conflicting ideological practises or discourses” (32-33). Caught between his American education, and its ideas and values, and the values and expectations of his family and community, Ato is unable to take a position in relation to the cultural and political issues that will emerge in the play. One of these issues is the historical “trauma” Eulalie’s presence evokes and her claiming to have its silenced history heard in the present.

The manifestations of slavery's silenced memory are underscored during the first family gathering Ato attends where he announces that he has been married to Eulalie while studying in the United States. The pauses that follow Ato's answers to his family's questions over their new daughter's "roots" break into mourning once he elaborates about her ancestors' "routes": "Eulalie's ancestors were of our ancestors. But [*warming up*] as you all know, the white people came and took some away in ships to be slaves..." (18). Ato's "warming up" before explaining the specificities of Eulalie's background foreshadows his awareness that the history of transatlantic slavery is a sensitive issue for his family. Indeed, the mentioning of the word "slaves" brings to the surface a part of the community's history that was buried in silence for many years, and begs its acknowledgement. Yet, besides his pleas to be offered a "listening space" (Lyedesdorf 10): "But no one is prepared to listen to me...", "But you will not listen to me...", "Please I beg you all listen to me" the family's facial expressions of horror, along with Nana's reaction: "Now, what shall I tell them who are gone? /The daughter of slaves who come from the white man's land. /Someone should advise on how to tell my story" (18), foregrounds the impossibility of endorsing Eulalie's story as part of communal history. Gourdine Angeletta suggests that Nana's inability to communicate the news of Ato's wedding to the ancestors is complicated by Eulalie's presence, "because to include Eulalie in the story she must speak or write, what has yet to be acknowledged" (32). Yet, what remains to be explored are the causes of this inability.

Interestingly, the aetiology of Nana's impotence as a messenger to the "Royal Dead" is not offered until the family gathering comes to an end and the stage has been emptied. In a monologue addressed to the audience, Nana discloses what was concealed in her initial reaction, shedding light on the root cause of her difficulty in transferring the news to the ancestors:

Even when the unmentionable
 Came and carried off the children of the house
 In shoals like fish,
 Nana Kum kept his feet steadfast on the ground
 And refused to let any of his nephews
 Take a wife from a doubtful stock. (19-20)

This testimony reveals the ways in which slavery has been experienced as trauma and concealed as a secret due to the guilt of its injustice. As Nana explains, the ancestors have experienced and survived the irrevocable horror of their children's enslavement. Living under the perpetual threat of captivity, their only defence towards the surviving members of the community was the preservation of a sense of collectivity orchestrated around the illusionary clusters of "sameness" and "racial purity". Their attitude exemplifies what Agyemang defines as the "pathogeny" of a "victim society", which, having adapted to the constant danger of capture, assumes "a posture of perpetual defensiveness" (27), to the extent that it "becomes conservative, the people huddle together, furtive, subsisting by cunning, afraid even of the tremor lurking in the light" (27). This precarious mode of living that defines "Africa's culture under siege" (26) forms the ontological basis of the community and explains the ways in which trauma has contributed to the silencing of slavery. For the ancestors' inability to shield their children, and even themselves, against the ransacking of the "unmentionable" results in a defensive attitude that renders slavery "unmentionable", in that by shutting out all those who come "from a doubtful" stock they annihilate and silence their history. However, although the history of slavery has been kept safely outside the parameters of the community, what has remained "inside" and haunts the consciousness of its members is the guilt of exclusion, a guilt that symbolises all that was denied within the culture, and yet remains present in its haunting absence: the question of justice and responsibility towards all those who were taken away, who were drained from the African continent, and shipped to the other side of the Atlantic. This unspoken and unacknowledged awareness, sealed properly in the collective unconscious of the community, is the communal secret that has passed down to the next generations, and makes its presence felt when Eulalie returns, claiming the space that her ancestors were denied. This claiming is not only conducted in the name of the injustice committed in the past, but also in the name of the present and the future and, particularly, Eulalie's role within its frame: her right to represent herself, to question, and to rethink, the History of silence and exclusion.

Like psychoanalytic theory's description of the trauma scenario, the family's and Nana's reaction to Eulalie's return illustrates how the silenced, lost, or unrepresentable historical "fact" continues to make an appearance, albeit as something other than "fact".

As Caruth notes, “in its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 11). Before advancing further, it is necessary to consider the extent to which trauma theory exists in a “disconnected relationship” to literary and critical work concerned with African experience, due to “the European cultural and historical underpinnings of psychoanalysis from which trauma theory emerges” (Johnson 2). As Ranjana Khanna—among others—notes in *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Race*, “the concepts of self and being that came into existence and in psychoanalysis were dependent on strife of violence, that is, on the politics of colonial relations” (2). The problem of the psychoanalytic practise is not located on its ahistorical and apolitical agenda that downgrades material and historical circumstances of real lives to background influences, but on the epistemic violence it has inflicted on the colonised people. Yet, Lacoue Labarthe’s and Jean Luc Nancy’s pertinent suggestion in “La Panique Politique”, namely that “it is less a question of asking oneself what Freud says or does not say, or allows one to say about the political, than of wondering what the question of the political does in and to psychoanalysis” (2), reflects the attempts of post-colonial critics, who begin to re-think the relation between psychoanalysis and race in ways that illuminate black experience. For example, according to Claudia Tate in *Psychoanalysis and Black Novels* (1998) the re-reading of African American novels through the lens of psychoanalytic discourse unveils “the residual surplus meaning of unconscious desire”, whose “enigmatic presence produces textual meanings, which in turn complicate the explicit social message of the text” (9). Similarly, starting from the premise that trauma creates and shapes communal histories, J. Brooks Bouson argues for “a race-cognizant application of shame and trauma theory” that can illuminate how “African Americans have been forced to deal not only with individual and/or family shame and trauma but also with cultural shame and racial trauma” (6).

Cathy Caruth, in her work on trauma studies, has argued that traumatic effects are not produced by the experience or event itself, but “by the structure of its experience or reception” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 4). For Caruth “trauma” is defined as the

“response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena” (*Unclaimed Experience* 91). Since trauma involves forgetting, in that the event is inaccessible beyond the moment of occurrence, and falls beyond the subject’s perception, it is denied as an immediate experience and becomes a reflective process. The retrospective reconstruction of the traumatic event, apart from presupposing a time lapse between the experience and the advent of trauma, signals the paradoxical relation between memory, history and trauma. Trauma signals the impossibility of a conscious memory of an event but at the same time its manifestations—in the form of intrusive returns—allow the past to make its presence felt in the present. Working in the present from within, and having a reflective reference to the past, trauma abolishes “historical boundaries” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* 8) and comes to be theorized not as a possessed memory, but as a memory that “possesses the one it inhabits”. In this respect, Caruth’s claim that “the traumatised, ..., carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of history that they cannot entirely possess” (8) exposes the double edged challenge trauma imposes on the subject: to fully recognise and access the historical experience that haunts the present and at the same time, and most importantly, to experience the present undisturbed by the past. Caruth’s theoretical accounts establish the foundations for understanding the impact of trauma on a subject and how traumatic history returns to haunt and leave its imprints on the present, but she avoids making the leap from the personal to the communal. Although she mentions that “history, like trauma, is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas” (*Unclaimed Experience* 24), implying that the construction or reconstruction of historical narratives is instigated by collective symptoms, issues like the implications of traumatic memory on the community, and the ways through which trauma haunts and inhabits collective memory remain unexplored.

The relationship of the individuals to collective trauma is explored by Frantz Fanon mainly in the *Black Skin, White Masks* but also in the conclusive section of *The Wretched of the Earth* entitled “Colonial War and Mental Disorders”. In both works, he gestures towards a shift in the objects of psychoanalysis from the individual psyche to a social

situation. Fanon's sociogenic account of trauma links²¹ "the problematic of colonialism with that of subject formation" (Gates 458), in that it reads the alienation of colonized people through the lens of "social and economic realities" (Fanon, *Black Skin* 13). As Adams suggests this reading is facilitated through a re-constellation of Freud's theory of "trauma" and Adler's formulation of "inferiority complex" with Jung's "collective unconscious". For Jung the collective unconscious is the "expression of the bad instincts of the darkness inherent in every ego", which "is then repressed and projected onto other people" (Adams 165). Yet, although Jung traces the collective unconscious "in the inherent cerebral matter" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 188), Fanon locates the construction of the collective unconscious to material/ideological manifestations of culture, to "the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group" (188). These stereotypes inform the coloniser's collective unconscious who passes them on the colonised. And within the historical specificity of colonial order, which is Fanon's centre of analysis, and not the a-historical condition of racism as Hall correctly notes, the colonised is "obliged to have a relationship to self, to give a performance of self, which is scripted by the coloniser, producing in him the internally divided condition of 'absolute depersonalisation'" (Hall, "Why Fanon" 18). The colonised people are burdened by the "perverse palimpsest of colonial identity" (Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon" xv) that negates their humanity and inscribes them, by way of defining them, as "the other", and inflicts permanent traumatic marks on identity. Thus, in order to understand why "the war on national liberation,..., has become a favourable breeding ground for mental disorders" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 201), we have to engage in a copious inventory of colonial history and the damage it has inflicted on the colonial subjects.

Like Fanon, Erikson argues that trauma has to be understood as resulting from "a constellation of life experiences as well as from a discrete happening" ("Notes on Trauma and Community" 229). Suggesting that the word trauma can serve "as a broad social concept as well as a more narrowly clinical one" (*A New Species of Trouble* 228), he notes that "sometimes the tissues of community can be damaged in much the same way

²¹ I am fully aware of Cedric Robinson's argument in "The Appropriation of Fanon" about the dangers of prioritising Fanon's psychoanalytic agenda over his programmed political vision; yet, my brief reading of his treaty on trauma attests to Fanon's commitment with politics and communal life and does not erase his political voice. See also my next chapter, where I engage in a more in depth analysis of *The Wretched of the Earth*.

as the tissues of mind and body” (230). For Erikson, collective trauma can be described as a “blow to the basic tissues of social life” (*A New Species of Trouble* 233) and its ability to “create a community” (“Notes on Trauma and Community” 186) is evident in the fact that the community is shaped and defined by its reactions to the trauma. “To describe people as traumatized is to say that they have withdrawn into a kind of protective envelope, a place of mute, aching loneliness, in which the traumatic experience is treated as a solitary burden that needs to be expunged by acts of denial and resistance ... What could be less ‘social’ than that?” (“Notes on Trauma and Community” 186). Shared experiences of trauma create “a community of suffering” that draws similarly damaged people together, and according to Erikson co-ordinate communal responses of mourning or recovery.

Where, Erikson assumes “an unproblematic translation from individual to collective trauma” (Saunders & Aghaia 17), Ron Eyerman, in his study on slavery’s impact to the formation and constitution of African American identity, insists that there is “a difference between trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process” (*Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity* 1); whereas the former “involves a wound and the experience of great emotional anguish by an individual”, the latter “refers to a dramatic loss of identity and meaning, a tear in the social fabric, affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion” (2). Analysing the temporally and spatially mediated forms of traumatic memory that being “rooted in an event or series of events, but not necessarily in their direct experience” (7) underpin collective identities, he underlines the role of newspapers, radio or television to their disfigurement. By “selectively constructing and representing” some fundamental injury, the cultural agents construct and reconstruct the memory of the community, affecting and defining its position towards the past. In this way, traumatic events that haven’t been experienced can be passed on from one generation to another, informing communal identities and claiming a space in the present. Eyerman’s materialist account emphasises the power of cultural representation—partial or selective—on/in the transmission of trauma. But how can we account for the transmission of traumatic events that haven’t been represented, that have remained conspicuously undisclosed? How can the gap

created by the impossibility of representation occupy collective memories and what are the repercussions of the transmitted gap on communal identities?

The territory of the transmission of the unspeakable has been mapped by Nichola Abraham and Maria Torok's studies on the transmission of symptoms from a parent to a child. Although their concept of the "transgenerational phantom" emerges from the specificities of family secrets, it has the potential to be applied within a broader cultural context, since it "moves the focus of psychoanalytic inquiry beyond the individual being analyzed because it postulates that some people unwittingly inherit the secret psychic substance of their ancestors' lives ... conflicts, traumas, or secrets" (Rand 166). Similarly, Khanna argues that the *phantom* offers "important insights for the literary critic and particularly for postcolonial studies", in that "the presence of the phantom, that is, the existence of material secrets... that can be carried through generations, has consequences for reading against the grain, reading politically, and for reading for difference in the colonial archive" (254). The *transgenerational phantom* points to the internalisation of the gaps and silences created by the "other's" impossibility to articulate a traumatic event, providing "a theory of readability" for the "poetics of hiding" (Rand 57), and lends itself to interpret the processes of cultural encryptments, these words and secrets that a culture does not admit to itself, such as the complicity in the horror of the slave trade exemplified in Nana's narration.

In order to begin, the psychic phantom is defined as the imprint of an indigestible experience, whose existence "points to a gap, it refer[s] to the unspeakable" (174). Lying beyond articulation, it cannot be integrated into the fabric of psychic life and occupies isolated psychic regions. In Abraham's words the phantom is "a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious" (Abraham 173). Existing completely outside the subject's consciousness, and being foreign to the ego, it "work[s] like a stranger within the subject's mental topography" (173). In this sense, the subject harbours a foreign entity that remains incomprehensible and beyond articulation. For Abraham and Torok it is the psychic phantom, the gaps created by the silences surrounding traumatic events, and not the content of the traumatic event, that is transferred from parent to child:

The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious-for good reason. It passes-in a way yet to be determined-from the parent's unconscious

into the child's. ... The phantom's periodic and compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation in the sense of a return of the repressed; it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger within the subject's own mental topography. (Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom" 173)

Since "the psychically mute zone" of the phantom is not accessible to the child, the latter "attempts to metabolize and is thereby compelled to incorporate this mute aspect of the parent, at the price of creating a mute psychic zone" in his/her psychic web (Yassa 8). Thus, the unsayable gets transmitted without being articulated and the child becomes the medium for the return of a parent's unspeakable drama. Within this frame, Abraham and Torok argue that "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps within us by the secrets of others" (171). It is the ghost effect's radical heterogeneity, which, as Derrida notes in his forward to *The Wolf Man's Magic Word*, "implies the topography of an other, 'of a corpse buried in the other'" (xxx), that creates the conditions for the "heterocryptic ghost that *returns* from the Unconscious of the other, according to what might be called the law of *another generation*" (xxxi). This return, the return of another from *within*, doesn't only raise pressing, political questions about the haunting of silenced histories in the present, but commemorates, and thus betrays, the politics of exclusion that have made the construction of the crypt, and its ghostly inhabitant, possible in the primal foreclosure.²²

Abraham and Torok's theory provides a useful context within which to interpret the unspeakable in Aidoo's play. The transgenerational haunting of the ancestor's unadmitted role during the slave trade is dramatised, apart from in the family gathering analysed above, in a dream Ato has after he and Eulalie have settled in Ghana, exemplifying how

²² Abraham and Torok's theory of the *phantom* is largely based on the differentiation between two mechanisms of mourning: "introjection and incorporation". "Introjection" is defined as a successful form of mourning that gradually assimilates the dead "other", whereas "incorporation" signals the refusal to mourn properly, leading to the creation of phantoms. Since the phantom points to a mis-location—the internalisation of the gaps and silences created by the "other's" impossibility to articulate a traumatic event—its recovery is predicated on two processes. The first one is the recognition of the heterogeneity between the subject and the phantom, the realisation that the phantom has been created and belongs to someone else. The second entails the articulation of the shameful experience that haunts the subject in the socio-political reality of the present, mediating its initial sin/guilt under a new perspective. In his introduction to their work, Derrida has offered an exemplar reading that acknowledges the political signification of the "phantom" as a concept, but blurs the distinction between these two terms, and, as a consequence, challenges the possibility of the ghost's exorcism (xvii). My drawing on their theory in Aidoo's play is informed by Derrida's re-reading. See also Khanna, who gestures towards a similar use and application of their formulation in her book.

the silenced and encrypted guilt that surrounds slavery's history continues to haunt the present generation. The dream starts with the appearance of two children on the stage, a boy and a girl, who have a disagreement over what game they should play. Although they decide on the game Kwaakwaa—hide and seek—what remains unresolved is who will hide and who will seek. Upon the girl's insistence on being the one who will be found, the boy hits the girl, but he immediately regrets this, and, since their initial disagreement is not resolved, they start thinking afresh about what they should do. Interestingly, the girl's next choice is to sing "the Ghost", a game performed by holding each other's hands, skipping around and singing the following song:

One early morning,
 When the moon was up
 Shining as the sun,
 I went to Elmina Junction
 And there and there,
 I saw a wretched ghost
 Going up and down
 Singing to himself
 'Shall I go
 To Cape Coast,
 Or to Elmina
 I don't know,
 I can't tell.
 I don't know,
 I can't tell. (28)

The introductory question, what is it to be done (Odamtten 32), reflects the dilemma Ato and Eulalie—and along with them the community that watches—face in relation to the forgotten story Eulalie has become to represent: namely, Ghana's responsibility for the slave trade. Seen in this way, the girl's demand to be found symbolises the claim Eulalie, and her story, put upon the community: the acknowledgement, that is, of a long History of silence, and the urging to include its painful memory in the present, defying the ruptures or fissures it may cause on the national and communal fabric. Similarly, the little

boy's unwillingness to find the girl, symbolises Ato and his community's unwillingness to mobilise themselves towards the quest for Eulalie's forgotten history; rather, the community is inclined to just hide from the legacy of the past. And as the dream manifests, the community's denial towards the past ends up in a haunting, for the girl's next choice is to play "the ghost". Rather than suggesting "communality and gender reconciliation" that becomes paradigmatic to the characters of the play and, to a larger extent, the community that witnesses (Odamtten 28), the little girl's tactful retreat delineates the consequences of denial. The ghost's paralysis at the junction, its eternal wanderings up and down and its equally puzzling wondering about whether to go to Elmina or to Cape Coast, feature the haunting of a forgotten history, whose negatively loaded aspects remain silenced. Both cities were among the largest hubs on Ghana's coast line for the trade of slaves during the Atlantic slave trade. As long as the ghost lingers at the crossroad and is tortured by the impossibility of making a decision, because both places provide it with no possibility, its frustrating motto "I don't know,/ I can't tell./ I don't know, /I can't tell" will echo and haunt the community.

Seen in this way, Ato's dream concretizes how the community's secret makes its presence felt through the repository of the communal unconscious. This is further reinforced when he attempts to interpret the meaning of his enigmatic dream and remembers that he used to sing this song as a child:

Damn this ghost at the junction. I loved to sing that song. ... I used to wonder what the ghost was doing there at the junction. And I used to wonder too what it did finally...Did it go to Elmina or Cape Coast? And I used to wonder, oh, I used to wonder about so many things then. But why should I dream about all these things now? ...I am going Mad . (29)

Ato's failure to decipher the dream becomes even more significant in the light of the fact that this song is part of the tradition that passes down from one generation to the other unquestioned. And it seems that as long as the *phantom* does not become a legitimate subject of enquiry, it will always return to haunt the present and future generations. But what is the claim that the phantom stakes and why does it demand so insistently an audience with the community?

The answer to this question has been hinted at by Ato's response to the ghost's manifestation cited above, and particularly his association between madness and the engagement with the haunting silence of slavery's ghost. For the ghost of history demands an impossible, "unconditional forgiveness"²³, whose materialisation in the empirical world amounts to madness. The possibility of such a pure form of forgiveness has been glossed by Jacques Derrida in "On Forgiveness". Contra to the global "theatre of forgiveness", in which "the grand scene of repentance... is played out, sincerely or not" (29), and is subjected to calculable or calculated economies of political ends, Derrida juxtaposes an unconditional forgiveness that remains a madness in the material world. This form of forgiveness will not be answerable to the threads of instrumentality, that is, it will not be granted on the basis that it "amount[s] to the therapy of reconciliation" (41), a therapy that sanitises the discords of the past and produces amnesia, bringing a closure to any discussion of memory and responsibility; neither should it be granted "conditionally", that is, only after the condition that the guilty has repented and guaranteed its transformation. Rather, for Derrida forgiveness "should remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality" (32). To forgive unconditionally the horrors of history is to embrace their radical alterity, and learn to live with their torturing haunting in the present. It is a radical gesture of embracing whatever we want to forget or render invisible, and this painful embracing should not be a momentary action, but should always be in a process, perpetually eschewing any "telos" and closure. In short, it is a form of forgiveness that stretches forbearance to its limits, reaching the realm of

²³ Apart from Derrida, Hannah Arendt and Julia Kristeva have theorized on the concept of forgiveness and examined its possibility/impossibility in the material world. Closer to Derrida's formulation is Arendt's development of forgiveness in *The Human Condition*. Arendt values forgiveness as a political act, for to forgive we dismiss, and thus "make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly" (240). Forgiveness for Arendt has a healing effect from the burden of a horrific past deed and prescribes a way to live with the others. However, for Arendt, forgiveness is always directed towards a person, not a deed. This idea, along with her belief that we cannot forgive offences that "transcend the realm of the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance" (241) limit her application in Aidoo's text. Similarly, the epistemological limitations of Kristeva's theorisation on forgiveness can be grounded in her insistence, due to her psychoanalytic affiliations, to restrict forgiveness to the private sphere. Such a formulation detaches forgiveness from its rigorous political potential in the social arena. See Kristeva's *Intimate Revolt: The Powers and Limits of Psychoanalysis* (Columbia University Press, 2002), and "Forgiveness: an Interview," *PMLA* 117. 2 (2002): 278-286.

madness. Yet, even though this “forgiveness is *mad*, that it must remain a madness of the impossible, this is certainly *not to exclude or disqualify it*. It is even perhaps the only thing that arrives, that surprises, like a revolution, the ordinary course of history, politics, and law. Because that means that it remains heterogeneous to the order of politics or the juridical as they are ordinarily understood.” (39, emphasis added).

This act of forgiveness is elicited at the end of the play, when Esi Kom, Ato’s mother, embraces Eulalie and leads her symbolically into the house. The final scene comes after a climactic moment in the play, when Eulalie and Ato’s conflict over their fractured marriage comes to represent a number of cultural tensions explored throughout the play, such as the unresolved conflict between traditional and Western values, and the perpetual estrangement that the history of the middle passage has precipitated between continental Africans and those in the Diaspora. As we have seen, the conflict begins with Eulalie’s reaction towards Ato’s people, and particularly the pressure they put on the couple to have children, and culminates in a violent episode, in which Ato slaps Eulalie. Ato storms out of the house, and goes to his mother seeking advice. After listening carefully and determining the cause of the disagreement, Esi Kom realises that Eulalie’s “otherness”, and incomprehensible attitude, was partly fostered by her son’s condemnatory attitude towards his community. This realisation leads Esi Kom to re-think her stance towards Eulalie, and she opens herself, and quite symbolically “her house”, to her daughter-in-law. Esi Kom’s gesture of forgiveness that introduces Eulalie a-fresh within the communal frame is an act of remembering against forgetting, living against death, and makes possible an act of impossible hospitality that endures the pain of living with the “other”, and yet remembers the history of injustice Eulalie’s presence has evoked. Thus, although her invitation is predicated on the basis that Eulalie’s ancestors are watching: “And we must be careful with your wife”, she says to Ato, “You tell us her mother is dead. If she has any tenderness,/ Her ghost must be keeping watching over/ All which happen to her” (52), acknowledging the history of all those who were “excluded” and silenced throughout the ages, her embrace materialises the impossible act of bearing the weight and shame of this truth and yet living, living with each other, in and for the present. Esi Kom’s forgiveness does not fully break the silence that was nourishing and hosting the *phantom*, but acknowledges it as *a history of silence*. At the end of the play,

she fades away from the stage, and leaves the haunting motto of the ghost: “I can’t tell/ I can’t tell/ I can’t tell...” (52- 53), reminding the community of its existence. Thus, the praxis of forgiveness enacted in *The Dilemma* does not seal the haunting memory of the past safely in the past, nor does it initiate its exorcism. Rather, its haunting is embraced because it will never allow her community to return to the normality of “forgetfulness”, “denial” and “amnesia”. The ghost at the junction will always be there reminding them what they shy away from.

And it is with the memory of the ghost’s haunting that the audience is left at the end of the play, encouraged to take the risk of performing what has been initiated on stage in the political realm. Since, as we saw before, traditional dilemma tales eschew closure, and seek to initiate rather than resolve arguments, forgiveness remains “unfinalised” (Derrida, “On Forgiveness” 50), and is deferred to be enacted among the community, among the audience that, after the closure of the play, continues its existence in the material world. Aidoo, through Esi Kom’s radical gesture, has “welcomed”, in Spivak’s words, “the undecidable as the condition of possibility for responsible action” (79), and has projected on stage the need to remember and yet live, live in the present with the ghosts of the past. In inviting “the risk of un-concealing [the community’s] ambiguities by contextualizing them in a way that its present will be engaged in an agonistic relation with itself, its ‘sameness’ and its ‘otherness’” (Karavanta, “The Local, the Global and the Spectral” 182), Aidoo avoids positing a utopian world that could magically accommodate Africans and African-Americans irrespective of History’s spectral haunting. Rather, she sketches the conditions of an “inter-active community” that continuously negotiates its position with regards to traditional oppositions that defined, and continue to define, its identity: the official, pacifying, versions of History and the silenced, disquieting, stories, the tendency to forget and the need to remember, the native and the stranger, men and women. The inter-action with, and between, these oppositional forces does not annihilate their asymmetry—History cannot be fully written, the memory cannot be fully restored, the privileges of men over women, or natives over strangers, will not be eradicated—but enables a mode of thinking and performing that perpetually interrogates the structure of their foundations from *within* this unequal world.

Chapter 3

Remember to Remember by Negation: Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

“Independence is not a word which can be seen as exorcism”
Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

Fanon's resonant statement functions as a bridge between Aidoo's and Armah's urging to re-think the present through the silences of the past. For Fanon, a soothing reading of Independence fulfilled in euphoric, celebratory, and promising discourses of a “present” that has supposedly prevailed over what made colonialism possible, without critically assessing and assuming responsibility about the past, dismisses the complexities and dangers engendered in the present. And the detrimental effects of dismissing Aidoo's admonition in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* to acknowledge the traumatic and painful legacy of slavery's irreducible ghost are highlighted in Armah's novel *Fragments*, in which the forgetting of history has become a nightmarish mode of living.

Set in the post-independence era, *Fragments* narrates the story of Baako, a young Ghanaian, who returns to his native land after spending several years studying overseas. Through a multifaceted order of narration the reader has to reconstruct the journey of an unconventional “been-to” to the increasingly unfamiliar world of his native country. Baako's return, which culminates in his entombment at the asylum yard, is hounded and haunted by the unfriendly front of a western-established order, whose ubiquitous, erosive and contaminating philistine materialism has affected Ghana's entire socio-political apparatus, from the public sphere of the state's administrative machinery to the most private corners of the family unit and the people's collective consciousness. The only exceptional acts of alliance that attend Baako through his purgatorial passage are identified in the spiritual and sexual companionship of the Puerto Rican psychiatrist Juana, the traditional wisdom of his blind grandmother, Naana, and the artistic mentoring of his old teacher Ocran.

Through the narratives that surround and haunt Baako's return, Armah exposes, questions and gradually denounces the lost dream of revolution,²⁴ as manifested in the failure of post-colonial countries to become "self-acting political entities" (Armah, "African Independence Revalued" 141). At the same time, however, he aims to expose the poisonous role of Western cultural and economic imperialism as an insidious neo-colonial force in post-independence Africa. As Neil Lazarus has argued, for Armah, like many of the radical writers of the 1960s,²⁵ the dawn of postcolonialism was stigmatised by the "history of betrayal" that became synonymous with the history of neo-colonialism (21). The revolutionary expectations were soon replaced by a feeling of entrapment in a subservient position within a recalcitrant imperialist European political, cultural and economic sphere. Such a shift of impressions was triggered by the realisation that the conditions of revolution's potential for genuine national liberation were undermined from within by the betrayals of its political leaders, who sacrificed the ideals of independence on the altar of wealth, power and privilege, "these unfair advantages" which, according to Frantz Fanon, "are a legacy of the colonial period" (152). Armah's response to the failures of African Independence to fulfil the anticipated transformative rupture with the colonial regime is reiterated, besides in his novels, in the majority of his critical works. "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific" (1967), for example, is permeated by the awareness that "the net effect of Independence had merely been to substitute a black top for a white one on the colonial bottle" (27). Similarly, in "A mystification: African Independence Revalued" (1969), which appeared one year before the publication of *Fragments*, the very conditions of the post-independence era are denounced as "myths fabricated against reality" that, once unveiled, betray "sick jokes played on the continent" (141).

In exposing the pseudo-emancipatory façade of Independence, Armah articulates what a number of post-colonial theorists like Gayatri C. Spivak, V.Y. Mudimbe and Frantz Fanon have repeatedly emphasised: namely, that political Independence failed to

²⁴ Armah's lamentation about the pitfalls of African revolution is reiterated in his article "A Mystification: African Independence Revalued," *Pan African Journal* 2 (1969): 141-145, that was published the same year as *Fragments*; see also "African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific," *Presence Africaine* 64. 4 (1967): 6-30.

²⁵ Lazarus cites novelists like Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Ama Ata Aidoo, Chinua Achebe & Wole Soyinka, who besides their differences share this idea in common.

cause a rupture with the colonial episteme.²⁶ Armah seems to suggest that if African revolution is to be re-thought and re-fought, it will need to work through and against the internal culture of what Hesse has termed “de/colonial fantasy” (158). “De/colonial fantasy” entails western nations’ “compulsion to imagine that they have resolved or avoided any disruptive legacies of the failures to decolonise” (Hesse 160), whereas everyday reality comes to affirm the opposite. Although Hesse locates this tendency within the specificities of the Western liberal-democratic project to conceal, through disremembering, its emergence “*along with slavery, ethnocide, and racism*” (158), protecting in this way the contradictions embedded in the foundations of its liberal political agenda, I want to argue for the appropriateness of the term to describe the general climate of the post-independence era that Armah aims to expose. In particular, it is the “de/colonial fantasy’s” tendency “to assume in advance what it desires to deny” (Hesse 160) that seems apposite to the post-Independence condition. When Armah, in the aforementioned articles, criticises the internal culture’s self-oblivious stance towards the existing colonial legacies that inflect the socio-economic relationships and governance in the majority of the independent African states, he points to the rhetoric of a western influenced political elite, who try to persuade “against the evidence, against counter-interrogation” (Hesse 159) that decolonisation has been completed. The “de/colonial fantasy” intervenes when in an “attempt to overcome, to conceal the inconsistencies” (Zizek, qtd. in Hesse 159) between the revolution’s initial promises and the thwarting of its aftermath, they fantasise and want to make the people fantasise “that they have resolved or avoided any disruptive legacies of the failures” (Hesse 160) to achieve Independence. And as we will see, much of the political mediation fashioned in *Fragments* is informed by an attempt to expose and unsettle this delusion.

This task demands a re-thinking of the very condition of the “post” and the comforts that it so euphorically promises (Karavanta, “Rethinking the Spectre” 108), and gestures towards the “unsettling [of] the settled settlements of this very post-colonial sovereignty itself” (Scott 204). Echoing Fanon’s theorising of decolonisation as “a complete calling

²⁶ See, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Time and Timing: Law and History,” in *Chronotypes, the Construction of Time*, ed. John Bender and David E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University press, 1991), 99-117; V.Y Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

into question of the colonial situation” (Hesse 158), Armah’s rethinking and re-evaluation of the post-independence milieu entails, as he has stated, a serious analysis of the “empire’s historical process” (Armah, “A Mystification” 143-144), seeking to assess the fundamental changes of and in the imperial regime. Armah’s critical investigation of the empire’s political mechanisms is seen as the means to access the premises of the current political situation. Once the main questions posed examine possible changes in the *purpose* served by economic, political and cultural institutions after Independence, it becomes clear that the asymmetrical “traditional geometry of core and periphery” (Betts 96) that informed the Imperial order of things has not been counterpoised. On the contrary, through this lens, the post-independence condition is reduced to another transient form in the “parade of its [the empire’s] changing formulas” (Armah, “A Mystification” 144) that range from “trading factories, slave fortresses, private commerce and speculative enterprise, to the misnamed colonial system, the self-governing territories, and now the so-called independent nations” (144). When the occluded operations and hidden mechanisms that underlie Empire in its various permutations are unveiled, then it becomes apparent that they share the same grammar of exclusion and exploitation. The common denominator that unites slavery, colonialism and the current post-colonial condition is the reification of the local communities and their transformation into the prime source for the economic and cultural expansion of the West.

This mode of historical analysis suggests that the “betrayal” of post-independence leaders, their tendency to acknowledge “the values of western world forces as endemic to the indigenous culture” and thus “divert it into alien channels” (Armah, “A Mystification” 149) does not begin after independence; rather, it is a prolonged phenomenon that extends right back to the transatlantic slave trade, unearthing centuries old mechanisms of exploitation and indigenous collaborations with the colonisers. Thus, when Armah in his reading of Fanon concludes that “The central fact of our lives, the central statement in all of Fanon’s work is simply this: we’re slaves”, he proceeds to underline the literal signification of this characterisation, stressing that “until we’ve looked hard at this fact not as a metaphor, not as a poetic figure of speech, but as a rock-hard statement of what we are...we’ll never get where we need to go” (“Fanon the

Awakener” 5). The invocation of slavery as a backdrop to the contemporary political scene aims to awaken the masses to the immense societal dangers lurking beneath the empire’s subtle continuities, emphasising that “our conquest was only the beginning of an endless violence. Our present existence is this violence continued, sharpened and refined, institutionalised and made such a permanent part of our lives we often suffer without being able to understand or even notice it” (7). The community, being inculcated in a violent discourse, is unable to identify the roots of its collapse and entrapment in cycles of violence. And unless the infiltrating dynamics of this discourse are addressed, acknowledged and worked through as past history, then violence as an external historical legacy will keep on erupting and intruding into the present.

Far from adopting accommodating interpretations that register the traumatic past as aberrations and singular barbaric events in an otherwise progressive present, Armah’s *critical memory* “judges severely, censures righteously, renders hard ethical evaluations of the past that it never defines as well-passed” (Baker 7). His historical meditation aims at serving a “political role in the cumulative, collective maintenance of a record that draws into significant instants of time past and the always-uprooted homelessness of now” (7). It is this “ethico-political” parameter of re-membering the past, the duty to remember not simply for “having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning” (Ricoeur 9) to the present and next generations that allow its corollary formations to assume the presence of historical consequences for the present. This duty to remember is of vital significance since it entails working “against the erosion of traces” and combating the “general trend to destroy” (10), struggling to keep the memories of the past alive. And it is with particular reference to the separation of the present from its pastness that makes it important for Armah to revitalise the fading memory of slavery in the current post-independence period.

Armah’s return to the history of slavery is apparent, apart from in his articles and translations,²⁷ in a number of his novels. In *Two Thousand Seasons* (1977), subtitled as an historical novel, Armah offers a fictionalized epic account of African history that spans from the pre-contact years to the end of transatlantic slavery. Through a critical

²⁷ See, for example, Armah’s article on Cheikh Diop in *West Africa* 2nd June (1986): 1160-1162, and his translation of Barry Boubacar’s *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

appraisal of successive conquerors, Armah's broad historical canvas begins with the period of Arab domination of northern Africa and ends with colonial incursion into this region. The tracing of the history of the sub-Saharan region is conducted by a poetic, communal narrative voice that "sums up received histories and examines their social and political relevance as usable pasts" (Wilson-Tagoe 96). The first season of horrors is initiated by the Arabs, or "predators", who invade and enslave the region through the introduction of an alien religion. They are undone by their own greediness and gluttony and some locals' resistance, but success is limited as the new wave of conquerors, the armed colonial European powers, or "destroyers", are on the way. The Africans' successive entrapments in cycles of oppression and enslavement come as the result of multiple betrayals from within, and the fact that these communities never seem to learn from the past. Despite "the treachery of chiefs and leaders, of the greed of parasites that had pushed us so far into the whiteness of death" (187) there are some voices, like Isanusi's and Anoa's, who warn of the dangers ahead, but few heed them. Thus, although *Two Thousand Seasons* ends with the promise that a small fragment of the community will "seek the necessary beginning to destruction's destruction" (234), this promise is deferred, left to be enacted by future generations. Yet, as we see in *The Healers* (1978), Armah's next novel, succeeding generations are further entrenched in cycles of entrapment, fragmentation, and internal discord that facilitate colonial incursion into the region. This novel is set in the period of the Asante wars in the late nineteenth century and narrates the defeat of the Asante by the British colonialists in 1874. Armah's critical examination of the reasons behind the Asante Empire's collapse brings forth the exploitative complicity with the white slavers of the Ghanaian Kings, who, being obsessed with power, forget to ensure the unity of their people. As in *Two Thousand Seasons*, acts of resistance are limited to the courageous initiatives of the few, such as Densu (the central hero) and the community of the healers, who try in vain to avert the impending disaster.

My choice to focus on *Fragments*, a novel set in the post-Independence era, instead of these two novels that directly engage with the history of slavery, aims to strengthen this thesis' argument that the spectre of slavery appears and haunts West African literary imagination even in the most inconspicuous historical moments. Indeed, to my present

knowledge, *Fragments* has been primarily evaluated in terms of its political commitment and re-evaluation of the meaning of political independence for the African communities. This critical trend has been further reinforced by the political fermentations in Africa from the mid 1960s through the 1970s. The radical developments of this transitory period ignored historicity, privileging instead the “time of the now” (Benjamin, qtd. in Lazarus 3), since history was inscribed and embodied in the daily developments of the political arena. Recognising the primacy of this dynamic in the contemporary cultural and political milieu, literary critics have tended to evaluate the novel through the prism of neo-colonial incursion, the role and responsibility of the intellectual, and the fate of tradition in a transitory present.

However, there is a small proportion of critical commentary on *Fragments* that devotes, if not significant space, at least some amount of attention to the issue of slavery. Robert Fraser, for example, in *The Novels of Ayi Kwei Armah* (1980), emphasises the historical dimension in Armah’s work, suggesting that “his imagination is of an historical order, not in the ways applicable to the historian ... but rather as one whose mind dwells on the tracks of human experience in search for a clue to the depredation visited on his people” (2). According to Fraser, Armah’s oeuvre is permeated by the idea that the post-independence morass could be better understood, and thus confronted, through a deeper structural analysis of history. Similarly, Neil Lazarus in *Resistance in Post-colonial African Fiction* (1990) offers a perceptive account of the “social origins of the novel’s concerns” (x) through the mapping of the neo-colonial conjunctures that plague the present. Although the emphasis of Lazarus’ reading is in tracing modes of resistance in the face of neo-colonial incursion, he acknowledges that some scenes in the novel expose “the nightmare of the past that haunts the present life of the community” (105). Finally, Joe Lurie and Lemuel A. Johnson, although engaged in different projects (given that the former traces the attempts of the artistic subject to subvert neo-colonialism’s ramifications, and the latter reads allusions to the Middle Passage as a metaphor for

displacement and exile in African literature), refer to moments in *Fragments* that make explicit the similarities between historical slavery and contemporary bondage in Ghana.²⁸

In alignment with this small consensus of critics, and hoping to extend their reading further, my critical response to the novel suggests that by focusing exclusively on the immediacies of the post-independence milieu and dismissing any historical references as morbid or marginal aspects of the novel, sidelines one of the most important aspects of the text. As a corrective to this critical myopia, throughout this chapter I intend to give evidence of Armah's sensitivity to "a long view of the history of causes" that looks for "correlates in events across time and establishes causal relationship within and between these realms" (Olaogun 172). Before advancing further, I want to clarify that by making this claim, I do not intend to underplay the dominant position of the post-independence milieu within the frame of the novel's narrative. On the contrary, my intention is to argue that Armah's attempt to re-interpret the present within the dynamic framework of history facilitates the exploration and explanation of significant *patterns* behind historical events that illuminate some of the quandaries of the post-independence era. Consequently, this navigation within the world of *Fragments* is intended to be a critical exploration of its present political actualities through the prism of Ghana's history, and in particular slavery. By no means is this chapter a conclusive statement about Armah's work; it is, rather, an analysis of those sections of *Fragments'* narrative that critically re-visit the turbulent present either to criticise and expose the sources of its drawbacks, or to reinstate a sense of cultural and political direction within its community, not by means of dictation but *by negation*, by re-minding the community what paths it *should not* follow and what mistakes it *should not* repeat in order to realise the original objectives and aspirations of Independence. To this end, I focus on the novel's recollection of slavery, conceived not only as the ultimate antithesis of Independence, but also as an apposite metaphor that encapsulates Ghana's continued subordination to Western powers, and as a means by which to shed light upon Armah's revisionist stance towards the present.

Having raised the above points by way of prologue, I would also like to offer a brief account of this chapter's structural and thematic composition. In the first section, I seek

²⁸ Joe Lurie, "Fragments: Between the Loved Ones and the Community" in *Ba Shiru* 5.1(1973): 34, and Lemuel A. Johnson, "The Middle Passage in African Literature: Wole Soyinka, Yambo Ouologuem, Ayi Kwei Armah," *African Literature Today* 11 (1980): 72-73.

to assess the significance of historical memory in the post-independence era. This is achieved by exposing the amnesiac stance of Ghana's political leaders towards history, as manifested not only in their complicity with western capitalism, but also in the oppressive political regime their government tries to impose on its citizenry, a regime which resembles, in mode and intention, that of their white predecessors. The forgetfulness of Ghana's leaders is juxtaposed in the second part of the chapter to that of Naana, the protagonist's grandmother, who functions as abysmal well of memory. The main aspects of the narrative that will be examined here include Naana's connection with the forgotten moments of history, and her ability to trace and interpret the historical patterns that inflect post-independence Ghana. Having assessed the degree to which Naana offers a counter-discursive response to the state of forgetfulness that plagues contemporary Ghana, I will then turn to Baako's role, as an artist, in revising and awakening the historical consciousness of his community.

In the Shadow of the Slave Castle: Slavery's Visible and Invisible Geographies

“ A whole History remains to be written of spaces
—which would at the same time be the history of powers—
from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat”
Michel Foucault, “The Eye of Power”.

In view of these objectives, it seems appropriate to begin by exploring the methods through which the aforementioned problematics are explored in *Fragments*. The tension between memory and forgetting, as well as the evasion of responsibility towards the past that affects the present, is substantially endorsed, very early in the novel, through the architectural allegory of the ruins of the old slave castle,²⁹ whose presence overshadows Accra, Ghana's capital:

Over in the far distance, [one] could see the white form, very small at this distance, of the old slave castle which had now become the proud seat of the new rulers, the

²⁹ It is interesting to note that the symbolic function of the slave-castle is reiterated in the majority of Armah's novels; from *The Beautiful Ones Are Not yet Born* (p:92), and *Why Are We So Blest?* , to a culmination in *Two Thousand Seasons*. See also Marie-Therese Abdel-Messih, “Identity text history: The concept of inter/nationalization in African fiction,” *Research in African Literatures* 26.4 (Winter 1995): 163.

blind children of slavery themselves. ...it was no use asking anyone any questions about that. No one seemed to need forgiveness, and it was no use feeling sorry for oneself, for crimes borne by people with whom one identified. The real crime now was the ignorance of past crime, and that, it seemed, would be a permanent sort of ignorance in places like this. (30)

The very presence of the castle evokes, both in a literal and figurative sense, the haunting spectre of one of the most important chapters in Ghana's history, that of slavery.³⁰ If in Aidoo's theatrical play the slave castle appeared as just a name, as a haunting metaphor that urges the community to assume responsibility for its implication in the history of slavery, in Armah's *Fragments* the slave castle appears as an edifice, as a material structure that marks the urban scape with slavery's history. The haunting existence of this imperial monument evokes memories of African slaves who waited in its cells for the European and American ships which would take them on the dreaded Middle Passage to the Americas.³¹ Yet, within the world of *Fragments* history has been imprisoned within the realm of a scandalous forgetfulness. The slave castle serves not only to reveal the fragility of the present moment to withstand the permanence of historical memories, but also to unveil the contemporary repercussions of this forgetting. The superimposition of the new leaders on the site where the white overseers had previously stood is read by Armah along these lines. This gesture, far from pointing to a symbolic act of re-claiming the past, comes to expose the continuities that place the new elite as the latest in a long line of alien exploiters. Their presence signals the price of "lethe", which is not other, but rather a Sisyphean repetition of the past through the legitimisation of social and political structures of ruling that perpetuate and ape the old regime.

Within this frame, the characterisation of the new leaders as "the blind children of slavery" is sustained throughout the novel's narrative, applying not only to their personal culpability but also to their role as governors of independent Ghana. The first and most obvious parameter of these people's blindness is grounded in their unchallenging

³⁰ For critical studies that emphasise the detrimental effects of the slave trade in Ghana and situate it in an historical perspective, see Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974) and Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

³¹ See Kwesi J Anquadah, *Castles and Forts of Ghana* (Accra, Ghana Museums Board/ Paris: Atalante, 1999) and W. Lawrence Arnold, *Trade, Castles, and Forts of West Africa* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1964).

assimilation of and adaptation to the western mainstream. The sarcastic depiction of characters like Brempong, an African diplomat, becomes an important vehicle through which to critique the intimate relationship between these people's ideology and the colonial policy of assimilation. Brempong is portrayed from the beginning of the novel as someone whose entire ontological apparatus is organized around "the axes of Eurocentrism" (Lazarus 86), internalising "not only the colonizer's understanding of the Western world as the source of civilisation, but also their vilification of Africa as barbarous and backwards" (84). The first time Brempong is introduced is during Baako's flight back to Ghana. Although their meeting is short, Brempong exemplifies "the complex of dependency, which trains the African neophyte in mindless obedience to the dogma of Western superiority" (Lazarus 104). In a literal sense, he and his entourage attempt hallucinatory whitening by "bleaching their skin, dressing and speaking like whites" (Ogede 535).³² Brempong appears always in a dark suit escorted by his wife, who wears "the generous mass of a wig protruding over the tall black of the seat itself" (41). The apogee of his alienation is illustrated in the scene where we learn that he is so ashamed of his African origins that he has changed his name. The new version of Brempong's African name "Henry Robert Hudson Brempong", bespeaks an embedded Western orientation that suppresses his Akan background; yet, Brempong regards his name as a significant personal achievement in itself: "He looks favourably upon its full-blown capitulation to imperial ideology" and he is surprised when he realises that Baako, accorded the highly estimated status of a "been-to", still answers to an African name (Lazarus 86).

Brempong's submissive attitude to Western supremacy culminates as Karavanta has noted in another context "in amnesia, an amnesia that results in his reification of, and absolute identification with, the commodities that structure his existence" ("Rethinking the Spectre" 113). Thus, he insulates himself against his community with the Western gadgets he buys during his travels abroad. As he informs Baako, besides the two cars he brings from Germany, he has bought a lighter. The passage begins with a simple observation that is presented as a fact, "Where in Ghana would you find a thing like this"

³² For further discussion of the issue of the impact of racial discourse on black ideals of personal beauty, self-concept and self-esteem, see bell hooks, "Black Beauty and Black Power," in *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1995): 119-132.

(45), and then moves on to reveal the adoration of the assimilated native for the tantalising commodities of the conqueror: “I bought it in Amsterdam, at the airport, actually. Beautiful things there, Amsterdam” (45). The depiction of people like Brempong becomes indicative of their Europeanisation, of their determination, that is, “to dismiss anything indigenous while admiring everything that originates from abroad and climaxes in the absurd exercise of transplanting the material goods of provincial Europe in Ghana” (Wright 27). Like Estella Koomson in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, whose protestation against locally manufactured products climaxes in statements such as: “Really, the only good drinks are European drinks. These make you ill” (132), the lifestyle of these people has become so fetishist in their obsession with western products that they fail to see their condition of dependence upon Western supremacy. Ghana’s leaders exemplify the complex of dependency, which trains the African neophyte in mindless obedience to the dogma of Western superiority, acting “as puppets of Western personalities. They are puppets who serve to further entrench white power while maintaining the enslaved condition of the masses” (Lurie 31).

In addition to sketching out these damning psychological profiles, Armah is highly critical towards these characters’ roles as governors of independent Ghana. In fact, it is in the political arena where the implications of their vacuous historical understanding are most evident, since they follow the authoritarian policy of their predecessors. Thus, they are portrayed as being “so imbued with a blind faith in the superiority of things Western that they pursue Western habits to the point that their lives become unconscious parodies of the already decadent lives of the European expatriates glimpsed on the fringes of the novel” (Lazarus 84). The white expatriates are shown hermetically sealed in small bourgeois circles, adopting a deliberately oblivious stance towards the deprivation of the indigenous populace. They cruise “from bungalow to work to ingrown parties to nights at the Star after evenings spent chatting with visitors in embassies or at the Ambassador Hotel, to weekends on beaches or in the sun beside the pool at Akosombo” (24). In a similar way, Ghana’s politicians are presented as people “who knew of the awfulness of the life around them, who had the power to do something to change all this”, but who were “only concerned with digging themselves a comfortable resting place within a bad system” (31). Being as indifferent and self-serving as the white colonialists had been, the

leaders of post-independence Ghana cannot be touched by the degradation that surrounds them. Instead, led by their greed for power, by their need to find ‘a resting place’ even if it is ‘in a bad system’, their leadership not only contributes to the squalor and deprivation of the community at large, but also prevents the realisation of the ideals of Independence.

The ramifications of the political elite’s amnesiac stance towards history are painfully embodied in the political, social and cultural landscape of Accra, Ghana’s capital. The images offered by Baako after he lands in Accra herald and expose the urban scape’s entrapment in a cycle of western dependency. Baako’s observations offer a reading of “the city as a text”, to borrow Duncan’s formulation from his homonymous book here, that presents the urban scape as a “multilayered site where competing meanings and historical attachments are at work”. Accra figures as a condensed and overwritten spatial text in which silenced historical, social and political traces become apparent. David Harvey’s image of the palimpsest is a useful one for figuring Accra as a text consisting of “a set of heterogeneous processes which are producing spatial temporalities as well as producing things, structures, and permanencies in ways in which constrain the nature of the social process” (22-23). The metaphor of the palimpsest, which never being “quite scraped clean, retains traces of previous writings even in the face of later inscriptions” (Goh 4), captures the ideological and historical layering of Accra’s urban text in that the economic/technological changes conducted on its scape barely manage to conceal or erase stories of oppression and the residual overlays of the colonial order.

Thus, Baako’s wandering inside and outside Accra’s International airport is set against a plethora of images that celebrate Ghana’s technological and industrial growth: these include large advertisement boards that offer to the Ghanaian smoker the flavour of “international success” through the taste of a cigarette:

Get the taste
of international success
the smooth exquisite flavor
of a high class cigarette.

Get the taste. (57)

Other signs of prosperity and innovation include parking services for visitors and “large advertising boxes, which every few seconds beam out the message: “STATE EXPRESS

555/STATE EXPRESS 555/STATE EXPRESS 555” (57), drawing attention to the advanced system of transportation. Yet, Armah seldom allows us to mistake the visible appearance of the things for the things themselves; instead, through the application of a deconstructive method deployed via the ironic coupling of images of growth and images of degeneration, he questions Ghana’s ‘improvement’ after colonialism, revealing that every sign of development “is indicative of encroaching underdevelopment” (Lazarus 84). The Texaco petrol dump, for example, is set against the “NEW TECHNICAL SECONDARY SCHOOL with the building that was to be the school still unfinished though the foundation had been laid” several years ago (13-14); the construction of the new maternity wing at a hospital is inaccessible to the average Ghanaian citizen, since it is reserved only for VIPS and senior officers (75); similarly, the gleaming extravagance of Ghana’s Bank building is overshadowed by the sordidness of the daily life in the streets, populated by

tough-looking children carrying crates of colored Biro pens and fighting over the few buyers there, and women in a crooked row selling identical lots of fruit and cakes and bread, and the beggars [who] sprawled haphazardly in what spaces they could find the press. (66)

In this respect, a closer observation of what lies beneath the litany of images celebrating Ghana’s affluence proves, as Joe Lurie has commented, that “Ghana’s development is still sacrificed to a larger cause. It is a sacrifice which is directly connected to the continued impoverishment and suffering of Ghanaians” (33).

Armah’s interrogation of Accra’s spatial modernisation and development through dystopic realities of widespread urban poverty, social neglect and infrastructural decay, is enacted through mappings of “invisible geographies”, within the frame of the modern *polis*, through which “political violence works” (Gregory & Pred 2). Armah engages in cartographies of fear, of the concealed and the spectral, of what haunts life after Independence that manifests itself in a latent way “on the visible surface of the earth” (Gregory & Pred 7). The characterisation of the Ghanaian state apparatus draws attention to its resemblance to the colonial regime, as it appears to excel only in stifling, disturbing and exploiting its citizens through the imposition of a despotic government that aims to enslave from within. Those voices from the margins that dare to question, condemn or

criticise its function within the body politic are swiftly silenced. As Lazarus puts it, such dynamics suggest that “it is as though the state had declared war upon its citizenry” (Lazarus 107). We see, for example, soldiers castigating and arresting two men with subversive messages on their T-shirts that depict “cartoons of sweating wrestlers on them under the printed caption STRUGGLERS!” (23-24). The message’s implied correlation between the colonial regime and the post-independence government are so obvious that the state mobilises its most powerful armoury in cultural propaganda, the media, to edit a condemning article that classifies these small resistant acts as unpatriotic and troubling for “the peaceful minds of hardworking citizens [and enacted] with a view to subverting the nation as a whole” (24). The dominant regime aims to prevent the citizens from realising that it represents a dynastic extension of the colonial regime; such realisation threatens to encourage the masses to revolt and upturn the status quo. Thus, they must be silenced; they must be deprived, that is, of their capacity to challenge or act against post-revolutionary Ghana’s hegemonic regime.

But what happens to memory when hegemonic agencies enjoin a dissident minority to forget? With respect to the detrimental effects of authoritative body politics, and especially with regard to the implications of one of its most effective tools, that of censorship, Salman Rushdie argues for its potential to rob the people of their potential to be political beings, as:

In the end, it can deaden the imagination of the people. Where there is no debate, it is hard to go on remembering, every day, that there is a suppressed side to every argument. ... It becomes easy to think that what was suppressed was valueless, anyway, or so dangerous that it needed to be suppressed. (39)

For Rushdie, the ‘death of imagination’ is associated with the gradual fading of memory. Once imagination stagnates then the act of re-imagining or remembering what has been suppressed gets neutralised, till it gradually withers; and a people that has lost its imagination/memory is a people that faces a form of cultural death. Imagination and memory are the vital tools of questioning imposed notions and formulas; their suppression signals the end of any dialectical relationship with the authorities and heralds social inactiveness and apathy. Similarly, Albert Memmi in *The Colonizer and The Colonized* (1974) approaches the issue of social inactiveness from the perspective of

historical mutilation. For Memmi, “The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history” (135). The historical role of colonised subjects begins to become pathologised, once they have been bereft of any possible action or decision-making process that could affirm their contribution in relation to their “destiny, that of the world and all cultural and social responsibility” (135). Denied power, the colonised enters the stagnating realm of social inactiveness and s/he ends up losing any desire to actively participate in the social realm. For Memmi, such systematic negation of the colonised’s political responsibilities attests to the neutralisation of his/her historical role. The colonised ceases to be “the subject of history anymore. Of course, he carries its burden, often more cruelly than others, but always as an object. He has forgotten how to participate actively in history and no longer asks to do so” (136). Memmi associates the surrender of the colonised’s historical role with the social and political catalepsy of the present that leaves the colonised no other option but to live isolated from his/her age. Such imprisonment in the passive sluggishness of the present causes the colonized “to lose his memory” (147).

The impact of historical mutilation on the community is addressed and further problematised in the novel through descriptive accounts of the urban environment that delineate the way people have internalised the act and essence of living within the realm of a futureless present. The first impressions of the human implications of Ghana’s social and political distortion are gained through the consciousness of Juana, whose job as a psychiatrist has qualified her with an intrinsic concern about the oppressiveness of present existence, the fractured histories of violence, predation and dispossession. Juana has moved to Ghana as a restless fugitive from the ruins of her personal life and the complementary ruins of her native Puerto Rico, ransomed to U.S. Imperialism. Behind Juana’s confinement to the state of a self-imposed exile to Ghana lies an inner aspiration to exorcise the defeats of her past life through a promising beginning in a new place that still resembles the old (31). As Lazarus has pointed out, the strongest pole of attraction for Juana is Ghana’s political situation with regard to “the post-revolutionary task of reconstruction” (104). However, she has become severely disillusioned. The Ghana she encounters functions like a replica of her native country, bringing her closer to the realisation that “what she had thought she would find was not [t]here at all. None of the

struggle, none of the fire of defiance” (31). Through Ghana’s “familiar” debasement, Juana experiences the uncanny feeling of “the return of the repressed”³³ that breeds inside her a sense of desperation. Everywhere she goes she is made aware not only of oppression’s pervasive presence, but also of the “familiar fabric of her life” (31), the way in which people’s pain and destitution are experienced and understood.

Through Juana’s wonderings, Accra is portrayed as a “prolific creator” (23) of physical destruction and debased humanity. The conviction that there is little ground for hope appears to have taken hold of the masses’ collective consciousness. The message conveyed through every little corner of the urban environment is of a “Life lived not with it but of necessity against it” (23). An popular banner emblazoned on the sides of trucks and buses testifies to the above statement, lamenting that “Life is war”, while another popular slogan features the cryptic acronym “S.M.O.G”, with the initial letters standing for “Save Me Oh God” (24). An air of decay, estrangement and nihilism configures forms of resistance against the political institutions, which are perceived to maintain a repressive social order. Trapped within the web of the neo-colonial machinery, the Ghanaians are presented as “completely seized with danger and so many different kinds of loss” (23). Being unable to withstand and endure the destructive forces of a society internally in conflict with itself, they enter the labyrinth of neurosis that derives from the fracturing ground of social existence itself. They are therefore characterised, by a minor character, “as fishes out of boiling water” (25), highlighting the difficulties of fashioning or adopting any semblance of an alternative way of living in such a diseased social context. These forms of survival and adaptation charge further the indifferent presence of an authoritarian and despotic body, and formulate a silent front irreconcilable with the practices of the government, which not only fails to address the needs of the community, but also actively estranges it. In this way, the novel offers a deeply disturbing, and

³³ In the homonymous essay “The uncanny” Freud defines the uncanny as “the class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar.” (340). Although it falls beyond the scope of this thesis, it is interesting to notice that Freud’s “Uncanny” is first articulated through a dream sequence describing the experience of wandering in an urban environment: “Once, I was walking through the deserted streets of a provincial town which was strange to me... I found myself in a quarter whose character could not long remain in doubt. ... I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning. But after having wandered about for a while without being directed, I suddenly found myself back in the same street. ...I hurried away once more but only to arrive yet a third time by devious paths in the same place. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can best describe as uncanny...” (320).

unforgettable, critique of the social and political determinants that produce such impasses for the subjects.

But if the grammar of urban communication recounts and articulates the political situation, can it narrate the historical? This is the question Alessandro Triulzi addresses in “African Cities, Historical Memory and the Street Buzz”, suggesting that a tentative examination of the narratives that surround the asphyxiation of daily life, the “apparent chaos of the everyday” (78), map the first articulations of the new “post-colonial memory”. Contra to the official postulates of post-Independence governments and their “assault on memory”³⁴, Triulzi’s “post-colonial memory” comprises contestations over the appropriation of memories in the ex-colonial capitals of independent Africa, which offer “memories, based on aggregation/ exclusion that have characterised the African political scene” (77). Being the product of unconcerted collective articulations and “not part of an organic group whose faculty of recall would be similar to the personal memory of an individual”³⁵, they constitute enabling sites for observing the “new urban texts, which like every collective memory prescribe a semantic code of memorialisation of facts, events and sites of memory that link past to present” (Triulzi 80). Triulzi’s research centres on the urban texts of the 1980s, a period when the proliferation of nationalist rhetoric marked the darkest years of postcolonial Africa. During this period, the post-colonial cities, “in their advancing state of decay, with their *increasing violence* and their mix of traditional and modern” (77-78) offered a profitable ground upon which to explore subversive memories. But what happens if we probe into another important transitory point in the political history of Africa—the 1960s—in search of the same ideological configurations? Can we find traces of “post-colonial memory” even in an embryonic form?

Consider for example the scene involving the massacre of the rabid dog, where the dog’s madness becomes the cause of an outbreak of violence, disproportionate to its actual cause. The whole episode is narrated by Juana, whose ride out of the city is

³⁴ Here I use the term “assault on memory”, in accordance with Paul Gilroy’s definition, as the official memory propagated by the grand narratives of the Nation; see Vikki Bell, Interview, “Historical Memory, Global Movements and Violence: Paul Gilroy and Ajun Appadurai in Conversation,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 16.2 (April 1999): 21-40.

³⁵ Boguriul Jewsiewicki & V. Y. Mudimbe, “Africa’s Memories and Contemporary History of Africa,” *History and Theory*, Beiheft 32: History Making in Africa 32. 4 (1993): 10.

blocked by the tightened circle of a group of men around a “shivering dog” that was trying to absorb the feeling “of the road’s warm tar under its feet” (16). The sick dog represents a great threat to the safety of the community, for “a bite from a mad dog about to die would surely send the bitten man to death” (16), and the situation therefore demands a higher boldness than the armed men are able to offer. Among this group comes the figure of a short, physically deformed man, who advances towards the dog and takes his threatening life with a sudden, decisive blow of his pickaxe. In Juana’s account the killer’s eyes:

had a manic shine with far more burn in it than that possessing any of the others, and she knew at once that this was a man who needed something like the first killing of the dog for reasons that lay within and were *far more powerful than the mere outside glory open to the hunter with his kill*. (19, emphasis added)

Derek Wright in his reading of this scene points out that “in the Ghana of this novel communal feeling is a negative thing, which has degenerated into an isolated outburst of violent destruction” and that it comes to “replicate the sickness it intended to expel” (*Armah’s Africa* 148). He also postulates that the dog, like Baako himself at a later stage of the novel, becomes the scapegoat for the Ghanaians’ collective neuroses. Wright goes on to suggest that the scapegoat psychology “issues from an attempt to exorcize a general impotence” and “becomes an excuse for the fulfilment of private needs driven by an inner corruption” (148). But if we accept Wright’s interpretation then the root causes of the men’s violent behaviour are located in their individual perversions, and the Ghanaians consequently act in a social vacuum. Contrary to this though, I believe that Armah’s grotesque exaggeration in the detailed description of this violent outburst departs from a condemnatory judgement that stigmatises *exclusively* its protagonists. Clearly, Armah doesn’t sympathise with the dog-killer; but this feeling is not based on his action, but on the memories his physical deformity represents to the community. Once de-aesthetized and recast in a social/historical context, his deformed “scrotal sac so swollen that within the tattered pants containing it had the look of a third and larger buttock winning a ruthless struggle to push the original two out of the way” brings memories of impotence that the community wants to forget. In addition to this, Juana’s prescient observation that “the root of the trouble was deeper” than what was immediately visible in this scene (15)

invites us to detach this incident from the personal realm and remove it to a wider context. Once interpreted within the context of a carceral society, then the scene narrativises the expression of a desperate and monstrous yearning—perhaps even to the extreme of self-destruction and decay—but still meaningful in its potential to communicate all these negatively charged feelings and, more importantly, to problematise both their causes and their outcome.

Before elaborating on this statement, it is necessary, as Eric Hobsbawm recommended, to try to understand the social uses of violence and learn to distinguish between types of violent activity, before reconstructing systematic rules for it.³⁶ Fanon's evocative insight in *The Wretched of the Earth* on violence's catalytic role in the process of anti-colonial struggle is useful for this purpose. Fanon's particular contribution lies in his emphasis on the central place of violence within colonial society, and his argument that violence concludes the "absolute line of action" (67), since besides its political or strategic function, it holds individual and existential therapeutic value that liberates the colonised subject from the oppressive chains of his/her inferiority complex. "At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self respect" (*The Wretched* 74). Fanon justifies the cathartic qualities of violence, postulating that this was the vital domesticating tool that informed the nexus between the settler and the native. The first encounter between these two uneven protagonists was "marked by violence and their existing together... was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannon" (28). The settler's imposition and legitimisation of the colonial apparatus via the maiming, coercion and physical exploitation of the body "keeps alive in the native an anger which he deprives of outlet" (42). If colonialism is of a violent nature, Fanon concludes that only counter violence can eradicate it, and thus, "you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him" (42). In this way, "the colonised man finds his freedom in and through violence" (68) because it is only this medium that can confirm and empower his/her selfhood.

³⁶ Although this idea permeates the whole article, see in particular the closing sentences: "It is time that we put this process of learning on a more systematic basis by understanding the social uses of violence. We may think that all violence is worse than non-violence, other things being equal." Eric Hobsbawm, "The Rules of Violence," *Uncommon People: Resistance, Rebellion and Jazz* (London: Weidenfelds Nicholson, 1998): 228.

The situational, cultural and ideological parallels between Fanon's thematising of violence and Armah's scene of the dog's slaughtering invite us to view one in the light of the other. Further, when an "arc monument of FREEDOM AND JUSTICE" (16) built to commemorate Independence is surrounded by "soldiers in government Khaki uniforms" (16), then it is not only the concepts that become distorted, but also the citizens who inhabit the city. Within this context, the resurgence of violence should not be considered as a personal pathology, but rather as a consciousness that emerges as a response to institutional oppression. Consequently, like the oppressed subjects in Fanon's colonial context, Armah's postcolonial subjects externalise their frustration at the socio-political environment through violent outbursts. Like the colonised subjects in Fanon's analysis, the post-independence citizens in Armah's *Fragments* re-route their oppression through the power of their muscles. However, unlike Fanon's subjects, whose "lives can only spring again out of the rotting corpse of the settler" (73), in *Fragments* feelings of anger and resentment are not directed towards the main enemies of the community but rather towards simulacric representations of this threat: the sick dog. This act of displacing or misdirecting the violent outbreak should not be viewed as an attempt to undermine the necessity and urge of the subjects to release their frustration; as Sartre has noted in his preface to *The Wretched of the Earth* "If the suppressed fury fails to find an outlet, it turns to a vacuum and devastates the oppressed creatures themselves. In order to free themselves they even massacre each other" (16). Seen in this light, the massacre of the dog highlights the dissuasive contribution of a domineering social environment to forms of resistance. The eruption of violence may not serve as an enabling means of restoring the oppressed people's continuing quest for self-revalorisation and self-regeneration, because these words have lost their point of reference in post-independence Ghana, but it symptomatises social oppression and exclusion, and an attempt to respond to the dauntingly oppressive forces of post-independence Ghana.

At the same time though, since such attempts exemplify and externalise the people's frustration, they could be viewed as reactions towards Memmi's historical mutilation and Rushdie's "death of Imagination". This can be understood once we contemplate the significance both violence and oppression have for the collective consciousness of the urban population. Being subjected to a hegemonic regime that reifies and commodifies

their lives, that aims to mould them into a state of bodily and spiritual docility, the Ghanaians re-enact through a hellish ‘deja-vu’ the drama played during colonialism. And ironically enough it is through the very same means—violence and oppression—that the government struggles intensely to void collective memory of its pastness, thereby activating memory. As an “impossible story within” (Caruth 5), violence becomes the medium of recall and uses the body as a stage for performance. The body becomes a site that houses “reverberating memories”; its violent outbursts function as “the guarantors of memory, whose scars have formed the embodied script of the past.”³⁷ And when violence configures memory, then one has to delve deep enough into the psychology of the people to locate the root causes of their behaviours.

Extravagant elites, racially mutilated diplomats, authoritative governors, violent subjects...this list of adjectives characterises, informs and identifies the populated world of *Fragments*. Throughout this critical exploration of Ghana’s futureless present all of these conditions have been addressed, exemplifying how they are the by-product, in a manifest or a latent way, of Ghana’s amnesiac wilderness. In the next section of this chapter, Armah’s counter-discourse will be addressed, investigating how his account of history might reinvigorate Ghana’s ‘de-memored’³⁸ wasteland.

Naana’s Passages of Un-forgetting Negating Self-affirmation, Affirming Self-correction

“The native Intellectual ...who is willing to strip himself naked
to the history of his body,
is obliged to dissect the heart of his people”
Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*

Bound up with Armah’s condemnation of the collective amnesia that characterises the “blind children of slavery”—the new rulers of post-Independence Ghana—is his

³⁷ I am thankful for this idea to Julian Brown, who uploaded her paper “The Rules of Violence” for the upcoming conference “Cultures of Violence” in Cambridge :[http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/files/Brown 2004.pdf](http://www.ukzn.ac.za/ccs/files/Brown%2004.pdf). Besides the author’s cautionary, and caring, remarks about the “work-in-progress” status of her paper, and the “primary state” of her ideas that “should not be quoted” I have deliberately chosen to quote her work because it has been a source of inspiration for my discussion here.

³⁸ The term ‘memored’ appears in Grace Nichols’ poetic collection – *I Is a Long Memored Woman* (London: Karnak House, 1990). The adjective ‘memored’ signifies the endless historical reservoir of the female subject. I have appropriated and further developed this term to connote exactly the opposite.

emphasis on the healing dynamics of historical consciousness that could operate as a conduit through the grim penumbra of the present. Armah prioritises historical consciousness, as it seems that it could help to salve or prevent the present ills of alienation and social stagnation. In trying to think about the significance of remembering the past as a method of detecting historical continuities in the present, one of the most important questions posed is how is it to be remembered? Or to put it differently, what parts of the historical past are significant for the present generations, or what aspects of this memory should be unearthed so as to counter-balance the de-memoried temper of contemporary Ghana?

These questions become important in relation to Armah's work, especially in the light of a common misunderstanding centred on his prioritisation of a broad historical orientation. Thus, although critics offer perceptive observations on Armah's revisionist reading of the past, they somehow incorporate his political vision within the African ideology of "immemorial and perdurable essences: in a word, Negritude" (Sekyi-Otu 211).³⁹ Ode Ogede, for example, in his article "Negritude and the African Writer of English Expression: Ayi Kwei Armah" claims that Armah belongs to a generation of English speaking Africans, like Wole Soyinka, Lewis Nkosi and Ezekiel Mphahlele, who are known for their oppositional stance to the politics of negritude, but whose work is nevertheless "replete with the main features of this ideology" (128). With particular reference to Armah, Ogede claims that "Armah more than anyone illustrates the curious way in which the English-speaking African writer's persistent criticism of the occasional tendency toward sloppy sloganeering and posturing in Negritude writing has tended to obscure his own reliance on the essence of the theory" (129); he also argues that Armah's oeuvre "resembles Senghor's work in tone, intention and achievement" (128). Ogede justifies this argument by claiming that each of Armah's texts,⁴⁰ his five novels and his

³⁹ See, among others, Atta Britwum, "Hero-Worshipping in the African Novel (The Case of Ayi Kwei Armah and Others)" *Asemka* 3 (September 1975): 1-18; James Booth, *Writers and Politics in Nigeria* (London: Hobber & Stoughton, 1981); Thomas Moore, *Twelve African Authors*; and Brenda Cooper, "'With His Colour Like That of the African Soil at Dawn': Evaluating Black Nationalism in the Fiction of Ayi Kwei Armah, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Sembene Ousmane," in *To Lay these Secrets Open: Evaluating African Writing*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers (PTY) Ltd, 1992: 40-47.

⁴⁰ Although it would be useful to critique Ogede's arguments with reference to all Armah's novels, it falls beyond the scope of this thesis to do so. Thus, throughout my analysis, I will focus exclusively on Ogede's claims about *Fragments*. However, for other critics who have opposed such claims see Ato Sekyi-Otu,

six short stories, feature the Senghorian “ideal of restoring the lost African dignity” (129). In his discussion of *Fragments*, Ogede locates the similarities between Armah and Negritude in the novel’s central concerns, which are “about African societies, about the need for Africans to abandon unhealthy social habits and return to traditional industry, simplicity and integrity in order to carry their society forward” (131).

Before fully testing the validity of Ogede’s argument for Armah and Negritude’s ideological concurrences, I should like to begin with a synopsis of the latter’s main theoretical articulations. I consider this small parenthesis necessary, since besides filling one of the lacunae in Ogede’s article, which advances to the aforementioned claims without specifying or in a direct way clarifying Negritude’s ideological constellations, it will also pave the way for my rebuttal of this position. Negritude, as a movement, refers to the writings of Aimé Césaire and Leopold Sedar Senghor and constitutes a positive celebration of African blackness and “the most pronounced assertion of the distinctive qualities of black culture and identity” (Ashcroft *et al.* 20). The Negritude movement emerged in the aftermath of the colonial encounter as a reaction to white supremacy and imperialist domination, aiming at the “re-institution and re-engineering of the [black] racial psyche, the establishment of a human entity and the glorification of its long suppressed attitudes” (Soyinka, *Myth, Literature* 126). However, although the movement articulates the counter-myth of the racial doctrines propounded in Europe—where the Negro is posited as an inherently inferior being to the white man—its adherents do not contest “the colonial assertion that race signifies both outer and inner traits”, nor the putative “connections between race and culture” (Loomba 177). On the contrary, for Senghor, race “is in fact, a sum of the cultural value of the black world” (qtd. in Loomba 212). What Negritude does challenge, however, “is the meaning and values attached to these associations” (Loomba 177). As Aimé Césaire points out, the word ‘negre’ was adopted as a “term of defiance, out of a violent affirmation” (212). Similarly, in Senghor’s work, the racial chauvinism of Eurocentric prejudices that deny black people any sort of intellectual capacities is answered back by the celebration and constant affirmation of black people’s intuitive and emotive nature: “Emotive sensitivity. Emotion

“‘Toward Anoa...Not Back to Anoa’: The Grammar of Revolutionary Homecoming in *Two Thousand Seasons*,” *Research in African Literatures* 18.2 (1987): 192-214.

is completely Negro as reason is Greek. Water rippled by every breeze? ...Yes, in one way, the Negro is richer in gifts than in works” (qtd in Soyinka, *Myth, Literature* 129). As Irele suggests, for Senghor, the exaltation of the “black race’s intuitively intrinsic qualities are exclusively associated with a romantic myth of Africa, which posits a common cultural wellspring for black peoples and black subcultures all over the world: “What strikes me about the Negroes in America is the permanence not of the physical but of the psychic characteristics of the Negro African, despite race mixing, despite the new environment” (Irele 72). Thus, Africa creates what Senghor names “a collective personality of the black people” (Senghor qtd. in Irele 70-71), an inner state of the black man that lies outside historical or geographical processes. Africa provides first and foremost a distinct mode of racial being and existence, particular to the black man, which can be deduced from his African descent and which constitutes his identity.

As Irele suggests, “such a polemical re-evaluation of Africa merges itself into a quest for values and for a new spiritual orientation that does not remain confined within the parameters of artistic and cultural politics; on the contrary, it translates to the political terrain, providing the foundation of Negritude’s social and political vision” (74). Senghor’s intellectual effort aims not only at demonstrating the significance of traditional African values, but “at establishing their appropriateness to the experience and situation of modern Africa and ultimately of contemporary man” (73). Thus, Senghor’s political worldview, springing from a nostalgic feeling for the African heritage of values and experience, draws on and “seeks to mobilize a return to traditional, pre-colonial African society as a guiding referent for black culture and society in modern times” (Irele 84).

It is Negritude’s attempt to define a fundamental Africanism as a source of black cultural, personal and political expression, what Soyinka in his analysis of Negritude in *Myth, Literature and the African World* describes as “the contrivance of a creative ideology and its falsified basis of identification with the social vision” (126), that has triggered English-speaking writers’ ‘insensitivity’ to, and criticism of, Negritude. These oppositional voices “focus either upon the theoretical formulation of the concept or upon its practical and political implications” (Irele 83). On the “theoretical plane” the correspondence of Senghor’s ideas of the psychology of the African personality with Western racist theories offers a fruitful ground for critique, as it seems “to leave intact the

racial hierarchy established by the colonial ideology” (83). Frantz Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks* warns that: “To us, the man who adores the Negro is as ‘sick’ as the man who abominates him” (10), classifying Negritude as springing from the intellectual legacies and conditioning of the mother country. In a similar vein, Soyinka espouses Fanon’s point; for him this is inevitable given that Negritude embraces the essential binary nature of the western philosophical tradition:

Negritude, having laid its cornerstone on a European intellectual tradition, however bravely it tried to reverse its concepts (leaving its tenets untouched), was a foundling deserving to be drawn into, nay, even considered a case for benign adoption by European ideological interests. (*Myth, Literature* 134)

Negritude’s “failure to come to grips with the very foundations of Eurocentric epistemology” constitutes for Soyinka the ‘fundamental error’ in this theory, since its proponents do not only seem to accept the dialectical structure of European ontology but borrow from the very components of its racist ideology: “The fundamental error was one of procedure: Negritude stayed within a pre-set system of Eurocentric intellectual analysis both of man and society and tried to redefine the African and his society in those terms” (*Myth, Literature* 136).

Within this frame, it is not surprising that “Negritude aroused and continues to arouse more than a mere semantic impatience among the later generation of African writers” (Irele 126). Armah, as Ogede recognises, is situated among them and his critique of Negritude’s theoretical foundations is manifested in the majority of his oeuvre. For instance, in his 1967 article “African Socialism: Utopian or Scientific?” Armah rejects Senghor’s artistic and political statements because his idea of Africa “is obtained through the agency of white men, the eyes of anthropologists and ethnologists, the slummers of Imperialism” (7-20). In the same article, he condemns Negritude’s failure to produce a counter-discourse that would be disengaged from Eurocentric discourses, since they describe “the flight from the classical Cartesian big white Father France into the warm, dark, sensuous embrace of Africa, into the receiving uterus of despised Africa” (13). Similarly, his harsh disapproval of Negritude is reiterated in the 1987 article “Battle of the Mind”, where he argues that

Négritude is a blind artistic summary of actual relations between Europeans and Africans from about the start of the slave trade to the latest adjustment programme designed in Washington, Paris, London or Rome for adoption and implementation by an African elite that still refuses, out of sheer inertia and habit, to do its own thinking. (62)

Armah's criticism of Négritude's unsatisfactory alternative ideological articulations is targeted towards the totalising aspects of their approach, which seems to have no other perspective than "the exchange of domination", the replacement, that is, of a dominant Eurocentric order by a dominant Afrocentric one. In other words, Armah is situated against the grain of negritude because of its failure to challenge the very ideological apparatus of Eurocentric tradition and thinking that it intends to react against.

However, besides his hostile attitude towards the theoretical parameters of Négritude, Armah opposes the socio-political implications of its politics; given the social mission of his literature, Armah's disavowal of Négritude's vision rests in its idealisation of the pre-colonial past and its dictation of an unquestioned and uncritical "backward" movement to African traditional values and systems of thought. To see this clearly, it would be useful to return to Ogede's argument and test its validity in relation to *Fragments*. Ogede seems to be correct to claim that in respect to *Fragments* Armah's focus is on healing the 'unhealthy social habits'; yet, as we will see, this does not necessarily presuppose a retrogressive movement to African tradition, a "return to traditional industry, simplicity and integrity in order to carry the society forward" (Ogede 131). Baako's grandmother, Naana's function in the novel provides a useful context within which to explore this issue, since as Toni Morrison has stated, it is the presence of the ancestor that reveals to a large extent the novel's "conscious historical connection" (330) with the past.

Naana "emerges through the cracks of the fragmented present as a subject with a solidly historical past", whose old age builds the bridge for the movement into the terrain of Akan ethos and tradition. Her wisdom "is contained in her desire to adhere to a traditional way of life" (Chetin 48), informed by the natural "cyclical rhythms" of life's essence. A frequently quoted extract from the novel commemorates the harmonious peace of a spiritual pre-colonial order of things and highlights the contrast with the unrest that, as we explored in the previous section, ravages the present:

Each thing that goes away returns and nothing in the end is lost. The great friend throws all things apart and brings all things together again. That is the way everything goes and turns round. That is how all living things come back after long absences, and in the long whole great world all things are living things. (1)

Naana's narration affirms a cyclical rhythm of life that defies linearity. Life does not end after death, because death is seen as a transitional state in a process of transformations. Such conceptualisation of the *cosmos* projects each person's important contribution in an organic circle of things. The human and the divine world conflate since there is no visual "geographical separation" between life and death (Wright, "Cargo Connection" 50-51), and the spirits of the "great friend" safeguard the welfare of the community's members that remain at the centre of its universe.

Being the representative of tradition, Naana charts "the silent danger" (196) of alien systems and values that threaten to encroach upon it. In an episode that takes place early in the novel and dramatises the libation ceremony for the spirits of the ancestors, who will safeguard Baako on his journey to the United States, this danger is identified in the context of a materialism that prioritises the base desires of the individual over the benefit of the community. Foli, Baako's uncle, keeps for himself the wine intended for the spirits; Naana notices this and rushes to restore order, as Foli's action threatens to anger the ancestors. On her way back, she criticises Foli, reminding him of the possible consequences of his action:

Did no one teach you the power of the anger of the departed? How did you forget, then? Or was the present growling of your belly a greater thing than Baako's going and the whole steam of his life after that? The spirits would have been angry, and they would have turned their anger against him. He would have been destroyed. (10)

This incident, besides exposing the extent to which contemporary Africa has lost step with past values, "emptying tradition of its larger, integrative function", establishes a clear dichotomy between the communalism of the pre-colonial past and the individualistic drive of the post-colonial present (Lazarus 112). For Naana, this act signals the beginning of social atomisation, self-aggrandisement and ego-worship, a prelude to the annihilation of the communal spirit.

If we were to judge Naana's role exclusively by these scenes, we would conclude that her vision resonates with Negritude's idealistic urge to return to the old values in countering the new order. However, what such conclusions ignore is that the traditional order she draws upon is of positive value but nevertheless obsolete. As Baako reminds her, "the world has changed" (98) and the artificial resurrection of tradition will not correct or amend the present. Also, Lazarus' incisive observation that tradition's "qualities have rendered [the community] not only powerless to defend itself against co-optation, but also naively open to invasion" (131) highlights the implicit and salient weaknesses in the very foundations of Naana's organising principles. As we will see later in this chapter, it is as if Armah suggests that there must be something fundamentally wrong behind the perfect facade of the pre-colonial world in order to allow external forces to contaminate its community. And unless these weaknesses are addressed, critically revisited and corrected, the present and the future cannot be re-organised on the foundations of a "glorious" past.

In addition to this though, the very limitations embedded in the uncritical return to traditional values are further articulated and become a guiding problematic through the symbolic operation of Naana's marginal position at the outer margins of the novel, framing through her lyrical narrative its prologue and epilogue correspondingly. On an initial reading, the undercurrent signification of Naana's ostracism at the text's fringes becomes suggestive of African tradition's peripheral role not only within the frame of a Western-oriented and fabricated historical rhetoric that has often relegated the non-European world to the footnotes of history, but also in terms of tradition's instrumental function in contemporary Ghana. As we explored in the opening parts of this section, Naana's world is a dormant entity completely obliterated and superseded by the modern westernised pattern of living and acting. As Naana concludes in her epilogue, which appears in the last part of the novel, she regards herself as "the remnant of something that passed and was immediately forgotten" (195), admitting that Ghana's traditional psyche exists only in her consciousness and that the traditional values she stands for are condemned to fade away once she dies. Such a comment adds weight to Derek Wright's astute suggestion in *Critical Perspectives on Ayi Kwei Armah* that "Naana's vision is a lost order that cannot be restored" (185) and challenges "the return to values rooted in a

way of life that has vanished... the centrality that it assumes in the novel as a whole is disproportionate to its minimal function in the contemporary scene” (225). Indeed, Naana’s deliberate absence from the heart of the events, with the exception of her appearance at specific stages in the novel when “the generational changes take place”,⁴¹ suggests that her reality is not synchronic with that of contemporary Ghana. This idea is most poignant in Naana’s epilogue; when commenting on her impending death, she acknowledges her failure to keep up with the modern world, admitting that “Such inward readiness to go does not come if this world here has room and use for us” (195). Naana is fully aware that the wisdom of traditional ethical imperatives that she voices and represents has no currency in the contemporary world and cannot lay any claim upon the new generation of Ghanaians.

However, if Naana’s potential role as an ideological and political touchstone of the present is problematised, what is her function within the world of *Fragments*? Will it be fair to assume that the refutation of her traditionalism along with its resultant retrogressive movement to the past positions Armah within the group of African writers that, as Morrison has it, “is far removed from the experience of the ancestor” (331)? In order to answer this question, it is useful to note that Naana, through her nostalgic link with the ancestors and the traditional order of things, has access to the collective historical memory of her community that reaches back to the very first encounters with the Western conquerors. So, apart from her nostalgic vision “filled with golden virtues, golden men and sterling events” (22), she is loaded with a historical consciousness. Being in this prerogative position, Naana can retrieve the course of her community’s history and posit it as a negative model insofar as it determines and configures the socio-political structures of the present. Through Naana we are invited to contemplate the catastrophic reaches of Slavery and to witness its legacies in the present. Armah seems to suggest that once the past is re-inhabited under this perspective, under a self-corrective rather than a self-assertive imperative, then it can be utilised by contemporary Ghanaians and carried over into different socio-political conjunctures.

⁴¹ As Ode S. Ogebe has observed, there are two more passages in the novel in which Naana appears. The first occurs when Araba’s child is to be outdoored prematurely on the fifth day after its birth, instead of the traditional eighth day; the second scene is when Baako’s family trumps up charges of insanity against him and then hounds him into an asylum against her protests.

The first instance when Naana delves into history takes place during the first chapter of the novel, when along with the rest of family she escorts Baako to the airport. While inside uncle Foli's car, Naana recalls an incident when the sounds of songs played on the radio carried her away. As she reports:

For a long time I listened and was lost, till I heard Foli shout to Baako and another friend as if I was not there,

"Look at your grandmother, listening as if she can understand."

Before I could become angry I saw it was true. I had not understood a single word, and yet this was something I had not known before Foli spoke. Listening to the sounds, I had thought I knew what the words were saying also.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The People singing. Those playing."

"Ah. Afro-Americans."

"Americans?"

"Yes," Foli said.

"It was as if I understood what they were saying..."

"Their people were Africans." It was Baako who said this. Afraid to raise more laughter against myself, I shook my head with the perfect understanding that was not in it. I had not understood the words at all, but the sounds, above all the cries of the man who sang most of the beginnings, and the women's voices, many, many women's voices, always there around him to catch his pain and make them all into almost something sweet, that was all familiar to me somewhere. And also beneath it all the thing that went on always and would not let me escape, heavy like a sound of doom, that also I knew. (9)

This passage is centred on the paradox that permeates Naana's insight into the meaning of the (Afro)American songs. As Naana admits, before uncle Foli's teasing remark about the absurdity of the situation, that is, her acuity regarding the songs' meaning, she was not even aware of the foreign language of the lyrics. Yet, her intuition regarding the undercurrent meaning of the songs, transmitted through their sound, the painful cries of the male voice and the consoling qualities of the female voices, enables Naana to define

acutely their mood and general atmosphere. This occurs because, according to Naana's testimony, her understanding is not based on the language of the songs; rather, it is anchored in her informed sensitivity of the "structures of feelings" (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* 77) communicated through the melancholic lyricism of the singers' cries, as well as her ability to identify with the underlying trend of calamity that permeates these songs.

Naana's intuition into the undercurrent message of the songs, transmitted through their supra-discursive elements instead of the power of language and narrativity, can be better understood in the light of Paul Gilroy's analysis in *The Black Atlantic* of black music's putatively inherent qualities. Among the points that Gilroy raises about the condition of the black musical medium, two seem to be of importance in interpreting Naana's experience. The first one concerns the inherent ability of the black musical heritage to communicate the "distinct mode of lived blackness" (82), which is associated with the historical memories of slavery's unspeakable horrors. Black music has a predominant position among various social forms as it remembers, re-imagines and re-transmits "the residual traces of terror's necessarily painful expression" (Gilroy 74), operating as a form of oral history, as a map of unrecorded experiences to be remembered and passed down through generations. At the same time, Gilroy postulates that this expression has grown in "inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language" (74); this is due to black people's systematic exclusion from literacy as well as their need to codify the songs' undercurrent signification, mainly associated with the slaves' will to be free and to be themselves. Yet, the transgression of normative linguistic and semantic structures of expression places in the foreground the black people's continued ability to transmit the terrors of slavery, which "though they were unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible" (Gilroy 73). Thus, the sonic qualities of black music re-inhabit the constitutive "topos of unsayability" (73) of the horrific predicament of blackness and become the landscape in which slavery's suppressed histories, so unreservedly horrendous, so irreversibly other, so outside the bounds of history and morality as to defy representation, are given voice.

The qualities Gilroy attributes to the musical heritage, those of cultural bearer and history perceiver, are in accordance with Armah's representation of the (Afro-)American songs in the incident with Naana. Armah seems to concur that music and memory come

together and to this end, he uses the musical medium as an aid to memory, as a means to rejuvenate the silenced and forgotten. Naana listens to the songs and their sadness takes her to the depths of history, establishing a genealogical link with the forgotten stories of her community that go back to the years of the transatlantic slave trade. Being triggered by the music's emotive dynamics, Naana performs a mental re-enactment of the Middle Passage and crosses the Atlantic, finding herself "walk[ing] across strange lands where [she] had never been before" (10). Being mentally there, she encounters the violent history of her people that includes the stories of Slavery and the history of her ancestors' enforced diaspora; her empathy with a centuries-old suffering charges her with a feeling of "sadness [that] remained with her" (10) long after the songs have ended. Thus, contrary to the institutionalisation of amnesia that, as we saw in the previous section, permeates contemporary Ghanaians, Naana's memory is vivid and engages in acts of resistance against the efforts of the dominant discourse to erase, if not completely obliterate, any sense of historical orientation.

For Armah, Naana's vivid memory represents a useful vehicle for drawing correlations and detecting both the continuities and causalities between past and present. The clearest illustration is to be found in the outdoor ceremony that Efua and Araba, Baako's mother and sister, arrange in celebration of the birth of Araba's child, her first after many miscarriages (88-89). According to the Akan ethos, the spirit of a newborn child should be welcomed from the world of the ancestors through a ceremony conducted on the eighth day after its birth. However, in recent times "traditional practices have been voided of their larger, integrative function", reduced instead to empty gestural practices (Lazarus 112). Consequently, the process of the ceremony has been transformed into an exaggerated feast to which the most affluent acquaintances are invited to enhance the material growth of the family. Efua proposes to move the baby's outdoor ceremony three days back from its traditional date to payday so as to enjoy the guests' generosity before "they got broke" (88) and succeed thus in "collect[ing] the fattest droppings" (184). The ceremony operates as a kind of monstrous bargaining system, with Efua starting as an experienced vendor, whose comments—"Four cedis!" ... "Let's all clap her. The big man's wife has made us proud with four...Inspector Duncan Afum...Police Inspector Duncan Afum, your turn now. Show your powers, Inspector..." (186)—aim to extract the

maximum amount of money from her eminent guests. By its end, the baby expires due to the family's neglect. Being preoccupied with collecting money, they fail to notice that the baby was placed directly in front of an electric fan blowing cold air onto the celebrants. In the epilogue of the novel, Naana comments and offers her explanation on this incident:

What is the fool's name, and what is the name of the animal that doesn't know that? The baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that began the same old destruction of our people when the elders first- may their souls never find forgiveness on this head- split their own seed and raised half, part selling part to hard-eyed buyers from beyond the horizon, breaking, buying, selling, gaining, spending till the last of our men sells the last woman to any passing white buyer and himself waits to be destroyed. (199)

As Frazer acutely notes, "Naana's rage here is grounded in an uncanny insight into the collective psychology of her people" (40), whose betrayal of tradition on the altar of materialism, the modern deity imported by the West, has condemned them to a Sisyphean repetition of the same mistakes. She engages in a comparison between past and present that enables her to draw an analogy between the death of the baby and the brutal historical reality of the domestic slave trade. Like those among their ancestors, who, without weighing the consequences, welcomed the European slave trade as a form of commerce through which they themselves could profit, Efua and Araba's obsession with material gain has resulted in them killing their own offspring. From a historical perspective, the family's betrayal of the newborn is seen to be the legacy of moral betrayal, a history of duplicity which precedes the era of independence, precedes even colonialism and is connected with the "earlier bartering of slaves during the pre-colonial period" (Frazer 40). Thus, by exposing that the root causes of the ancestors' betrayal towards their own people have produced later accretions of the materialistic ethic that ravages and alienates the present, Armah succeeds in building a chain of associations that illuminate which aspects of the pre-colonial past have been inherited in contemporary Ghana. What should not be dismissed though is his uncompromising insistence on the shameless and violent realities of history. As Wole Soyinka has argued, Armah is not reluctant to offer aspects of the past which are far from idealised. Actually, it is within the negatively-charged histories of History that Armah's "contribution to the search for a

social direction” lies. Through his insistence on a “strict selectivity” regarding the brutal realities of history, Armah aims to secure an alter/native “designing of the future” (Soyinka 114). “History functions as a cautionary tale, creating secure conditions for a tenable future”. In this sense, history is crowned as the ultimate educator, upon whose foundations contemporary Ghana can be taught and redirected.

It is highly ironic, then, that Naana despite her blindness is the only one who can see things “unseen by those who have eyes” (2). The symbolic parameters of Naana’s blindness has polarised critics’ interpretations between those who treat her as a female sorceress, attributing to her prophetic qualities, and those who see through Naana’s blindness the limited vision of the world of occultism, spirits and ghosts, the religious background of the Akan tradition that she represents.⁴² Without excluding any of these interpretations, instead accommodating all, Sara Chetin in “Armah’s Women” raises a point that negotiates the aforementioned polarities. Chetin contests that Naana’s blindness symbolises “the collective unconscious of a destroyed uprooted people whose fate lay in their blindness” (47-49). As Naana’s monologue at the end of the book testifies, contemporary Ghana is a new society that merely succeeds in masking the patterns of an old process:

What a thing for you to laugh at, when we grow just tall enough and still clutching the useless shreds of a world worn out, we peep behind the veil just passed and find in wonder a more fantastic world, making us fool in our own eyes to have believed that the old paltriness was all. But again we hold fast to the new shadows we find. We are fooled again, and once more taste the sharp unpleasantness of surprise, though we thought we had grown wise. (200-201)

Naana, the last fragment of a community of elders and ancestors, has witnessed over and over again the fate of her people and is able to diagnose the chain of associations that have contributed to their disaster. Naana not only “hold[s] the whole course of history in her steady, unfinished gaze” (Frazer 11), but points towards the erasure of the dividing

⁴² For critics who interpret Naana’s blindness as a symbol of prophetic vision see Kofi Owusu, “Armah’s F-R-A-G-M-E-N-T-S: Madness as Artistic Paradigm,” *Callaloo: A Journal of African American and African Arts and Letters* 11. 2. 35 (Spring 1988): 365; for those critics who interpret Naana’s blindness as a sign of her limitations see Neil Lazarus in *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*, (London: Yale University Press, 1990): 113; and Derek Wright, “Fragments and the Akan World,” *Ayi Kwei Armah’s Africa: the Sources of His Fiction* (London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1989): 144.

line between old and new generations, uniting the predicament of the Ghanaians under the rubric of alienation and unquestioning perpetuation of the same mistakes. This is testified through the telling “use of the present tense” (Frazer 11) throughout her references to a time frame that goes back to the transatlantic slave trade. The ancestors’ disastrous actions, their enthusiastic response towards imported forces and traditions that divert them to alien channels, are not part of a distant past but a continuing part of the present. In the absence of “periodic reformation and regeneration”, Africa’s history “renews only its own decay and bequeaths its old characteristics to new generations” (Wright 99); and for Naana, those who fail to recognise this reality are condemned to a state of perpetual slavery. As eternally enslaved subjects, contemporary Ghanaians deflect and reflect the position of their ancestors, confirming that the past is no place to look for an alternative to the present.

What I want to suggest though, by way of epilogue, is that Naana’s function exemplifies Armah’s vision of the appropriateness and utility of history in contemporary Ghana. As we have seen, such vision challenges Negritude’s centrifugal movement towards the past. Armah gestures towards the importance of the pre-colonial past like Negritude’s advocates, but doesn’t stop there; rather, he uses history’s basic matrix as the stepping-stone, as an educational tool, as the means to acquire an understanding of the present ailment’s banality and set in motion the process of revisiting it. In this sense, Naana is resurrected to re-claim a version of the past as an act of resistance, as a struggle for the politicisation of memory that serves to illuminate and transform the present, that serves to inject and infuse some historical vision in the amnesiac wilderness of post-Independence Ghana. In retelling the story of the past through Naana, Armah engages in an act of historical revision that is important in terms of acknowledging how the past repeats itself in present relations, and at the same time of arming the subjects of the present with the necessary archival data to eliminate such repetition. In the final section of this chapter we will see how her paradigm of setting in place the forgotten connection, of remembering to remember, becomes a guiding principle in Baako’s personal and artistic quest.

In-between the Need, and yet the Impossibility, to Re-member

“The very impulse to historicise for the native[intellectual]
is not an intrinsic motivation,
but a form of extrinsic command”

Rajapolan Radhakrishnan, *History, the Human, and the World Between*

Between the two diametrically opposed stances to history—the Ghanaian elite, who have adopted a deliberate amnesiac stance towards the past to preserve their own material comforts, and Naana, who engages in acts of remembering but has chosen not to take any course of action—Armah positions Baako, the visionary artist, who employs the creative process in the service of keeping the memories alive. Focusing on Baako’s predominant role within the thematic framework of the novel, this section will address questions that revolve around the significance of history in the creative articulation of the contemporary artist, examining the specific historical phases that seem to be prioritised through his art, as well as his role and utility in forging a cultural agenda through the lens of artistic expression that provides society with a sense of historical direction.

A good point of entry to the African artists’ predicament in the post-independence era is through the reflections of Chinua Achebe, who, both through his literary and critical work, has actively participated in debates over the fate, vitality and re-direction of the artistic enterprise in contemporary Africa. Writing from the same transitory historical standpoint as Armah does, Achebe’s response is informed by the recognition that after Independence Nigeria remains “in just as much need of change as it ever did in the past” (15). And it is with regards to this urgency that Achebe tries to sensitise contemporary artists to the pivotal and humanizing capacity of art in relation to nation building. In particular, in his collection of essays *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) Achebe argues for the indispensability of traditional African matrices that reconnect art with the material world and promote its relevance to the contextual political, social and cultural immediacies of the period, positing them as a medium for confronting the dangers of disengagement promoted by western models. Achebe traces the evasion of social responsibility and misdirection of artistic vision to the internalisation of western artistic movements that have disassociated art from its social function, rendering it “accountable to no one, and needed to justify itself to nobody but itself” (19). As a result, the devotees

of this artistic dogma seem to “have banish[ed] entirely from their hearts and minds such doubts and questions as *What use is it this to me?* as the ultimate irreverence and profanation. Words like *use, purpose, value* are beneath the divine concerns of this Art” (19). Against the lack of dialogue between art and the socio-political specificities of the African continent, Achebe seeks to reinfuse cultural debates with the axioms of traditional artists, who “lived and moved and had their being in society, and created their works for the *good* of that society” (19), recognising not only the ministering qualities of art to basic human needs but also its obligation to serve down-to-earth necessities. Setting the paradigm of traditional artists who were not divorced from reality, Achebe intends to galvanise his contemporaries to contribute in a positive and constructive way to current urgencies. This could be achieved by responding and addressing themselves to the socio-political exigencies that fall in abeyance, by producing art “that evolves out of the necessities of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people” (7).

The underlying signification of Achebe’s invitation to (re)place art at the service of the transitory present informs Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Homecoming* (1972). In terms similar to Achebe’s, Ngugi’s suggests that one “cannot separate economics and culture from politics. The three are interwoven. A cultural assertion was an integral part of the political and economic struggle” (26). The central role of culture in Ngugi’s liberation narratives is attributed to its close affinities to history in colonial discourses on Africa, a cultural history that had been distorted by years of colonial miseducation. In his essay “The Writer and His Past” (1968), Ngugi voices his reflections on how an engagement with the past forms a prerequisite for a genuine national culture. Thus he advocates that a writer should “sensitively register his encounter with history, his people’s history” (39) as found in the mores and experiences, in the betrayals and epics, “in the mainstream of his people’s drama” (41). The African writer has a duty to re-tell and re-claim the past and through this act of reclaiming to “attempt to restore the African character to his history” (43). Through this process of discursive resistance, which entails re-writing history by inserting the marginal that has been excluded, given that “our vision of the future, of diverse possibilities of life and human potential, has roots in our experience of the past”

(Ngugi 40), writers are expected not only to recount the past, but to imagine the future and make others see the dawn beyond the night.

What is striking in both Achebe's and Ngugi's contemplations on the role of art in the political arena, and the act of historical revisionism from the site of the native artist/intellectual, is their unquestioned faith in his/her political role, and in his/her entitlement to speak *to* and *for* the urgencies of the present. Their positions become even more conspicuous once considered alongside the theoretical formulations of post-structuralist Western intellectuals, who, as Radhakrishnan notes, repudiate their prerogative positions of speaking on behalf of the masses so as to evade the political danger of being implicated in "forms of power that transform [them] into its object and instrument in the sphere of 'knowledge,' 'truth,' 'consciousness,' and 'discourse'" (*Diasporic Mediations* 36). For example, theorists like Michel Foucault and Giles Deleuze, drawing on recent examples of revolutionary struggles in Europe such as those of May 1968, assume that the masses "do not need theory, for they are 'theory' in practice" (40). Yet, their reluctant attitude towards the responsibility of representation, which stems from a fear of doing epistemic violence to the masses, has two effects: on the one hand, it denies to the masses "the historical materiality of 'representation'" (41), and, at the same time, it precludes any possibility of engaging in a participatory dialogue with the emerging temporalities of the masses.⁴³ Yet, different historically emergent movements from marginal groups⁴⁴ within, and outside, the West have assumed an "authentic organicity of constituency" with intellectuals, and have formulated inter-active political communities that erase the "I" – "They" division and replace it with a legitimate "I-We" relational coordination. This "I-We" formulation, where the "I" is constantly informed by the "We" and vice versa, brings the intellectual and the people together "in the project of envisioning and constructing the future" (Radhakrishnan, *The Human* 78).

Thus, for postcolonial theorists like Fanon the intellectual should join forces *with* the masses, and assist in their emergence. Far from oversimplifying the complexities of the role of the intellectual in the envisioning of the political future, Fanon's schematization of

⁴³ On this idea see also Neil Lazarus' splendid critique of Trinh T. Minh-Ha in his "Disavowing Decolonisation: Fanon, Nationalism, and the Question of Representation in Post-colonial Theory," in *Frantz Fanon: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Anthony C. Allessandrini (London: Routledge, 1999) 161-194.

⁴⁴ Radhakrishnan refers to Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Jesse Jackson, and W.E. B. Dubois.

the intellectual's development entails three stages that culminate in his/her "de-schooling" (or class-suicide as Cabral has put it) in the ways of white culture, and his/her subsequent "re-schooling" in the specificities of the local culture (Radhakrishnan, *The Human* 79). As Radhakrishnan notes, for Fanon the process of the "decolonization of the political unconscious" (*The Human* 79) is inextricably linked to the progress of political decolonization. Being unadorned with the vestiges of colonial culture, s/he can then "strip [herself or] himself naked to the history of [her] his body" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 170). By positing her/himself in the unprivileged position of the people, the intellectual's critical encounter with history entails a painful encounter with a number of historical haunting(s). Her/his inventory of the ghostly traces of the past is burdened by the realization that "this history has to be repudiated, and yet no radical repudiation can exorcize the fact that it is indeed a history" (Radhakrishnan, *The Human* 82). It is from this critical standpoint that the intellectual acknowledges the materiality of history, the amount of damage, dispossession and violence it has caused in the past and continues to cause in the present, and s/he assumes responsibility not only towards history, but also towards the present. For the intellectual attempts "to repudiate the *authority* of colonial history, not its givenness" (Radhakrishnan, *The Human* 82). The haunting of the colonial past, the scars it has left on the social body, as Aidoo taught us in the previous chapter, cannot be erased; the 'givenness' of the horror and injustice of the colonial history cannot, and will not, be effaced; yet, what is challenged and "called into question" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 183) is the legacy of the past in the present. And this questioning finds shape in making the latent, hidden, secret traces of colonial history visible.

The imperative to re-direct contemporary African art becomes manifested in the world of *Fragments* when the dogma of European colonial acculturation that goes hand-in-hand with historical mutilation, employs techniques of depersonalisation of artists and intellectuals through the process of a latent censorship. The modern African writer must then overcome unique pressures if she/he is to function in any meaningful sense as a spokesperson for her/his community. Take, for example, the night which Baako, Juana, Ocran and others spend at Accra's drama studio, one of Ghana's primary cultural nerve-centres, which becomes symptomatic not only of Ghana's spiritual wasteland but also of its regressive/reciprocating dependency upon the recently departed western masters.

Initially, as the head organiser of these literary soirees, Akosua Russell proclaims that the main aim of these gatherings is to promote the “development of an indigenous literature as well as an indigenous art” (110). However, the rhetorical cover of development becomes a conventional phrase to “disguise the sterility of their ideas” (Lazarus 90). The meeting’s lack of vital relevance to the specificities of the present is not only attested by Juana, who can trace a banal repetition between another literary evening that she had attended and this one, but also by Ocran, who, in a bitter lamentation for the abjection of cultural enterprise in Ghana, sarcastically comments that “she’ll have to vary this routine. Eight years back, when this place was opened, it was exactly like this” (114). Ocran’s plea for a change that will challenge the present cultural paralysis comes as a critique of the artistic enterprise of people like Akosua Russell, who behind the façade of intrinsic interest in advancement and rejuvenation conceal their actual motivations, which involve the acquisition of funds from western benefactors. That specific night the guest of honour is Doctor Calvin Byrd, “a man of great goodwill with the very strong and healthy interest in the development of robust, indigenous art forms” (110). Thus, as could be expected, the “local literary and artistic big shots” (107) seek to ingratiate themselves with the western sponsors, in the hope of being included and prioritised in their charitable gestures.

The prostitution of African art’s dynamic qualities is illustrated through Akosua Russell’s recitation of the “most frequently anthologised Western African poem,” (114) entitled “The Coming of the Brilliant Light of the New Age to Amosema Junction Village”, which exposes her not only as a poor artist but also as one whose vision is alienated and misdirected beyond retrieval and recuperation. As we learn in retrospect, through Baako’s attempt to convey the distorted meaning of the original to Juana, this poem is intended to be a contemporary appropriation of the Mame water and the Musician myth.⁴⁵ Initially this myth narrativises a traditional account of “the artist’s relationship with the natural world” (Thieme 54) and locates artistic vitality within the context of “loss”, conflating the creative process with the artist’s unfulfilled desire. In

⁴⁵ The same story is written by Efua Sutherland: “New Life at Kyerefaso”, in Langston Hughes (ed.) *An African Treasury: Articles, Essays, Stories, Poems, by Black Africans* (New York: Crown publishers Inc, 1961).

particular, according to the traditional version, a young musician falls in love with a sea goddess, Mame Water; however, soon after their first intercourse:

the goddess leaves him and go back to the sea, and they meet at long fixed intervals only. It takes courage. The goddess is powerful, and the musician is filled with so much love he can't bear the separation. But then, it is this separation that makes him sing as he has never sung before. Now he knows all there is to know about loneliness, about love and power, and the fear that one night he'll go to the sea and Mame Water will not be coming anymore. The singer is great but he is also afraid and after those nights on the shore, when the woman goes, there is no unhappier man on earth. (120)

As Baako's conclusive comment on Russel's reworking of the myth suggests, "the myths here are good. Only their use..." (120). The ellipsis in his sentence, far from alluding to a silence of convenience, betrays his difficulty to admit and accept the horrific realisation that accompanies his first contact, after his return from the United States, with the local artistic scene; namely, that this myth has been reworked and appropriated by local artists, like Akosua Russell, only to be transformed into another Eurocentric narrative that "speaks of the greatness of a white man who, with his europeanized African wife, brought the marvels of a white western civilisation to a backward village" (Lurie 34). To illustrate, in her version, the powerful indigenous sea goddess has been turned into a high-born princess,⁴⁶ and the young musician into a handsome stranger, who bewitches the indigenous population with his fair features of "shiny flaxen hair,/Limpid pools of blue for eyes,/The greatness of a thousand men, /skin like purest shiny marble/ plus a dazzling chariot from beyond the seas" (113). Their union, "brought light from a far, far land/ Unto the nighted village people" (112), as a section of the last stanza makes clear:

The Dynamic couple took the village,

⁴⁶ Although it falls beyond the scope of this exploration, I would like to make a short comment in relation to the role of the female subject in these two versions. Whereas in the traditional version of the myth the female subject abides by archetypal representations of femininity, being not only ethereal and thus not solid and humane but also coming from the sea and with a threatening sexuality, she is in a power position within the dynamics of her relationship with the musician. On the contrary, the female subject in Akosua Russell's poem is represented in accordance with conservative patriarchal discourses of femininity, being dependent on the presence, means and tools of the western male, who will change and revolutionise her milieu. Notably, the only critic who has touched upon this issue is Sara Chetin in "Armah's Women", *Kunapipi* 6:3 (1984).

Opened a retail store for magazines,
 Taught letters to the children there,
 Gave wholesome work to idle men,
 Civilized the country entirely,

Reigning with new light o'er adoring subject. (113- 114)

What is revealing in relation to the poem's thematic preoccupation is not simply its subversive reappropriation of the myth's initial theme; rather, it is the banal replication in tone and context of "messianic civilizationism", the colonial Grand Narrative that distorts experiences and realities, and inscribes the inferiority of the colonized people, justifying thus their subjugation and dependence on the West. Her poem naturalises the perennial influence of the West over local affairs on the grounds of the local inability to contribute positively towards its development.

Through this lens, this incident serves as a perfect metaphor to expose the practice of Russell's creative circle and to solidify it into into "African guardian[s] of Western interests in the arts" (Lazarus 91). Thus, like Brempong in the political arena, Armah represents, in the form of Akosua Russell and her entourage, the decadent philistinism of the cultural elite. For Armah, it is the totalising dimensions of this circle's destructive character that have entrapped and gradually warped the vision of a minority of artists, who deviate and refuse to banish integrity and social engagement from their creative process. Within this context, the description and function of Akosua Russell's circle within the frame of the novel is highly reminiscent of the profile that Wole Soyinka draws in "Climates of Art" for those who manage to control, dominate and direct the cultural apparatus in the continent:

the trusted indigenes are conspicuous as exemplars, elegantly robed and delicately perfumed, golden goblets refilled even before the concession of emptiness. Their supercilious smile, the scornful turn of the lip says, distinctly: He is the architect of his woes, he knows what to do to gain or regain entry into this congenial belt. On their rather distended chests are pinned ribbons and medals proclaiming national honours and citations. Commissions, pensions, estates and sinecures are obtained at the stroke of the pen. They are chairmen or members of every lucrative board, delegates on every government commission. ("Climates of Art" 248)

In this passage lies Soyinka's uncompromising critique of their all-pervasive influence in determining the modes and structures of the cultural enterprise. Taking advantage of their prerogative positions, they disrupt and misdirect the identified project of internal reconstruction, promoting instead a culture of nepotism, bribery and corruption.

The hermetic interiority of this circle betrays the politics of exclusion of those who dismiss their hegemonic code of behaviour: people are expected to "sing the praise of occasion, or observe the silences of convenience" (Soyinka, "Climates of Art" 248). That particular night in Armah's novel, among the guests who fail to abide by these rules is Adogboda, a young university student, and Lawrence Boateng, a young novelist. Adogboda, having attended these soirées for three consecutive months and still failing to get any information in relation to the workshops that were supposed to run, inquires about this issue publicly. Akosua Russel's dexterous handling of this question, one which silences and bypasses the student's query, raises murmurs among the audience and leaves the student "utterly confused", swallowing the remainder of his words. However, this event, although appropriately suppressed, triggers Lawrence Boateng's return to the scene. Boateng lives and writes from within the post-independence bureaucratic apparatus: as he informs Baako, his official position is the editor of *Jungle* magazine. However, he has been reduced to sub-editor as the staff in London seem to have an immense degree of control over his work. Additionally, the majority of publishers with whom he has been in contact have rejected his novel (written three years ago) and in the meantime, his daily contact with the sterility of the cultural arena has rendered him unproductive. The courage which he displays on the artists' night when he exposes the Scadlers and their African collaborators (such as Asante Smith and Akosua Russell) is indicative of his frustration and disillusionment. Boateng voices publicly the truth: that such soirées are nothing more but "a market where we're all sold. We are confused. There's money for this and that. Grants and so forth, but who swallows all this money? Everybody says it secretly, but I am tired of secrets and whispers" (115). Lazarus in his reading of the scene comments that Boateng "does not vent himself against the stranglehold that Russell and her sort exercise upon artistic production in Ghana, but chooses to rather accuse Russell, trivially, of exportation of foundation funds" (92). Whatever the motives or the consequences of his action are, what is at stake in this

incident is the indirect “climate of fear”, to use Soyinka’s phrase again, that censors and obfuscates the artistic subject. Even if Boateng’s explosion is limited to the realm of self-interest, touching upon issues that affect him personally, I read his endeavours as a desperate attempt that unveils “the cynical opportunism of a minority which internally exiles its own black artists ... to the state of non-existence. The state of non-persons” (Soyinka, *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage* 249). The hidden censorship that prevails and is buttressed by a relentless climate of fear and insecurity haunts the African writer, who realises that to confront the reality may entail fatal consequences: s/he may be judged, and his or her creativity may be jeopardized (249).

This is the dilemma that comes to inform Baako’s predicament in relation to his artistic vision. If the root causes of this anomalous reality are identified in the slavish mentality of the cultural elite, how could one address and resist this situation without digressing from one’s initial mission? This is one of the crucial issues staged in the novel in relation to artistic enterprise, for as Lazarus has astutely observed,

the problem is not only that one cannot simultaneously be both serious and successful. It is also that one requires a particularly tenacious intellect to cling to one’s artistic integrity in a cultural climate in which the canons of officialdom and general convention have been set in favour of decadence and exocentrism. (92)

In *Fragments* we are presented with two intellectual strategies in relation to how the artistic can remain faithful to his/her artistic values while working in this environment: these are represented by Ocran and Baako. Ocran, living and producing from within Ghana, has witnessed over and over again the withering of the contemporary art scene. Coming from this position, he warns Baako that in order to retain his integrity and social commitment, he has to “work alone” (81). Any aspirations for establishing a collaborative rapport between the members of the existing art community should be abandoned because “no-one is really interested in being serious” (81). Facing the creative circle’s indifference, the artist should better “accept the position of cultural marginality, withdraw into a private domain within which he is still free to express himself” (Lazarus 95). For Ocran, the sacrifice of art’s social role and the retreat into artistic isolation for the sake of his vision is a necessary predicament to avoid the corrupting influence of the existing artistic milieu.

However, it must be emphasised that Ocran's stance towards art doesn't preclude the political dimensions of his work nor does it obscure his intrinsic interest about its social relevance. When Baako visits his old master's studio, it becomes clear that far from surrendering to a condition of self-reflection, he has triumphed over society's pressures to conform, modifying his *bit of world* in accordance with the dictates of his internal necessity. The terracotta sculptures that frame his working space give expression to his committed vision. As Baako reports:

the walls were lined with rows of black heads in dozens of different attitudes from sweet repose to extreme agony. They had been arranged in some kind of rough order, so that the tension captured in the heads seemed progressively to grow less and less bearable, till near the end of the whole series, when Baako had almost arrived back at the beginning, the inward torture actually broke the outer form of the human face, and the result, when Baako looked closer, was not any new work of his master but the old, anonymous sculpture of Africa. (78)

Besides the creative importance of the agonising faces that capture the feeling of the transitory present and the turbulent past, what is of interest is Ocran's curatorial intervention. The tension accumulated by the array of deformed busts ostensibly culminates in a work that captures through the absolute dissolution of form the apogee of a tortured psyche. The fact that upon a closer look this piece turns out to be "the old, anonymous sculpture of Africa" conveys a quite radical political statement: in spite of the people's battles, hopes and aspirations, expectations and sacrifices, nothing has changed. Thus, even if due to their seclusion Baako's artworks don't expose social change, they do bear social witness and this is what counts.

In this context, Ocran's comment that Baako is haunted by "the ghost of the missionary, that bullies the artist" (80) when the latter informs him about his plan to work for television should not be regarded as a break with the traditional role of the artist in the African community. Ocran believes in this, but being aware of the dangers ahead in preparing an artwork that will reach the public, especially when dependent on commissions or support from the community, he prefers to work in isolation and therefore sacrifice the social utility of his art. Contra to this position though, for Baako "an intellectual's integrity derives finally from his social utility, and not his utility from

his integrity” (Lazarus 97). Abiding by the dictates of the traditional artist in Africa, he believes that if an artwork operates in an autonomous sphere of activity and fails to reach the audience, then it is as if it has lost its very *raison d’être*. Actually, as Lazarus has correctly pointed out, Baako’s artistic vocation aims at forging “a coherent oppositional cultural practice” (100) that appeals to, and motivates the masses.

In Baako’s quest for the democratisation and simplification of art, he chooses television as the best possible medium. Through this choice Armah doesn’t aim to deny the function of television as a useful weapon for the transmission of the Western Imperialist Logos, nor does he disassociate it from the fascination of the bourgeoisie with western technology. The fact that television is a western product, that “its principal function seems to be limited by transmitting the cultural and social codes of the West” (Whyte 189), has been uncompromisingly endorsed not only in *Fragments* but also in the *Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. However, at this particular stage, Armah seems to align himself with thinkers like Ngugi, who believe that such media can be appropriated and placed in the service of the people. Ngugi suggests “We can utilise all the resources at our disposal—radio, television, film, schools, universities, youth movements, farmers’ co-operatives—to create such a society. (The film especially has great possibilities in Africa, where many people are still illiterate)” (19). It is, thus, the democratic aspects of television that appeal to Baako’s sense of social commitment. When he presents to Ocran the benefits of making films, he emphasises this point, arguing that “Films get to everyone....In many ways, I’ve thought the chance of doing film scripts for an illiterate audience would be superior to writing, just as an artistic opportunity. It would be a matter of images, not words. Nothing necessarily foreign in images, not like English words” (81). The power of the image is treasured because it can reach the masses and transmit the most complicated concepts in a simple way, without words.

However, the benefits of a decisive break with a means of expression based on words don’t concern the illiterate masses only; Baako values the potential of the visual medium because of its intrinsic ability to impose “itself on the reader’s imagination with all the force and directness of the visual image” (Whyte 193). This quality is of vital importance when we take into consideration the purpose of his work, which is engaged in shedding light upon the root causes of the political situation in Ghana. And this task forces him to

reach beyond the present. The severity of the daily crisis Baako encounters urges him to confront the “absence of connectedness” (L.A. Johnson 67) between the present and the past. Thus, when he introduces his work to the production meeting at Ghanavision, he announces that it is about “Slavery”, justifying his thematic choice by arguing that it represents a “central part” of their culture (146). The two script synopses Baako writes reproduce in miniature the fundamental conflicts dealt with in *Fragments*. Both “The Brand” and “The Root”, in posing slavery as the dominant metaphor, aim at exposing the linkage between “historical and contemporary bondage in Ghana” (Lurie 34). By contesting the process of erasure of memory, Baako’s scripts pose history as the main route to a probable solution, since it offers answers to the current conditions of slavery to which his people have succumbed.

And it is primarily the specific historical impetus prioritised in Baako’s work that renders words inadequate. How does one represent and approach slavery without lessening its horror, without sanitising it and thus making it trivial? How does one reconstruct a past reality whose horrific dimensions cannot be conceptualised? As I mentioned in the previous chapter with reference to slavery’s traumatic hold in the community, the magnitude of slavery serves to dismantle the connection between language and memory. These events are informed by a discursive deadlock, in which language and conventional narrative representation are no longer able to express the horror of the experience. The difficulty then resides in finding a “politics of aesthetics” that will succeed in addressing the horror of a past event, respecting and recognising, at the same time, its unrepresentable nature that denies the framing and normalisation by common discursive constructions. This is the problematic that partly informs Lyotard’s text *Heidegger and “the Jews”*⁴⁷, where he suggests that the danger of rendering narratable the ineffable lies in the fact that

⁴⁷ My choice of *Heidegger and “the Jews”* as an appropriate methodological tool for the reading of a post-colonial African novel is based on the author’s and David Carroll’s foreword to the text: both emphasise that “the Jews” “a name that is always plural, in quotation marks, and in lower case” refers “neither to a nation, nor to a political, philosophical, or religious figure or subject;” it rather addresses the continuous othering of “a heterogeneous nonpeople obligated to the memory of what cannot be represented” (xii). Framed within such a politics of interpretation, the seemingly specific centre of Lyotard’s text becomes a figuration that includes the Jews, but does not *exclude* the predicament of other “forgotten” peoples, whose present is haunted by the burden of an unbearable past.

Whenever one represents, one inscribes in memory, and this might seem a good defence against forgetting. It is, I believe, just the opposite. Only that which has been inscribed can, in the current sense of the term, be forgotten, because it could be effaced. (26)

In Lyotard's sense, a historical narrative that inscribes the past can translate a horrific historical moment as manageable and thus render it anecdotal. As a result, history will lose its unrepresentability, which rendered it sublime. According to Lyotard, the alternative to the narrativising of traumatic events is not a pious silence, which obstructs all historical reflection and critical thinking, but, as Carroll David argues, alternative "forms of thinking and writing that do not forget the fact of the forgotten and the unrepresentable," (1990, xiii), a position, in other words, that invites novel "politics of aesthetics" that derive their impetus from the recognition of the traumatic event's unrepresentability.

In *Fragments* Baako resolves the problem of remembering and addressing the ramifications of slavery without betraying his responsibility with respect to its unrepresentability, through the use of symbolic images that provide an index of the unsaid. Slavery is present through its absence, framing and haunting the two scripts as a metaphor and an image, respectively, and it follows the formula of allusion, suggesting that this happened in the past "but it might well have happened here today, and it might happen tomorrow" (Fanon, *The Wretched* 193). In the first script, for example, the opening frame juxtaposes the wretched black residents of a black circle, upon which has been superimposed a white square, populated by white people. With these two dominant shapes in the background, the script dramatises the attempts of a protagonist, the hero, "as he tries to bridge, by way of climbing on a human ladder, the distance" (Whyte 193) separating the weak circle of the oppressed from those who inhabit the square. Yet, the hero's mission fails as soon as he reaches his destination. The internalisation of the square's values are reinforced by the manoeuvres of those who inhabit the square, who "ROAM THE CIRCLE IN COMPACT CORPS, SELECTING AT INTERVALS PROSPECTIVE CLIMBERS, ISOLATING THEM WITH REPEATED RITUALS OF CONGRATULATION AND SUSTAINED PRAISE" (150).

On a first level of interpretation, the script offers a critique of the intelligentsia's betrayal as embodied in the dependency complex that has surfaced in their consciousness. These people rise to a power position in the name of liberating the masses. Yet, during the process, they identify with those who are in power and they end up keeping their people in the same defeated state. However, the script opens itself up to more interpretations once seen in the light of its title: "the brand". Baako explains that the inspirational source for this script was the words of Doctor Aggrey, one of the nation's grandfathers, who had commented "I am a brand plucked from the burning" (147). In appropriating this sentence Baako exposes that the branded condition of the elite, those whom western education had favoured by plucking them from the suffering masses, leads to a new form of slavery. The branding alludes to the dehumanising physical technique practised by European slavers as a way of imposing masterly rights over the slaves. The rationale behind the marking of human beings as pieces of property was to solidify and seal their function as commodities. Within the managerial structures of the plantation farms the slaves were reduced to livestock and their *raison d'être* was to guarantee the financial prosperity of the slave-owners and, in some cases, to augment their capital. Similarly, Baako's script alludes to the slavish condition of the elite, who remain branded like slaves under western supremacy. This metaphor not only compels the elite to confront their humiliating status but also to make the community aware of the horrific parameters of its role and function within the social and cultural frame. Their branded status reveals that they are the white masters' intellectual property and that consequently their actions will secure their profit.

The opening sequence of the second script, "The Root", sustains the juxtaposition between black and white. In the first shot a row of white pillars "assault the viewer's eyes" (145) and remain purposefully abstract, oscillating between "rows of soldiers at attention" or "the white crosses of a military cemetery" (146). Sharp dissonant sounds accompany the white agents' violent attacks against a circular viscous expanse of darkness. The abstract quality of the aforementioned images gradually zooms in to a concrete setting: the dark fishing village that is overshadowed by the vast white structure of Elmina's slave castle.

LS: OVERVIEW, COASTAL VILLAGE, QUIET, CIRCULAR, DARK.

NIGHT.

ON HILL IN DISTANCE, MASSIVE WHITE STRUCTURE OF SLAVE CASTLE.

MS: SECTION OF CASTLE,
GUNS POINTING OVER VILLAGE,
PILE OF CANNON BALLS BESIDE THEM.

SENTRY PACING.

CUT TO VILLAGE.

HOUSE WITH ROUND WINDOW OPENING TO SMALL VIEW OF CASTLE.

THREE WOMEN AND TWO MEN SITTING, STARING MUTE AT FLOOR.

CHILD LOOKING OUT THROUGH WINDOW. (146)

Confronting the viewer with these images, “The Root” opens up the question of history’s viability in the present through an exploration of slavery, silence and violence. In this script, Baako labours to expose that violence is not an integral part of the African communities; rather, it was originally imposed from outside, by the white oppressors, who came to dominate, enslave and exploit. The white exploiters’ brutality is transmitted through the presence of the white soldiers, their sharp weapons and the cannon balls. In this way, the screen becomes the site of violence, the locus of the reconstruction of horror where history is exposed and then transfigured. The directness of the images invites a re-enactment of the original brutality that will hopefully free the community from its collapse and entrapment in cycles of violence and degradation. The closing scene is telling as to the detrimental effects of slavery in the community. The muteness of the people—contrasted with the cacophonous sounds of the previous attacks—becomes not only emblematic of their defeat, but also a feature that expresses the difficulty of framing the historical event of slavery in a semantic structure other than an image. Similarly, the community’s frustration, symbolized by the people’s downward gaze, becomes intensified in the image of the little child looking out of the window. His fixed gaze towards the white massive structure of the slave castle confronts the audience with a number of “unuttered questions” that concern the historical function of the slave castle itself, as well as the present and the future of the community. These questions cannot be answered unless the history of slavery is critically retrieved and examined and its lasting effects measured against the present milieu.

Significantly, however, neither of these two scripts makes it to the production room. Asante Smith, who presides over Ghanavision's meetings and is responsible for these decisions, proves to be the male replica of Akosua Russel. Introduced as "the sweetest tongue in all of Ghana for singing his master's praises" (46), he has established in Ghanavision the same "climate of fear", sterility and disorientation that we have encountered in every other Ghanaian institutional context. His pompous statement "We're engaged in a gigantic task of nation building. We have inherited a glorious culture, and that's what we're here to deal with" (147), which asserts the ideal function of these institutions as producing and screening viable ideological, social and political programmes, becomes a farcical statement once tested against his actions. Baako's scripts, being firstly judged as having "peculiar concerns," are finally rejected on the basis that "they have no film or tape for drama" (150). As we learn in retrospect, all the available film equipment will be used for the higher cause of "taking pictures of the Head of State" (150).

We also learn, for example, that expatriates are given preference in job hiring over trained African personnel and that Janet Scaldar has a disturbing degree of influence over what happens to scripts submitted to Ghanavision (Lurie 33). As Baako reports,

a script on Slavery had been done, accepted, approved, stamped and routinely filed. It would have gotten lost unused, except that the Scaldar woman saw it, said she liked it and decided to turn it into theatre. There was a white man in the script, the enslaver, helped by a bloated African chieftain and his trinket-wearing court of parasites. In the Scaldar woman's play the white man disappeared, to be replaced by a brutish whip-swinging African, and the whole thing became purely a free-for-all among yelling tribal savages. It was dully filmed for Ghanavision. (132)

Ghanavision films the script only after Janet Scaldar has resurrected and staged it as theatre, after trivialising the screenplay's initial thematic exposition of Atlantic slave trade into 'purely a free-for all among yelling tribal savages'. In this way, history is deliberately falsified through the suppression and misrepresentation of historic evidence. The role of the European trader, as the initiator and main agent of the slave trade, is not only silenced but completely and utterly distorted to the extent of transferring the stigma of blame exclusively to the African involvement in the supply of slaves. The initial

screenplay's categorical disavowal of the indigenous population's implication in the slave trade, portrayed as a group of parasites, has been altered, presenting the condition of Slavery as if resulting from the barbarous habits of the savage Ghanaians. And this change dramatises the role of cinema "as trauma", as a medium that enhances the psychic rupture and inferiority complex of the native, for it elicits "disrupting" and "ambivalent identifications" with negative representations of blackness that denigrate and annihilate the self (Kaplan, "Fanon, Trauma and Cinema" 150). From the stand point of the spirit of the era, that is the period of independence, when Ghana has just been liberated from the colonial yoke, the initial script could function as a cautionary tale for the Ghanaian people, stressing the negative impact of dissension and division within the community once threatened by alien forces. Yet, any possible gesture towards shaping a sustaining and nurturing sense of identity that could re-historicize the masses and emphasise the importance of internal union is condemned and doomed from the beginning.

Within the world of *Fragments* the memory of transatlantic slavery, and the reclamation of its legacy in the contemporary post-colonial scene, remains a "fragment" of silence. In this way, the novel's title does not only capture the political condition of the present but alludes to the fragments of history, to these stories whose deafening silence haunt and fragment the present. As we saw, Naana's "unuttered" mnemonic fragmentations become not only a metaphor for the fractured past, but also the impossibility to articulate its legacy in the public sphere. Similarly, although Baako's attempts at expressing what lies latent in the silence of its horror are censored by an apparatus that has decided to keep the past safely in the past, his two scripts have opened up the path for the retrieval of impossible narratives, of absent, forgotten stories made possible by silence. And so does Armah through his novel. The history of transatlantic slave trade cannot be narrated, and even if it can, it will always be a story of silence, but its memory can be rescued by recovering forgotten unities.

Chapter 4

The Bodies of Slavery in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*

Who is a slave, if not a person who, everywhere and always,
possesses life, property, and body as if they were alien things?
Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*

This chapter marks the passage from Ghana to Nigeria, signalling, at the same time, the last destination of this study. The overwhelming presences of the slave castles on the Gold Coast has inspired historian Van Dantzig to describe the region as “an ancient shopping centre” (qtd. in Bailey 17), and Robin Law and Kristin Mann to add that “the two principal ports of embarkation for slaves in the region were Ouidah and Lagos” (307). These historical accounts underscore the scale of commercial activity that was taking place in these ports, and elicit images of the slave-markets as sites that were inundated by the haunting presences of black enslaved bodies. Thus, Armah’s spatial descriptions of post-Independence Accra as a site of pain and violence give way to Emecheta’s depiction, in *The Slave Girl*, of the slave markets as scapes of multiple deaths; and *Fragments*’ call to re-member the silent, but not silenced, body of history encoded in the spectral silhouettes of the white slave castles is complemented by *The Slave Girl*’s urge to re-inscribe the stories of black enslaved female bodies that slavery’s history has put under erasure, but not fully effaced.

Buchi Emecheta’s *The Slave Girl* narrates the life in bondage of a young Igbo girl, Ogbanje Ojebeta, who, after her parents’ sudden death, is sold into slavery by one of her brothers. Having detailed Ojebeta’s life in bondage, the narrative ends with her eventual return to her village, after the death of her mistress. Yet, far from delineating a glorious passage from slavery to freedom, Ojebeta’s return to her community is marked by the bitter realisation that her “name was almost forgotten after a while, so much so that people muddled the facts and said she had died with her parents and *been secretly buried*” (79, emphasis added). The inscription of Ojebeta’s story constitutes Emecheta’s attempt to disrupt this pacifying dis-membering, and to reconstitute “herstory” in history.

Ojebeta's "secretly buried body" is retrieved and resurrected from the repressed/falsified communal unconscious, and is offered the space to assume a spectral presence that narrates an (alter)native story. This story, a story of silence and invisibility, of memory and forgetting, of "living-dead" bodies that have been subjected to multiple oppressive forces, discloses the black woman's enslaved body as another "site of suffering",⁴⁸ of multiple political, historical and social inscriptions that haunt "the short memory of the people" (76).

To haunt "forgetting" from the marginal site of the black woman's enslaved body, from the perspective of "the outsider within",⁴⁹ is not only to expose "the hegemonic oppressive structures within their communities from the marginal position, but also the dominant power structures from which they emanate" (Collins 15). Thus, the first haunting Ojebeta performs addresses the site of colonial modernity and its impact on the female predicament. If the African woman has been silenced and treated as a commodity, her silence has been "engendered through a particular historical violence, this of slavery" (Anim-Addo 9). In Emecheta's autobiographical work *Head Above Water* (1986), the voicelessness of the black woman's experience, during and after slavery, is enmeshed in Africa's alleged lack of historicity that is used as a justification for enslavement:

Big mother in Ibusa did not use a typewriter since her stories were simply for us, the children in her compound. And that was one of the big misconceptions about Mother Africa: because she did not write down her stories and her experiences, people of the West are bold enough to say she has no history. (59- 60)

Emecheta's use of the mother Africa trope does not render the female body allegorical or abstract to satisfy colonial or national purposes, neither does it subscribe to generic images of Africa as "savage and treacherous" or "warm, sensuous, fruitful and nurturing" (Stratton 40); rather, it exposes its historical erasure by colonial forces. In this sense, Ojebeta's narrative, much like the narratives of Emecheta's other heroines,⁵⁰ doesn't simply "write back" (in Rushdie's much quoted formulation) to Eurocentric discourses of

⁴⁸ This phrase is taken from Derrida's *The Specters of Marx* where in his scathing critique of capitalism and Enlightenment he argues that "no degree of progress allows one to ignore that never before, in absolute figures, never have so many men, women, and children been subjugated, starved, or exterminated on the earth" (85).

⁴⁹ Although Collins develops this term to address the specificities of African-American women, it can be appropriated within an African context to describe the multiple fronts African women have to fight against.

⁵⁰ See Emecheta's appropriation and subversion of the "mother Africa trope" in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

colonial and imperial designs,⁵¹ but promulgates the multiple markings on her body as an alternative site that revises the archives of Western Historiography.⁵² Such a form of haunting undoes forgetting and dismissal of female experience, and refashions history, by way of recording, and thus legitimizing, the voices of silenced others.

At the same time, Ojebeta's story haunts another form of forgetting that exposes the workings of a latent social slavery. Emecheta's diving into the wrecks of history,⁵³ to evoke Adrienne Rich's poem, from the site of the gendered, racialised subaltern subject signifies the "resurrection of possibilities wrecked by the historiography of patriarchy" (Radhakrishnan, *The Human* 54). As Emecheta explains in her autobiographical novel *Head Above Water*, Ojebeta's story was inspired by the life story of her mother, who is eulogised in the following way:

My mother, Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta Emecheta, that laughing, loud voiced, six-foot-tall, black glossy slave girl, who as a child suckled the breasts of her dead mother; my mother who lost her parents when the nerve gas was exploded in Europe, a gas that killed thousands of innocent Africans who knew nothing about the Western First World War; my laughing mother, who forgave a brother that sold her to a relative in Onitsha so that he could use the money to buy *ichafo siliki*—silk head ties for his coming-of-age dance. My mother ... that slave girl who had the courage to free herself and return to her people in Ibuza, and still stooped and *allowed the culture of her people to re-enslave her*, and then permitted Christianity to tighten the knot of enslavement. (*Head above Water* 3, emphasis added)

Through Ojebeta's narrative, Emecheta traces the ways through which the female body is inscribed by culture and turned into an object of domination and control. Her black body, which "is nothing but a shuttling symptom between treacherous and seductive

⁵¹ For studies on Western philosophy's discourse on race, see Emanuel Eze's reader *Race and Enlightenment*, which recontextualises the discussion on race within the philosophical and intellectual legacy of European Enlightenment.

⁵² Having said this, it is interesting to quote from Carla A. B Joseph's "Nation Because of Difference," which argues that in contrast to the work of authors from the West Indies, Emecheta's narratives "are grounded in specificities of culture—Igbo, Yoruba, Nigeria—and *do not carry the burden of slave experience*, but respond to national, economic, and patriarchal exploitation, as well as racial exploitation in the context of migration" (emphasis added). I hope this chapter, through its material exploration of slavery's history in Emecheta's novel, will prove the opposite.

⁵³ I allude here to Adrienne Rich's poem "Diving in the Wreck". See Radhakrishnan's astute reading of the poem in his *History, the Human, and the World Between* (56- 60) for the connections between Emecheta's and Rich's turn to History.

sovereignties” (Radhakrishnan, *The Human* 92), shifts the focus of attention from the personal and singular to the historical and communal, thus binding together “her story of oppression with a long history of female exploitation” (Karavanta, “The Global, the Local & the Spectral” 170). Ojebeta’s embodied experience problematises a patriarchal discourse that de-legitimises female experience.

In the struggle for the articulation of critical intervention, Emecheta’s novels complement the attempts of other “black women historians” who, as Adrienne Rich has suggested, “are making sure that the Black woman can no longer be severed from the context in history, who are making sure that she has a written history which will not be subsumed under the experience either of white women or of white or Black men” (“Resisting Amnesia” 149).⁵⁴ These women form a “political community” (Ekolito 151), whose body of literature is concerned to critically intervene in traditional culture and Western discourse. Writing from the site of the margins, their narratives draw attention to conditions of oppression, and expose how these injustices are part of a larger pattern of complex social and economic causes. Their turn to history is not a “romantic” or “nostalgic” look at the past; they don’t rely on the act of “merely breaking silences” and “telling tales”, but resist amnesia by becoming consciously historical, by assuming, that is, a form of “historical responsibility [that] has, after all, to do with action—where we place the weight of our existences on the line, cast our lot with others, move from an individual consciousness to a collective one” (“Resisting Amnesia” 145, emphasis added). Black women’s sense of historical responsibility attests to their historical and social intervention, to their yearning towards de-mythologized representations, and the possibility of change these representations may afford.

And it is not accidental that in her revisionist project Emecheta chooses to “begin not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body” (Rich, “The Politics of Location” 213). The act of re-vision pre-empts, as Radhakrishnan

⁵⁴ My use of the work of Adrienne Rich, a white, middle class, lesbian woman as a theoretical framework within which to consider the problematic surrounding the predicament of an African female writer like Emecheta is partly based on Rich’s political agenda with regards to issues of gender and sexual subalternity, and partly on her recognition of her “white skin” as a burden to “places it has not let her go” (216). Rich’s self-reflexive attitude towards her whiteness as a “point of location for which she has to take responsibility”, “saves her”, as Radhakrishnan suggests in *History, the Human and the World Between*, “from a potential blindness to macro-politics” of colonialism, international division of labour e.t.c.” ().

notes, the need to “think a different history”, that requires “different tools, strategies, and a different sense of space” (Radhakrishnan, *Theory in an Uneven World* 26). This new space should accommodate the “different histories and knowledges that have been subjugated too long—constrained to exist in darkness as gaps, holes, and ‘ineffables’ within the body of dominant historiography”, and need to “be imagined in excess of and in advance of actual history in the name of experiences that are real but lacking in legitimacy” (27). The female body, historically silenced and ignored as a locus of uneven operations of power, provides the space to start ‘thinking history differently’. It can become another “struggle concept” that articulates “historical matrices of intelligibility that display the relations among apparently disconnected entities and thus enable us to grasp the logic of domination that underlies the seemingly disparate and isolated experiences of individuals in culture” (Ebert 32). The urge to produce a narrative that looks back at history from the site of the female body aims “not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it” (Rich, “The Politics of Location” 213), and through this reclaiming to “gain agency even at the site of such silencing” (Carr 75). To produce, in Peter Brooks’ words, “the semioticization of the body which is matched by a somatisation of story” and to suggest “that the body must be a source and a locus of meaning, and that stories cannot be told without making the body the primal vehicle of narrative signification” (xii), is to situate “corporeal mappings of the subject into cultural systems” (Bukatman 88), and to present these narratives of oppression as symptomatic somatizations of local and global concerns.

Emecheta’s focus on the female body can be traced through the majority of her works;⁵⁵ in *The Bride Price* the image of the woman as a commodity is constructed through the epistemology and injurious custom of bride price that reduce her heroine Aku-nna to a marketable property. Aku-nna’s life is burdened by the domination of her uncle, whom her mother marries after her first husband’s death, and his pre-arranged plan to marry her to Okoshi. Aku-nna rebels against the normative patriarchal code of her community and runs away with Chike, her male teacher who is equally marginalized as a

⁵⁵ Emecheta’s prolific status as a writer (she has produced seventeen novels) makes an elaborate review of her work impossible within the limited space of this thesis. I have, thus, chosen to briefly outline her feminist concerns in two novels, *The Bride Price* and *The Joys of Motherhood*, whose main themes re-emerge in *The Slave Girl*.

descendant of slaves (stigmatised in traditional Igbo communities). Their double unauthorised marriage (for Chike is a descendant of slaves and Aku-nna's bride price has not been paid) continues to plague the new couple after they settle in the urban centre of Lagos. Patriarchy's hold over Aku-nna is evident through the legend that has come to haunt her life: "If a girl wishes to live long and see her children's children, she must accept the husband chosen for her by her people...if the bride price was not paid, she would never survive the birth of her first child" (168). The prophecy comes to pass, and after her death, Akku-nna's body undergoes further erasing; her story remains in the communal oral archives to reinforce the threat of grim results for women who make their own choices. While for future generations Aku-nna's example will be used to prove that the gods punished disobedient daughters, few will question the actual reasons behind her death and fewer will construe it as the result of a systematic injustice and oppression that condemns the "disobedient others" to become outcasts or "living dead". Attributing Aku-nna's death to a stratified system that condemned the couple to a wretched life, Emecheta's narrative presents a scathing critique of patriarchal laws that commodify female subjectivity and feature corporeal regimes to regulate citizenship, marriage and education.

The issue of the gendered, racialised subaltern's inscription, appropriation and silencing by patriarchal structures is also central to *The Joys of Motherhood*. In Nnu Ego Emecheta presents the image of the African mother distilled from the romanticized and beautified aspects the matriarch usually acquires within the African context. Charting Nnu Ego's initiation to the 'joys' of motherhood through a phase of infertility that defines her as a half-woman and leads her to an aborted suicide, Emecheta highlights the instrumental function of women within a patriarchal system that values their roles as reproducers. Having internalised her society's value system and spent a life in service to "professional motherhood", Nnu Ego dies in loneliness with no child or friend to hold her hand, for having been busy "building the joys" (224) of motherhood, she has isolated herself from the wider community. Her dedication to motherhood earns her the "noisiest and most costly" burial in Ibuza and she is regarded by the next generation as a deity. Yet Nnu Ego's refusal, in her role as a deity, to grant women's requests for children, means that some come to regard her as evil: "Stories afterward, ..., said that Nnu Ego was a

wicked woman even in death, because however many people appealed to her to make women fertile, she never did” (224). Her facile accommodation under the “wicked woman” stereotype silences the reasons behind Nnu Ego’s refusal to annex more women to the state of motherhood, which is the realization that she has fed her children on “her life” (186). The articulation that her “love and duty for her children were like her chain of slavery” (186) links her predicament with the slave woman’s who is her *chi*—to whom I will return later on in this chapter—and unveils her reified/enslaved status to patriarchal hegemonies.

Equally, in *The Slave Girl* Emecheta displays a steady commitment to rooting out the multiple manifestations of oppression that impact upon and silence female bodies. Although, like in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the metaphoric significance of slavery as a sign of women’s subjugation to patriarchy is retained, in this novel slavery acquires further material dimensions as the historical destiny of Nigerian women. This is an important element that has been overlooked by the majority of literary critics, who approach Emecheta’s narrative along gender lines, and relegate slavery to a metonymic structure of oppression. Yet, Emecheta’s insistence on the historical reality of slavery, demands another reading for it directly confronts the institution of slavery. Thus, although my critical response to the novel acknowledges that the issues that occupy the localities of Emecheta’s characters are inseparable from the larger patriarchal projects of which they are part, I also argue that to silence the novel’s interrogation of the history of slavery is to re-enact the forgetting Ojebeta’s people display/perform after her return to the village: the forgetting of the History of slavery and the questions it raises for the local communities and regarding modernity’s Imperial designs.

In reading *The Slave Girl* as an instantiation of the attempt to rethink and remember the history of slavery from the locus of the black female body, this chapter explores how Emecheta’s restaging of the enslaved body necessitates the critical revisiting of the politics of its exclusion. My focus on a number of manifestations of forgetting recorded in the novel, which reveal the silenced individual stories inscribed by the history of slavery in Nigeria, attends to Emecheta’s attempt to recover the “othered” female bodies of slavery’s history. I thus begin with an exploration of the historical/ideological conditions that facilitate the forgetting of the enslaved female body. The narrative’s

elaborate accounts of the flow of white capital in the region provide a critique of materialism that, as we will see, evades the question of ethics and responsibility. The imploding ramifications of local communities' complicity with the trafficking of black flesh are further analysed in the second section, which explores the question of gender more systematically. Having first explored how *The Slave Girl's* narrative speaks to local histories of female oppression, I turn to Emecheta's blunt confrontation of merchant women's complicity with hegemonic designs. As I argue, their uncritical surrender to patriarchy and capitalism results in a double forgetting: not only towards their unfortunate sisters, whom they exploit and reify, but also towards their communities. The conditions that surround the slave girls' life in bondage and their condemnation to a 'life in death' are addressed in the final section through a reading of Agamben's formulation of "bare life". The specificities of the historical subjects presented in the novel speak to what Agamben's formulation excludes from his otherwise thought provoking argument, and problematise his controversial contemplation on the issue of agency. Reading the slave girls' spectral manifestations in the novel as the return of the bodies that have been constantly under erasure, but never erased, I end with a meditation on the question of the political and agency through the site of the spectre, of the body that returns to claim the right to life of which it has been violently deprived.

**Once upon a Time, When the Red Covered Half of the Global Map,
There Were Still Slaves...**

“You don't fire cannons when an ordinary man dies.
Cannons can be seen only in wealthy men's houses.
Cannons are the sign of greatness. Boom! boom! boom!...
Now, the shooting of the cannon did not only announce the death of a great man,
but also announced the great man's ancestors
had dealings with the white men, who dealt in slaves”
Flora Nwapa, *Efuru*

The Slave Girl's story unfolds within a time frame of almost thirty years and is set in a moment of transition, when British Imperial forces invaded and colonised the region. This event signifies a turbulent phase in Nigerian history as it marks, among a great number of social, geopolitical and economic changes, the last phase of domestic slavery.

Nigeria's annexation to the British Empire signalled the beginning of the end for domestic slavery, which was still exercised in the region as the remnant of economic relations developed during the transatlantic slave trade. Finding impossible to eradicate an institution that was well rooted in indigenous cultures, and was further strengthened by the transatlantic trade, Frederick Lugard, Nigeria's British administrator, introduced a "poll-tax-type" system that "was compelling the local slavers to pay for their slaves".⁵⁶ Being sanctioned by law to sell them, the local masters were gradually forced to find alternative financial arrangements that eventually resulted in the emancipation of the slaves. Such a dynamic transformation brought to the surface the ruins of an old and dying system revealing the interconnectedness of global and local legacies in the constitution of domestic slavery. Thus, although Ojebeta's story is set at the beginning of the twentieth century "when the reign of the great Queen Victoria's son was coming to its close, when the red of the British Empire covered almost half the map of the world,... and Nigeria was taken over by Great Britain" (15), its time line stretches back to the beginning of transatlantic slavery, a period that signals the emergence of global commercial networks.

The presentation of slavery as part of a "continuum of relations" and a "combination of elements" that implicate both external and internal forces (Miers & Kopytoff 69) has been explored in the previous chapters of this thesis.⁵⁷ Coker, for instance, in *The Last Harmattan* exemplifies how Fatmatta is captured by indigenous slavers, and sent to the

⁵⁶ See Hogendorn, Jan S. & Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Reform of Slavery in Early Colonial Northern Nigeria," *The End of Slavery in Africa*, eds. Suzanne Miers & Richard L. Roberts, 391- 414, especially pages 400-407. In addition to this article, see Hogendorn's and Lovejoy's extended research on the issue of taxation in *Slow Death for Slavery*, and particularly the section "The Colonial economy and the Slaves" (199- 233) where they offer an excellent historical analysis that details how the introduction of the "poll tax" system didn't only force the masters to "liberate" some slaves, but was applied to the newly manumitted slaves, who had to pay off both their masters and the colonial administration for their freedom. In addition, the taxation was introduced as the best possible way to gradually transform the former slaves into a civic body with prescribed duties to the State. Lugard's statement about the "moral charter of independence" is worth quoting at length:

Direct taxation, ... as being the State recognition of the rights and responsibilities of the individual, is the moral charter of independence of a people. Communities, however, who have only recently emerged from such a state of servitude, are not, at first, wholly fit to appreciate those rights and assume those duties, and they take some time to acquire the sense of responsibility and its obligations. (qtd. in Hogendorn & Lovejoy 173)

⁵⁷ See Miers & Kopytoff's "African 'Slavery as an Institution of Marginality,'" in *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives*, (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1977), especially pages 67- 73.

plantations in the Americas. Similarly, Aidoo in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* comments on the internal involvement with the slave trade as the evasion of responsibility, and points to a lack of resistance towards the slave raids in the region. Finally, Armah in *Fragments*, through Nana's testimony, criticises the materialist drive of his ancestors, who for the sake of "easy wealth", sold their brothers and sisters to the European traders. Equally, Emecheta's narrative offers elaborate accounts of her ancestors' collaboration with the white slavers, but the complexities of the historical period she chooses to focus allow her to advance her critique one step further to outline "the power of the ideological determinants of the specific historical period and socioeconomic confluence at which her characters are caught" (Odamten 50). Thus, before exploring the ways through which the black female bodies are inscribed by a number of hegemonies, the post-abolition functioning of slavery's institution in Nigerian communities proliferates an exploration of the historical, economic and ideological conditions that surround and have produced these bodies during, and before, the chronological unfolding of the novel's action. Besides shedding light on the circumstances that significantly contribute to the situations presented in Emecheta's story, such an inquiry "provides a more complex history of the 'route work' of modernity itself" (Lesjak 137), in which the history of capitalism and the ideological infiltration of indigenous communities plays a dominant role. As I will argue, the insidious incursion of Western values in the region results in the ultimate form of forgetting: the forgetting of the question of responsibility towards those bodies that are sold and abused in the name of materialism.

In *The Slave Girl*, slavery's prominence as a cultural institution haunts both oral tradition and living memory. The opening lines of the narrator ⁵⁸—who much like the "bird on the wayside" in Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* has access to the legendary and the real, the mythical and the historical—return to a time when "History was not written" and "there was little division between myth and reality" (20), to narrate the deeds of Great King of Idu, Oba Idu. Oba Idu's power and wealth is accumulated and

⁵⁸ For engaging discussions of orality in Emecheta's novel see Tom Spencer-Walters, "Orality and Patriarchal Dominance in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*," and Susan Arndt, "Buchi Emecheta and the Tradition of Ifo," in *Emerging Perspectives on Buchi Emecheta*, ed. Maria Umeh (Trenton: Africa World Press., 1996).

sustained through the trading of slaves with neighbouring tribes and the “pale skin Potokis”, the white men. As the narrator explains,

so renowned was this king that peoples from all regions of the world came to trade with him. The Potokis came to buy slaves, the Gambaris from the north came to sell their captives, Ibo came to sell ivory and sometimes to sell those members of their societies who had committed sins abominable. (21)

The King’s legendary reputation, described with a mixture of awe and fear, is further exemplified by the terrifying rumours circulated about the likely fate of those who dared to approach his kingdom, for “if you were caught along these bush tracks, you were either killed as a human sacrifice to one of the king’s innumerable gods or, if you were lucky, you would be sold to the pale-skinned “Potokis” (20).

The mythic proportions of Oba Idu’s power and wealth create a striking contrast once compared to the status of present-day slavers. Okolie, for instance, Ojebeta’s brother, has vivid memories of his grandfather’s involvement in the trafficking of black flesh “when the human market was at its height” (38). In particular, he recalls that when “his grandfather [was] coming home with strings of captives”, the lucky ones “were kept as house slaves, but most of them were either taken down to Bonny or sold to people going to Idu” (38). Additionally, we learn that the women in Onitsa market aspire to follow the examples of their fathers and grandfathers, whose trading with the Westerns was so profitable, “that the abundance of capital and property that had built could still be seen in many families round Onitsa and Bonny and Port Harcourt” (58). The “matter of fact” admission of human trafficking here projects slavery as a prominent, unsanctioned institution that has spread in the region, and whose ethical parameters remain unquestioned. Slavery is deprived of its mythic proportions, or exceptional status, and has become part of everyday life. Yet, the difference between the “then” and the “now” is not only the difference between the “mythical” and the “factual”, but also the difference between the “there” and the “here”. As we are informed, slavery doesn’t take place at “the end of the world” (19), at the point “where the blue sky touched the earth” (21), and it is not necessary to “cross seven lands ... and seven seas” (21) to be endangered; rather, slave raiding and trafficking is exercised in the communities, and among the members of these communities. Okolie’s childhood recollections of women’s kidnapping “in the

middle of the night when they went out to their toilet” (38) reveal the uncontrolled expansion of the slave raids that undermine, as Rodney suggests, the symmetrical conditions of trade: “it was through warfare, trickery, banditry, and kidnapping. When one tries to measure the effect of European slave trading on the African continent, it is essential to realize that one is measuring the effect of *social violence* rather than trade in any normal sense” (“The Unequal Partnership” 135-136, emphasis added).

The missing link between these two phases is the chronological shift from a period in which slavery was limited and regulated by the Africans to an era in which the increasingly aggressive global capitalist system radically changed the conditions of both trade and supply. During the latter period, the rising demand for slaves in the expanding plantation systems in American and Caribbean colonies made slave trafficking accessible to “the many”. Its widespread circulation was mainly fostered by the flow of white capital in the region that ensured “easy wealth” for everyday people, like Ojebeta’s grandfather. Miers and Kopytoff’s analysis of the European trade’s impact on the social and economic structure of African communities is pertinent here. As they suggest, “greater possibilities of use tend to encourage the acquisition of more persons. Greater rewards in some spheres of activity will tend to shift their use in that direction. A rise in the number of transactions will open up new niches for middlemen ...” (“African ‘Slavery as an Institution of Marginality’ 71), and so forth. Miers and Kopytoff recognise the importance of such systemic relations, on the grounds that “changes in some elements can bring profound transformations to the total configuration” (71), but their main focus rests on questioning the material effects of slavery in the region. Although the impact of the overseas slave trade in the local communities will be assessed further down, what is important here is that by focusing on the materiality of slavery’s institution, Miers and Kopytoff overlook the fact that the rise of “entrepreneurship” was accompanied by the ideological baggage of Western materialism that informed, reshaped, and finally assimilated the local community to a new set of values and beliefs.

The insidious contamination of the values of the African communities by Western materialism, and its lasting, devastating effects even after slavery was abolished by the West, is criticised in a number of points in the novel. The most prominent illustration takes place when the narrator unveils Okolie’s motives behind Ojebeta’s selling into

slavery. Being driven by an urge to make memorable his “coming of age dance”, he intends to use the money fetched by his sister’s trading “to buy a new horn pipe, and some women’s head-scarves which he would have to tie around his waist for the dance. He would also need string cowries and little bells for his feet” (41). Okolie’s obsession with material objects that lead him to proceed with selling his younger sister into slavery recalls, according to the narrator, “those days when it was easy for the European to urge the chief of a powerful village to wage war on a weaker one in order to obtain slaves for the New World” (73). Although this comment references a phenomenon that Abdul JanMohamed considers as symptomatic of ‘the dominant phase’ of colonialism, where the insidious colonial mechanism proliferates due to its “ability to exploit pre-existing power relations of hierarchy, subordination, and subjugation” (80), it makes an important addition, by denouncing the community’s unconditional surrender to the materialistic ethos of the West, and its easy internalisation of these values. According to JanMohamed the material practices of the ‘dominant phase’ ensure the native’s “passive and indirect” consent with the colonialists’ machinations, but their “successful interpellation” (80) doesn’t take place till the discursive practices of the ‘hegemonic phase’—which occurs after Independence—are employed. For Emecheta, the material practices are equally efficacious in indoctrinating the native to alien systems. In addition to drawing attention to the intricate machinations of the colonisers or white slavers, Emecheta also allocates a share of responsibility to the local communities. Thus, Okolie’s engagement in exercises of self-deception, that aim to mediate the significance of his transaction by negating the horror of his action: “he had never sold anyone before, and now he persuaded himself that what he was about to do was not selling in its actual sense” (37), echo the process of his ancestors’ self-imposed blindness, who proceed to sell their brothers and sisters without measuring the political cost or the ethical consequences of their actions.

Far from being a singular event, Okolie’s denial of his action’s ethical parameters symptomatizes the community’s attitude towards slavery. The limitations of hypocritical rationalizations that intend to neutralize and sanitize the coarse calculations behind the trafficking and using of slaves are further revealed in the behaviour of Ma Mee, one of the most prominent merchants in Eke Market. Her contemplation on the nature of her trade ends with a statement that betrays her ideological capitulation to Western

materialist values: “buying and selling people could not be helped. ‘Where would we be without slave labour, and where would some of these unwanted children be without us?’ It might be evil, but it was a necessary evil” (64). Ma Mee’s flagrantly mercantile justification for her actions is based on the account that African markets were developed and enriched by the European commodities they received for the African slaves. In this respect, some members had to be “sacrificed” for the communal benefit. Yet, besides the erasure of ethical responsibility, this thought exemplifies another form of short-sightedness to slavery’s wider implication, overlooking the fact that the accumulation of rapid wealth is not compatible with social or economic growth. As Rodney suggests, if “development means a capacity for self-sustaining growth,” then the slave trade has devastating effects for the local communities (“The unequal Partnership” 143). “The necessary evil” rationalisation fails to take into account “the fact that several European imports were competing with struggling African products; it fails to take into account the fact that none of the long list of European articles were of the type that entered into productive process, but were rather items rapidly consumed or stowed away uselessly” (*How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* 140). Additionally, it ignores the fact that the introduction of commodities like cloth in the African markets marked the “technological arrest” or “stagnation” (142) of African producers, as the competing prices of the imported goods forced them either to continue production on a very limited scale, or, in some instances, to abandon their craft altogether. Still, being blinded by the benefits of “easy-rapid- wealth”, the local communities ignore the wider economic ramifications of their collaboration with the white slavers, and by presenting slavery as a necessary evil, they erase any question of ethical responsibility towards their victimized compatriots.

Emecheta’s unmitigated criticism of her community’s readiness to accommodate, and thus efface, its complicity with the institution of slavery is echoed in other Nigeria writers’ attempts to narrativise the complexities of slavery’s institution in the region. Wole Soyinka’s theatrical play *Dance in the Forest* (1960), for instance, contains an equally uncompromising interrogation of the question of slavery and responsibility. Produced for a ceremony celebrating Nigeria’s independence, *Dance in the Forest* reflects his country’s moment of transition in the fictionalized historical “Gathering of the Tribes” staged in the play. As the tribes assemble for a narcissistic celebration of their

glorious past achievements, they appeal to their deities to send them spirits of distinguished personalities and warriors as guests to their feast. However, “in a deconstruction of the so-called grandiose History” (Olaniyan 494), the “Forest Head”, the ancestor’s leading figure, rejects their vanity, and motivated by the bitter realization that “a hundred generations has made no difference” (26) sends them the “Dead Ones”, the spectres of a man and a woman, who bring forth horrifying aspects of history the community would rather forget: their involvement in the slave trade. The man was castrated and sold into slavery by his Queen, Mata Kharinu, for refusing to lead her army in an unjust war against a neighbouring tribe. Some of the humans are dragged to the forest and are forced to confront as a race the forgotten truths about their past, present, and future.

Soyinka’s privileging of “an embittered past in the understanding of the present and the construction of the future” is reiterated in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Although the novel faces up to the insidious horror of colonial incursion into Nigeria, the history of slavery surfaces at a marginal, yet decisive moment in the novel, when Obierika, Okonkwo’s best friend, visits him during his exile in a neighbouring village. Included among the news Obierika brings to his old friend is an account of the massacre of Abame village’s population by the British colonialists. In retrospect, and while the men attempt to assess the significance of this alarming event, Obiema connects the massacre with a wider history of causes that exposes his community’s naivety, and lack of vigilance in recognising the impending threat. As he says, “we have heard stories about white men who made the powerful and the strong drinks and took slaves across the seas, but no one thought the stories were true” (103). Such a belated realization comes as a judgmental statement about the community’s inability to shield itself from external conquerors in spite of the warning signals. By the end of the novel, the threat considered to be “outside” the community will evade and brings its destructive forces inside the community.

A similar scenario unfolds in *The Slave Girl*, when the narrator details the process of colonial incursion in the region. The picture she draws is of people living as mere spectators of history. As she says,

In fact the people of Ibuza—did not know that they were not still being ruled by the Portuguese. The people of Ibuza did not realise that their country, to the last village, was being amalgamated and partitioned by the British. They knew nothing of what was happening; they did not know that there were other ways of robbing people of their birthright than by war. *The African of those days was very trusting.* (15, emphasis added)

Omar Sougou, in his analysis of this scene, reads the indigenous population's failure to distinguish between the British and the Portuguese, and their unawareness of the subsequent appropriation of the land, as another manifestation of the complex mechanisms of empire: "the native population, confronted with the Imperial system, lacks a frame of reference" (73). Although this reading is valid, and indeed the community is presented "as helpless" in the face of "new powers and technologies" (73), the narrator's conclusive irony blurs the distinction between "knowing nothing" and choosing to ignore the impending threat that endangers the communal welfare. In this context, their ignorance is linked with an apathy towards present political developments and a myopic stance towards a long history of causes.

The same kind of irony pertains to the conditions of Ojebeta's father, Okwekwu, employment as "a Kortu-man", a court messenger for the British Administrators (14). His appointment came about after a district officer was attacked by the only creatures that seem to resist the colonial presence in the region, the "notorious malaria mosquitoes, and many other such tropical insect soldiers" (14), and had to be sent away. Okwekwu carries the ailing officer in his hammock, and as a reward for his service to the crown, he is offered the profitable post of the court messenger. When he is challenged by the other members of the community for supporting someone who arrived on their land with colonial intentions, he resorts to traditional proverbs counterarguing that it is wicked "to fight someone who is knocking at the gates of death" (15). Thus, Okwekwu's appeased conscience for doing the right thing limits his critical perception of the politics that are at stake with his action: he ignores the fact that by helping the white administrators and accepting the post, he facilitates their penetration to the inner parts of his country, and their interference in local issues. He also ignores the presence of a slave from Akwa in the court (15), who helps him with the translation of the court proceedings, and reveals

the white people's exploitation of neighbouring communities. Blinded by the money he gets from the colonialists, Okwekwu even considers himself to "be lucky to get this job" (15).

The devastating consequences of Kwenkwu's unquestioning submission to colonial forces are illustrated when the narrator establishes a link between his death and the larger geopolitical sphere of events, and particularly, the impact of First World War on the community. For once again, the people of Ibuza are presented as ignorant about the historical events that directly influence their lives: "most people living in the interior of Nigeria did not know that the whole country now belonged to the people called the British who were ruling them indirectly through the local chiefs and elders" (27). Being unaware of the intricate network of collaborations with the local chiefs that seal their fates, Ibuza's communities are powerless when one by one their members are killed by the strange "felenza" brought by the colonialists. Although they are correct to attribute the spread of influenza to the British conquerors, they are mistaken about the cause of the outbreak. For far from being a newly imported virus, the "sudden deaths" (24) are the price they pay for their newly formed country's invasion of the German occupied Cameroon. After uniting, in 1914, the South and the North parts of the region in what we now know as Nigeria, the British mobilised the local forces to a war against their neighbours.⁵⁹ The connection between the air raids and the resultant casualties is established months after the actual event:

Now, in the year of 1916, the rumours said that the new colonial masters were at war with 'the Germanis'; and the latter fought the British by blowing poisonous gas into the air.... Many inside Ibuza were asking themselves what they had to do with the Germanis, and the Germanis with them. There was no one to answer their questions. (27)

The cost of such belated questioning is paid with hundreds of unregistered deaths in the memorial archives of First World War, Okwonkwu's and his wife's being among them, and an even more belated insight into the ramifications, and the asymmetrical conditions, of their long-term collaboration with the white masters: "They came to places like Benin

⁵⁹ For a detailed historical study of Nigeria's political formation under the British occupation, as well as its role in the First World War see Osuntokun's *Nigeria in the First World War* (London: Longman, 1979).

and Bonny, bought healthy slaves from our people and paid us well. And this is how they thanked us” (26). Like in the passage quoted above from Achebe’s novel, the realisation of the uneven networks the community has been implicated in comes too late, when the damage is irreversible. And more crucially, Emecheta is even more pessimistic about the changes such a realisation could afford. For the community acknowledges the injustice in the present, but refuses to assume responsibility for their collaboration in the longer history of injustices that has been taking place for years. And this failure annihilates any possibility of positive outlook for the present and the future. Thus, the articulation comes as another statement that underscores the community’s alienation from any sense of collectivity or political intervention.

And as long as people fail to question the historical aetiology of the physical dispossession, torture, disappearances, and physical deaths that plague their communities, then latent consequences, such as the “social” or “psychological” death of the slaves, pass equally unnoticed. When Ojebeta returns to her village after a life in slavery, no one inquires about her experience as Ma Palagada’s property. Any possible testimony that would hold them responsible for her suffering, both physical and psychological, is carefully silenced by shifting the focus of attention to “her smooth skin” and “polished manners”:

They would call Ojebeta’s stay with Ma Palagada anything other than a good thing. For has she not returned with such fine manners and clothes, just like the other men who went to seek their fortunes in white man’s jobs, in *olu oyibo* [white man’s job]. No, it was to *olu oyibo* that she too had gone, not just to Otu Onitsa. That was an understatement. (149)

Once again, the community’s obsession with prosperity abjures any possibility of “recognising their complicity in the evil that stares them in the eye” (Olaogun 189). This form of denial symptomatizes an insidious desire to expurgate slavery from Africa’s narrative and to abdicate the participants’ responsibility in it. Yet, in Emecheta’s novel, much like in Aidoo’s, Coker’s and Armah’s, slavery cannot be erased from Africa’s history. As we will see, in spite of the community’s attempt to silence Ojebeta’s story, Emecheta’s textual tracing of her predicament sheds light on sites of silence that combat forgetfulness by raising the haunting question of justice and responsibility.

In the Markets: The Visible, the Invisible, and the Dead Bodies

Is not this where we must begin? Not with her body, which may be missing,
 which we may miss, as we consume, as we read.
 This is not about her body, but about other bodies who are missing,
 but who haunt these pages.
 It is about other debts accrued, impossible to account for, here and now.
 How can we respond generously, if we do not respond
 to the circulation of bodies as debt,
 to the forms of exchange (capital, objects, images)
 that allow us to face up to distant others, which allow us to name them...
 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*

The story of Ojebeta's life in slavery, a story that her community rushes to silence and falsify upon her return to the village, starts with the journey she makes with her brother from Ibuza to Onitsa. Although, as the title of the chapter "A Short Journey" indicates, Ojebeta's passage from freedom to slavery can't be compared to the horror surrounding the Middle Passage; its description is haunted by the same feelings of fear, entrapment, suffocation and captivity:

As they padded through the bush tracks, they seemed to be entering the very belly of the earth. It was as if they were being gradually but nonetheless determinedly swallowed by dark, mysterious, all green world, the walls of which were enveloping them, fencing them in, closing them up. Overhead hung the tangled branches of huge tropical trees on both sides of them were large leaves, creeping plants and enormous tree-trunks, all entwined together to form this impenetrable dark green grove. (31)

The appropriation of the imagery of the Middle Passage, such as references to the earths' belly, the closing up of the tangled branches and the mysterious darkness that surrounds Ojebeta and her brother, and its further resituating on indigenous soil, betrays the hold of the narrative of transatlantic slavery's over the community. As Laura Murphy notes in her exemplary reading of Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, this fear "is informed by a mythology of captivity" that is not only fed by "the dangers of the slave trade but its lasting effect on the psyche of those" left behind (145). At the same time, it invites the exploration of the trade's effects, and the tragedies that followed in Africa.

Although Ojebeta's crossing does not involve the Atlantic ocean but a small segment of the River Niger, her arrival at Onitsa market signals her death as a free subject and her "rebirth" as a slave.

The sites of the markets within the Nigerian context, and West Africa in general, figure as a female space. For the ordinary women, the marketplace has always been "a legitimized social space with economic and political potential" (Ogunyemi 49). There they can obtain economic independence—a crucial basis for overcoming dependency—they can formulate bonds and friendships with other women that share their difficulties and hardships, and they can organize themselves in political causes that will ameliorate the problematic conditions of the community. Yet, within the historical frame of Emecheta's narrative, Onitsa market's ideal depiction as a "meeting ground", that "trades on goodwill, embracing men, women, and children without difficulty" (51), is shadowed by the activities that have transformed it into a site of "human drama" (249). The market's depiction as "a place where one can come and go freely" (51) is violently disrupted by the enslavement of a number of men and women, who are chained to their masters' stalls; the lively humming and buzzing of the national and international merchants' bargaining is haunted by the silent cries of the bodies that are to be sold; and the fashionable displays of newly imported textiles are violently disrupted by the naked, wretched bodies of the future slaves. Emecheta's definition of the market as the place "where the visible living met and among them moved the dead and the invisible" (43) is not only attuned to the conditions of the "human drama" that haunts these sites, but invites the tracing of social and cultural forces that have rendered these nameless, reified bodies, like Ojebeta's body, "invisible".

By bringing forth the forgotten female "other" missing from ideal depictions of the markets produced by other African female authors, Emecheta's narrative problematises the very conditions of female empowerment exercised on sites once compliant with, and fostered by, capitalist modernity, and exposes the convergence of forces that have condemned a number of "other" female subjects to the shadowy space of invisibility. Following Ojebeta's mobility, *The Slave Girl's* narrative ranges across a number of sites; it moves in and out of the markets' borders, and in and out of the intimate space of women's experiences in a traditional village. As we will see, each crossing and return

registers different, yet related, structures of invisibility that afford Emecheta the opportunity to engage in a powerful critique of hegemonic workings that contribute to these women's invisibility and silence. Without exaggerating or diminishing the horror of slavery, the sustained metaphor of women's entrapment in patriarchy's shackles comes as a way of looking back at history from the location of the gendered, racialised subaltern, exposing how one system feeds the other.

The overlapping territory between patriarchy and slavery is mapped in Emecheta's novel through the narrator's statement that

No woman girl in Ibuza was free, except those who committed the abominable sin of prostitution or those who have been completely cast off or rejected by their people for offending one custom or another. A girl was owned, in particular, by her father or someone in place of her father or her older brother, and then, in general, by her group or homestead. (175)

The word "owned" points to the way in which the deeply rooted hierarchy between men and women plays out in society, and annihilates female agency. As Spivak has argued, "the figure of the woman moving from clan to clan, and family to family as daughter/sister/wife/mother syntaxes patriarchal continuity even as she is herself drained of proper identity" ("Deconstructing Historiography" 220). Patriarchal power is founded on "the dissimulation of her discontinuity, on the repeated emptying of her meaning as instrument" (220). In *The Slave Girl* the exposition of the conditions of patriarchy's discursive and epistemological tenure emphasises the women's reduction to mute/invisible signs, calling into question the politics of oppression that impose regimes of female silence and invisibility.

What are though the politics of narration and representation that speak to the condition of invisibility? How do we listen to the silence emanating from the invisible body of the gendered, racialised subaltern? Most importantly, how can we "the represented ones", either in the form of the first world intellectual or third world writer, speak about this invisible body that escapes representation, in that it is "either accommodated to or banished from the totalizing circle articulated by the centering logos of Imperial metaphysics" (Spanos qtd in Karavanta, "Rethinking the Spectre" 107)? This is the problematic space that Spivak's "Can the Subaltern speak?" has successfully

traced, exposing how the “work of the mechanics of the constitutions of the Other” (294), operated both by the Imperial centre, and by indigenous patriarchal hegemonies, “obliterate the textual ingredients with which such an object could cathect, could occupy (invest?) its itinerary” (280). For Spivak the plight of the subaltern is that

between patriarchy and Imperialism, subject-constitution and object-formation, the figure of the woman disappears, not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the “third-world woman” caught between tradition and modernization. (306)

The female subaltern’s historical and political conditioning attests to the impossibility of its representation, in that its presence or voice has been displaced and silenced in the process of multiple textualisations. The “Breast Giver”, for example, a text Spivak reads through the lens of the subaltern subject’s silencing, narrates the story of Jashoba who earns her living by selling her milk to the bourgeois Haldar family. When her milk is depleted, and Jashoba loses her use-value, her body is invaded by cancer. Although Jashoba’s milk has nurtured a number of boys, she is abandoned by the Haldar family and dies unattended and uncared for. In her analysis, Spivak demonstrates that Jashoda’s body, rotting with “a hundred mouths” of cancer (“A Literary Representation of the Subaltern” 249), inhabits a violent space that is marked by ultimate silence perpetrated by patriarchal and capitalist mechanisms. Jashoda, a victim of super-exploitation, and multiple textual and hegemonic inscriptions, cannot articulate her own story or resist her annihilation. What is left of her voice is the presence of a trace that points to its absence, to its disarticulation and silence.

Spivak’s assigning of the subaltern into the space of silence and invisibility has been questioned by a number of scholars; to name just one, Benita Parry in “Problems in Current Theories of Post-colonial Discourse” argues that Spivak’s theorization replicates the erasure of the subaltern’s subjectivity by imperial narratives, for in dismissing the “evidence of native agency” (36) found at “those sites where women inscribed themselves as healers, ascetics, singers of sacred songs, artisans and artists” (35), she denies “to the native the ground from which to utter a reply to imperialism’s ideological

aggression or to enunciate a different self” (36).⁶⁰ Yet, as Spivak highlights, all the texts that ascribe voice and agency to the subaltern are “texts of counter-insurgency or elite documentation that give us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern” in a form of mediated creative or “theoretical fiction” and leave the actual subaltern’s voice unheard (“Deconstructing Historiography” 203-4). That is, the textual utterances Parry ascribes to the subaltern have already been mediated through another voice, either that of the native intellectual or “the first-world intellectual masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (“Can the Subaltern Speak” 292), offering a representation of the subaltern’s voice, and not the actual voice itself. In these cases, the subaltern’s voice “is never fully recoverable, ... is always askew from its received signifiers ... is effaced even as it is disclosed, ... is irreducibly discursive” (“Deconstructing Historiography” 203).⁶¹

But if the retrieval of the subaltern’s voice is an impossibility, how can speaking continue? Does Spivak’s thesis, as Barry suggests, foreclose not only agency, but also the subaltern’s voice altogether? As Radhakrishnan notes, Spivak’s “interventionist agency speaks for and within the asymmetry of a world structured in dominance”, but does not forget to “seek a way out of this asymmetry” (Radhakrishnan, *Theory in an Uneven World* 155). Spivak’s “way out” is located in the “spectral” dimension she ascribes to the subaltern subject. For the subaltern does speak, but the moment it speaks and “inscribes itself into history is also the moment when representation as such is problematized, and the agent doing the problematization is the subaltern subject” (Radhakrishnan *Theory* 160). In changing the “very apparatus of representation”, by “subalternising representation” (160), the subaltern “protects its ethical difference from the totalizing sovereignty of representation” (160- 161). Rather, it makes its presence felt as the trace of the “inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 294) that comes to haunt the politics that have constituted it as absent and silent.

⁶⁰ See also Jenny Sharp’s “Figures of Colonial Resistance,” in *Modern Fiction Studies* 35:1 (1989): 137-55 who has argued that Barry’s thesis is grounded on the positions and voices of the native intellectual, and not these of the subaltern.

⁶¹ For a more detailed, and yet accessible, overview of Spivak’s theory and the debates it has prompted see also Penelope Ingram’s excellent article “Can the Subaltern Speak? Appropriating Subaltern Silence in Janet Frame’s ‘The Carpathians’”.

For Spivak this is the agency of the subaltern, for in residing in silence and absence, it resists hegemonic textual inscriptions.

If the subaltern exists as the blank trace that is always under erasure, but never fully erased given that it points to the violence of its erasure, then the task of the first world critic or the native intellectual is to bear witness to these erasures, to the injustice of its disarticulation and to recover it as a “silent mark”. As Boehmer has succinctly noted:

The difficulty here is that to speak to such bloody realities by way of literary representation can appear to distance or sanitise them. Yet, at the same time ... [it] is also to obtain some form of theoretical purchase on at once the importance and the near impossibility of self-articulation as resistance to colonialism. (130)

Instead of seeking to superimpose voices on the sites of silence, the task of the writer is “to measure silences” (Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” 296). Emecheta’s *the Slave Girl* “measures silences” by exposing the lives of historically conditioned Nigerian women whose bodies-in-bondage are inscribed by a number of apparatuses that put them under erasure. Thus, far from romanticizing and turning her female characters into ‘don quixotic’ heroines, she delineates their everydayness, their struggles to survive, their submission to and oppression by various hegemonies. Yet, Emecheta’s tracing of female powerlessness and exploitation should not be misconstrued as an attempt to “define women as archetypal victims” (Mohanty 200) of male supremacy, that freezes them in passivity; rather, by “uncovering the material and ideological specificities that constitute a group of women as ‘powerless’” (200), she exposes the violence of the act of erasure. This exposition does not intend to recover the original voices or figures, but to attend to the pain of their erasure, and in this way to disrupt the politics that have initiated this violence.

Emecheta’s refusal to superimpose a voice upon the silenced female subaltern subject points towards a political position that informs her agenda as a black feminist writer. Her much quoted phrase that she is a “feminist with a small ‘f’” (“Feminist with a small ‘f’” 175) voices her critique towards the fact that “feminist criticism reproduces the axioms of Imperialism” (Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts” 243). Her resistance to the epistemological dictates of Western Feminism is grounded in the global dimensions of the movement that threaten to obscure localised concerns and needs:

I will not be called a feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that...I don't like being defined by them. It is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. ... ("1989 Interview" qtd. in Nhaf-Abbenyi 7).

As Nfah-Abbenyi has noted, Emecheta's disapproval of the term feminist is due "to the implications that she suspects are inherent in such identification" (9). Her questioning of the very context from which the word "'feminist' originates—one that is European, Western, literate, developed and affluent" (9), reveals her awareness that besides its "feminine" face, feminism could easily become another tool of the Imperialist, neocolonial machine that could potentially impose or dictate its views and visions on African or "third World" women. Thus, the work of Western Feminists like Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who "have challenged the patriarchy's control of women's bodies, especially the constitution of sexual difference through the phallic symbolization described by Freud and Lacan, and have reclaimed the irreducible reality of women's concrete experiences" (Nfah-Abbenyi 23), is relevant to African women's oppression, but fails to accommodate the localized concerns of African women. As Emecheta has emphasized, "Sex is important to us. But we do not make it the centre of our being, as women do here" ("feminism with a small f" 176). As Emecheta maintains there are a number of other issues that have to be addressed in conjunction with sexual oppression and liberation: "you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off" (1989 Interview" qtd. in Nhaf-Abbenyi 7). For African women, the feminist battle begins at the mundane level of daily survival and basic education, and their narratives address and problematise these issues.

The significance of African feminist approaches to Feminism is that they do not simply "duplicate", "reflect", or "write back" to radical feminist critiques on sexuality, but that "they are creating a space for themselves for questioning a combination of oppressive conditions that are both traditional and specific to their colonial heritage and postcolonial context, a context that posits their protest beyond the limits of radical feminism" (Nfah- Abbenyi 30). A number of critics, such as Trinh Minh-Ha, have welcomed these critical voices that articulate their urgencies and expose what is forgotten by western feminism, by embracing the challenge to "keep open the space of naming in

feminism” (“Interview with Palmar” 66). Equally, Emecheta, having argued that “white [feminists] feel they are the big guns in the movement”, concludes by suggesting that “they are helping our women in that it is giving them confidence” (“Interview with Adeola” 43). Her position parallels that of Aidoo, who is also adamant in stressing that her version of feminism is primarily rooted in a number of vocal, assertive African women, but she acknowledges the solidarity offered by the international feminist movement that reinforces their convictions about the need to stress and continue the battle for the development of women:

What it has done is that it has actually confirmed one’s belief and one’s conviction. Our people say that if you take up a drum to beat and nobody joins then you just became a fool. The women’s movement has helped in that it is like other people taking up the drum and beating along with you.” (“1986 Interview” qtd. in Nfah-Abbenyi 8)

Aidoo’s call for a space within the women’s movement “where many different drums can be beaten to many different tunes at the same time”, so that “women in African and the diaspora can beat their own drums as well, and they can send out and receive their messages” (11), is reiterated by Carole Davies Boyce, who has suggested that “the term ‘feminism’ often has to be qualified when used by most African or other Third World women” (Davies Boyce & Graves 10). Instead of a European/American model of feminism that fails “to deal directly with issues that directly affect Black women” and “tends to sensationalize others”, Davies gestures towards the creation of an International Feminism, which, starting from the common causes of identifying gender-specific issues and of resurrecting women from their invisibility, could accept the divergences and contributions of “various regional perspectives” (11).

In tandem with these tendencies, Emecheta’s narratives beat their own rhythms, and create a space that speaks to the specificities of African women’s oppression. The novel is full of examples of women who suffer under the yoke of stifling patriarchal structures that render them to obtainable commodities. The fact that “girls were not normally prized creatures” (19) is instantiated whenever Emecheta delves into depictions of women’s lives. Moulded from birth by the male social order and deprived of the freedom to carve their own paths, they are left with no other choice but to succumb to the oppressive social

roles that are assigned to them. The life of Uteh, Ojebeta's aunt, exemplifies the limitations or privations of women's liberty and her example symptomatises how a number of female subjects are shaped in the service of patriarchy. Her marriage to Eke, a man despised by her brothers and the rest of the community, is arranged by her father after he receives the bride price.

Of course, no one actually knew what else was expected of Uteh, since her father accepted the bride price before she was able to make any choice. And what obedient daughter of any family, good or bad, would be allowed to marry a man of her choice? She was only obeying her father's instructions. (39)

The effacement of female subjectivity through patriarchal marriage structures are further explored through the conditions that surround the life of Umeadi, Ojebeta's mother, after the death of her father. Umeadi's body is not speared by the influenza, but before her death she becomes a victim of Igbo patriarchal tradition. Her subjectivity and individuality is effaced and she becomes both the subject and the object of mourning rituals; her body loses its visibility and materiality and becomes a metaphor for suffering, and an extension of her husband's death. Umeadi's ghostly existence is sealed by the imposition of asceticism, and the monitoring of her actions in the public sphere is registered in her confinement in the private sphere of her house, "for while on mourning, she was forbidden to visit the stream, to bathe, to enter any hut where the man of the family had a title" (28). Her status as embodiment of the profane or the unclean is further highlighted when she is denied the right to a proper burial, for "since [she] had died while still in mourning, custom had demanded that her body be thrown into the "bad" bush (82). The exposition of the structures of oppression of all these women in the traditional systems becomes a form of protest against the ways in which patriarchal discursive practices inscribe and are inscribed in women's bodies and minds.

Along with the plight of women who were enslaved by patriarchal restrictions, Emecheta includes the lives of exceptional women who refuse to follow pre-determined paths. Ma Palagada, Ojebeta's owner, has built up her fame partly as a wealthy merchant in Onitsa market, and partly as a rebellious woman, who defied the restrictive norms of her community and married the man of her choice. Ma Palagada's "effrontery to marry [someone] not only outside the town of Ibuza but completely outside her tribe", a

Portuguese slaver, “who came from the salty waters” (34), seals her ostracism from the community, for when a woman “went beyond that and married someone who did not speak the Ibo Language, then you were regarded as lost, or even sold into slavery” (34). Yet, when “slavery was squeezed out” (112) and the Portuguese man leaves the country (as there was nothing more for him to gain there), Ma Palagada is left with two daughters, and “a great deal of wealth: coral beads, earrings, some silver and some copper plated, cases and cases of gin schnapps, bales of cloth and lots of money” (113). With the wealth she has inherited from the ex-slaver, Ma Palagada starts her own enterprise and ends up owning the largest textile stalls at Onitsa market. Although we don’t have reports in the novel to testify whether the community’s opinion about her “abominable” act alters after her financial prosperity, Okolie’s comments and attitude towards her, and later on, Ojebeta’s humbling by her powerful status, indicate that her wealth helped to remove the stigma attached to her rebellious choices.

In Ma Palagada Emecheta refuses to create the heroic woman who resists the patriarchal restrictions of her community, endures the communal outcry and re-surfaces as a victorious liberated and emancipated woman. Rather, her figure, which is the fictional progeny of Madam Tinubu, a memorable female in Nigerian politics and history,⁶² is used to criticise those women who, having acquired wealth and visibility “become the agents of patriarchy and the custodians of the values of the male oriented societies that used to oppress them” (Stratton 104). These women’s ability to adapt themselves to the new political and economic relations is compromised by the fact that their wealth is built at the expense of all the slave girls they acquire illegally, and whose forced labour they exploit.⁶³ Ma Palagada’s function within the novel suggests that “women were not exempt from ambition or ingenuity” in utilizing the slave labour of their less fortunate sisters for the maximization of their profit; actually, it suggests that once they had the opportunity “to indulge their ambition” (Robertson & Klein 13) they become like male slave owners. It is under Ma Palagada’s ownership that Ojebeta, and

⁶² For details about Madam Tinubu’s role within Nigerian culture and contemporary reception of her role see Ogunyemi’s “An Excursion into Woman’s Space” in *Africa Woman Palava* pages 50-53.

⁶³ As Robertson & Klein explain it is probable that free women “derived much of the benefit from slave labor in sub-Saharan Africa. There are several reasons for this. First, most slaves were women, and the sexual division of labor was largely maintained for women slaves; second, the majority of free women kept their property separate from men’s; and third, the main functions of female slave labor were productive rather than reproductive. See pages 6-9.

the other slave girls, are inculcated in the fundamental lessons of patriarchy and learn that as long as they are “docile”, they will be “trouble free” (63). Their acquiescent service to patriarchy and capitalism mirrors their multiple betrayals, not only of themselves as women, but also of all these other women that they enslave, torture and abuse so as to augment their capital.

A telling example in the novel that reveals Ma Palagada’s betrayal of her gender’s emancipation is instantiated through her abstention from Aba Riots or the Women’s war, a glorious moment in contemporary Nigerian politics,⁶⁴ when women made their presence visible in the body politic.⁶⁵ The Aba Riots or Women’s War was the market women’s response to the British administration’s decision to tax women.⁶⁶ In 1925, the British colonialists decided to introduce “direct taxation in order to create the Native Treasury, which was supposed to pay for improvements in the Native Administration” (Van Allen 71). In 1929, when the British officials ordered a recounting of households, rumours started spreading through the women’s communication networks in the markets that women would be included in the tax system, and after a number of meetings they conferred upon concerted action. The women revolted, marching through the markets and amassing in protests at the District Office. Their unexpected mass revolt forced the British colonialists to provide written assurance that women would not be taxed, and to imprison the local chiefs/collaborators for “spreading news likely to cause harm” and for “causing physical assault on women” (Gailey qtd. in Van Allen). Yet, the news of the victory inspired more women in neighbouring markets who continued the fights. The riots lasted for a number of days and a number of strategic posts that symbolised colonial power, such as courts and prisons, were attacked (Van Allen 73).

⁶⁴ See also Johnson-Odim’s “Women and Gender in the History of Sub-saharan Africa,” in *Women’s History in Global Perspective* (ed. Bonnie Smith, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2005): 9- 65 for an elaborate account of West African women’s multiple revolutionary action during and after colonialism.

⁶⁵ In *Ake* (1981) Wole Soyinka refers to “Aba Riots” as a symbolic moment that demonstrates the increasing power of women in Nigeria. It is interesting to juxtapose Soyinka’s optimism about the women’s emancipation with Emecheta’s more down to earth interpretation of this historical event, which is consistent with her attempt to focus on the everyday and mundane female experience, rather than the heroic and exceptional.

⁶⁶ As Van Allen has noted even the name “Aba Riots” is symptomatic of women’s discursive erasure from the body politic and history, since it “neatly removes women from the picture. What we are left with is “some riots at Aba”—not by women, not involving complex organization, and not ranging over most of southeastern Nigeria” (61). For Van Allen, the term “Women’s War”, in contrast to “Aba Riots” “retains both the presence and the significance of women” (61). I agree with Van Allen’s point, but since in Emecheta’s text the event is referred to as “Aba Riots” I have chosen to the latter.

During this moment in Nigerian politics, when women proved that they could wrest power, resist and interfere in the body politic, Ma Palagada is resolved not to “take part in such senseless fighting” (132). Although the other market women are determined to fight, and claim their right to representation in the body-politic, Ma Palagada argues that they should let men deal with colonial and political issues: “Why can’t the men do it themselves? Why can’t we talk things over with the white men? It is all silly and idiotic...” (132). When Ma Mee confronts her, attributing her refusal to join their cause to her “friendship” with the white men, Ma Palagada recoils, explaining that: “What my husband and I are saying is that we should all refuse to pay, and let them do their worst” (133). The British Officials did their worst, by opening fire, in a number of occasions during the riots, killing 50 of them, and wounding 50 more (Van Allen 60). Interestingly, at the time when the women were battling in the streets, and exposing their bare bodies to the colonial army, “Ma Palagada was in her room, very ill” (135), and, several days later, she passes away. Her seclusion in the domestic sphere when the other women write themselves into Nigerian and colonial history, instantiates her failure to claim her right to representation, outside the discursive practices of patriarchy and colonial modernity. Her ailing, “degraded body”, symptomatically reveals, Emecheta’s critique “of [these] social pathologies” (Keown 12), that have encroached upon and infiltrated the social/communal body and the political female front. Although Ma Palagada’s corpse doesn’t end up in the bush, like Ojebeta’s mother, and she gets a proper burial that earns her an “expensive tombstone”, “what is left of her name are church wall inscriptions and the tombstone craving” (Stratton 104).

Of Bodies With(Out) Death

“The force of law is really a response to fear...
This fear, under its final mask, is the fear of death”
Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*

In death one can find an illusory refuge: the grave is as far as gravity can pull,
it marks the end of the fall; the mortuary is the loophole in the impasse.
But dying flees and pulls indefinitely,
Impossibly and intensively in the flight.
Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*

As well as integrating the question of female experience in the reflection of and perspective on Nigeria's historical transition, *The Slave Girl's* narrative speaks to the historical condition of these women's entrapment in the indigenous system of slavery. If their lives as "free" women are conditioned by patriarchal structures that put their voices under erasure, what place is given to the lives of "slave women"? If patriarchy entraps them in structures of invisibility by nullifying their voice and agency, how are they inscribed in the order of slavery's power, and how does this order inscribe and mark their bodies?

The very title of Emecheta's narrative refers to the relativised and localised aspects of the institution of slavery in Nigeria. The slave girl's predicament speaks to the fate of a number of slave women, who were condemned to the "shallow graves" of the internal markets. For while slavers in the Americas valued men for their productive capacities, the great majority of slaves within the internal African markets were women.⁶⁷ The sexual imbalance in proportion of the overseas slaves and internal slaves, which according to estimations was "two men to one woman" (Rodney, "An Unequal Partnership" 173), was mainly due to the fact that the departing Africans "were determined by African supply conditions" (Klein 165), and the West Africans preferred women to men slaves. The preference of female over male slaves in the internal markets reveals aspects of the local communities' organisational structure that colluded in their immersion and eventual incorporation into the institution of slavery. The demand for women among the local markets accrued to their "submissive socialisation", which made their assimilation to the status of the slave easier. In many societies women were taught to obey men "unquestioningly" (Robertson & Klein 6), and this compliance guaranteed docile and pacified slaves who were unlikely to run away or revolt. At the same time, there were a number of cases where kinship structures "allowed the transfer of rights over people and which permitted the development of dependent relationships that some times could lead to slavery" (Lovejoy, "Indigenous African Slavery" 26). These historical accounts

⁶⁷ For historical approaches to this issue, see Paul E. Lovejoy and Richardson's "Competing Markets for Male and Female Slaves: Prices in the Interior of West Africa, 1750-1850," *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 28 (1995): 261-293, and "The initial 'Crisis of Adaptation': The British Abolition of the Atlantic Slave Trade in West Africa, 1802-1820," in Robin Law, ed., *From Slave Trade to 'Legitimate Commerce: The Commercial Transition in Nineteenth-Century West Africa* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995), 35-56.

establish the connection between slavery and the domestic devaluation of females within the patriarchal family and African society reminding that for women “slavery begins at home” (Brodzki 51). In conjunction with these factors, the African women’s productive labour throughout the ages, such as their widespread use as the primary group in agriculture,⁶⁸ made them a valuable acquisition for the tilling of the ground, the sowing of the crops, the cultivation and harvesting of the land, and women were more valued than men for their re-productive capacities. Women slaves could potentially augment the stock of their owners, but they could equally be used as the means of “expanding the owner’s lineage” (Robertson & Klein 6). As Klein suggests, “since even female slaves could be significant links in the kinship networks, their importance in the social system was enhanced. Also slave women were cheaper to acquire than free local women in polygynous societies and were therefore highly prized” (165).

Within the specificities of domestic markets, slave women figure as commodities, as bodies reduced to instruments: they are tamed, they are docile, they increase their masters’ wealth through their reproductive capacities, and they are forced to unwaged labour. Their circulation in and among local markets and masters “offer a text for living and for dying” (Spillers 387), refusing to dwell in either site, and constantly negotiating life in death; their bodies constitute unlivable sites of existence that call life into question. These bodies bear the invisible “marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside” (387), in that, their shadowy traces, in between life and death, in between masters, in between monetary transactions, expose an alternative history of modernity that contests and interrupts its humanitarian ethos. It is within this frame that I would like to introduce Agamben’s concept of “bare life” and explore how the historical specificity of the black enslaved body deployed in Emecheta’s text problematises and develops modernity’s politics of exclusion.

Agamben’s development of the term “bare life” is influenced by Foucault’s theorization of biopower and biopolitics, that exemplify how normalizing technologies of power that emerged in modernity sought to bring “life and its mechanisms into the realm

⁶⁸ Coquery-Vidrovitch’s historical book *African Women* attests that within the frame of the Igbo communities “it was mainly women who worked the land” (ii). Further to this, James Thornton’s analysis in “‘Sexual Demography’: The Impact of the Slave Trade in Family Structure” explains that even if this was not the case before the transatlantic slave trade, “it became a necessity after, because having less men around, the women were forced to engage in manly tasks to provide to the dependent population”.

of explicit calculations” (*History of Sexuality* 143), to objectify, that is, the forces of life, and on the basis of this knowledge, to set them into productive coordinations that maximize their value as resources.⁶⁹ Agamben’s genealogical process traces the first manifestation of the political subject’s transformation into manipulable object of political management and control in ancient Rome, and particularly in the liminal state of *homo sacer*, a banned “person whom anyone could kill with impunity” but “who was not to be put to death according to ritual practices” (*Homo Sacer* 72). The unpunishability of *homo sacer*’s killing and his exclusion from the ritual of sacrifice delineates the embryonic constitution of a new subject that is doubly effaced by both political and religious laws. This subject’s banishment from the political life (*bios*) exposes the devaluation of his biological existence (*zoe*) and brings to the surface the constitution of “bare life”, an existence that is devoid of political significance or intrinsic value and is exposed to murderous violence. At the same time, the degradation of the subject to an insignificant, disposable body, and its further reduction to a life of unsanctioned suffering and mortality, sheds light on a liminal case in sovereign power that includes, by way of excluding, and anticipates and authorizes, by way of annulling, such a form of existence. This exceptional case, which leaves the sovereign outside, and yet profoundly implicated in *homo sacer*’s original exclusion, instantiates the symbolic birth of an extreme kind of sovereign power in which “human life is included in the political order in being exposed to an unconditional capacity to kill” (*Homo Sacer* 85), and initiates a sphere where “the sovereign’s power is exercised as rule over life” (Ross 2), where politics become biopolitics.

Although in ancient Rome the condition and conditioning of bare life constitutes an exceptional case of “the excluded outside of the political” realm (Ziarek 91), with the passage of time, bare life becomes the “inner hidden form” of political power and violence. Far, though, from suggesting its integration within political existence, bare life remains the “disjunctive inclusion of the inassimilable remnant” (91), which still remains

⁶⁹In his “Political technology of Individuals,” Foucault brings together the “politics”, “police” and “biopolitics”: We can say now that the true object of the police becomes, at the end of the eighteenth century, the population; or in other words, the state has essentially to take care of men as a population. It wields its power over living beings as living beings, and its politics, therefore, has to be biopolitics. Since the population is nothing more than what the state takes care of for its own sake, of course, the state is entitled to slaughter it, if necessary. So the reverse of biopolitics is thanatopolitics.” (160) Foucault, Michel. “The Political Technology of Individuals”. *Technologies of the Self*. London: 1988.

the target of sovereign violence. For Agamben, the production of bare life that is utterly extinguishable and exhaustible at the will of the sovereign power becomes crystallized in the irreparable and ineffable conditions that surrounded life in the Nazi concentration camps: “The camp—as the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space (insofar as it is founded solely on the state of exception)—will appear as the hidden paradigm of the political space of modernity” (*Homo Sacer* 123). As he explains,

Insofar as its inhabitants were stripped of every political status and wholly reduced to bare life, the camp was also the most absolute political space ever to have been realized, in which power confronts nothing but pure life, without any mediation. This is why the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen. (171)

For Agamben, the “thanatopolitics” of the concentration camp are not modernity’s extreme aberration, but its *nomos*, its “fundamental biopolitical paradigm” (181). The epistemological limits of Agamben’s hypostatization of the Nazi concentration camps “as the ‘*nomos*’ of the modern” (Scott ix) have been highlighted by a number of critics. His turn to the concentration camp as modernity’s biopolitical paradigm, for example, betrays a Eurocentric definition in that it forgets a number of other antecedent manifestations of “bare life”, such as those instantiated in the traversing of the Middle Passage,⁷⁰ or the plantations in the Caribbean and the Americas, where the denuded, incarcerated and disposable black bodies of the slaves exemplify the politics of exclusion by inclusion that surround bare life.

Along with the aforementioned examples, the lives of the slave girls under Ma Palagada’s ownership symptomatically reveal the conditions of another historical specificity that is absent in Agamben’s formulation of ‘bare life’, although their enslavement defines them as subjects in a permanent and predetermined state of exception “with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns” (*Homo Sacer* 84). This omission is even more conspicuous, since in *Homo Sacer* Agamben opens up the

⁷⁰ Scott offers a reading of Agamben’s bare life through the *Zhong* incident, where the captain of the ship decided that “it would be more profitable to throw one hundred and thirty-three of them to their deaths overboard since the Liverpool ship owner’s insurers were bound to answer claims brought for slaves thrown into the sea for “the safety of the ship” but not for those who perished of “natural causes” (4)

manifestations of “bare life” to include a number of un-constituted and un-representable identities outside the spatial economies of the concentration camp, such as those of refugees, of illegal immigrants, of comatose bodies, and of ethnic rape camps in the former Yugoslavia. If, as Agamben suggests, “we find ourselves virtually in the presence of a camp every time such a structure is created, independent of the kinds of crime that are committed there and whatever its denomination and specific topography,” (175) then the lives of the slaves, like the girls in Ma Palagada’s house, who are reduced to, and expended through, calculated economies of profit and loss constitute another manifestation of “bare life”.

Thus, in the same way that “homo sacer” materializes that which “cannot be included in the whole of which it is part and that cannot belong to the set in which it is always, already included” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 178), the slave girls’ black bodies constitute what is “included by exclusion” in slavery’s system. Their separation from, and annihilation in, the body politic constitutes and consolidates slavery’s operation as a system of biopolitics. A symbolic moment in the novel that mirrors the girls’ “exclusion by inclusion” in the system of slavery takes place when Ojebeta becomes aware of the different spatial economies in Ma Palagada’s big house, which include her ‘bare’ existence as a slave by writing off her humanity. Ojebeta and the other slave girls sleep in “the special parts of the compound allocated to them”, “because no well brought up lady”, like Ma Palagada, would “allow her bought girls to sleep in the same building as the daughters of ‘human beings’” (89, emphasis added). Being reduced to the state of “bare life” that is life lived in a perpetual state of “without”: without the right to representation, without the right or the means to resist, without the laws and regulation of the body politic to protect them, the bodies of the slave women are not only stripped of intrinsic value, or deemed expendable, but have indeed “entered to an intimate symbiosis with death, without nevertheless, belonging to the world of the deceased” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 100). Within this frame, the slave girls’ lives in bondage amplify the conditions of being in a perpetual state of exception, of enduring “death-in life,” and of joining modernity’s long list of “living-deads”. Their lives are embroiled in what Achille Mbembe calls in “Necropolitics”, by way of appropriating and expanding Agamben’s state of exception, “a *state of injury*, in a phantomlike world of horrors and intense cruelty and

profanity” (21). For although they are all kept alive, their daily subjection to maiming, coercion, and physical exploitation reduces them to the invisible, ghost like figures of modernity’s “necropolitics”, which underscore the profoundly cynical nature of the form of politics enunciated in expendability.

The slave girls’ subjection to the state of exception is informed by their implication in both gendered and colonial configurations of biopolitical power. Their status, conditioned, as we have seen, by the complicity of local (patriarchy) and global (capitalist modernity) forces, adds another dimension to their suffering which finds expression in the act of sexual violation. If the “ethnic rape camps” in Agamben’s narrative⁷¹ instantiate a fundamental example of bio-political power, in that the act of rape is the mark of sovereignty stamped directly on the abject female body, then the rape of slave girls instantiates another manifestation of the male master’s control over female bodies, which are authorized as his property by annulling their intrinsic value as human beings. Emecheta’s criticism of the slave girl’s debilitating by gendered configurations of power is articulated through their helpless surrender to Pa Malagada’s and his son’s sexual appetites. Chiago, the older slave girl, testifies that whenever Ma Palagada is out of the big house “Pa Palagada would call her into his room on any pretext”; on one occasion, for example, “He had insisted on her rubbing his back and cutting his nails, while he occasionally dipped his huge hands into her blouse” (93). Similarly, Clifford follows his father’s example and exercises his right as the master of the house; the first time Clifford “jumped on her and pulled at the small breasts she had then...” (94), Chiago resists and screams. As a result, she is not only slapped by Clifford, but violently beaten by Pa Palaga. Thus, although Chiago many times “had come out feeling physically ill and sick at heart” (94), she gradually learns “to stop protesting, to accept his attention and be quiet about it” (93), for as they all agree “what can we do?” (94).

⁷¹ Having defined the concentration camp as the “nomos” of modernity, Agamben advances to suggest that “the camps have, in a certain sense, in an even more extreme form reappeared in the territories of the former Yugoslavia. At issue in the former Yugoslavia is, rather, an incurable rupture of the old nomos and a dislocation of the population and human lives along entirely new lines of flight. Hence the decisive importance of ethnic rape camps” (176). My juxtaposition of the horror in former Yugoslavian rape camps and the conditions of life in bondage does not aim to belittle or reduce the former; rather, it is due to my sensitivity and empathy to these Muslim women’s “bare lives” that motivate me to enlarge and make more inclusive the list of anonymous female bodies that have endured this ultimate form of violation.

Interestingly, the girls are familiar with only a small portion of Chiago's agonies from her visits in Pa Malagada's room; for, although her stories narrate her disgust towards the violent fondling she has to endure, they deliberately conceal the fact that "she had had to give in completely to the man's gross appetite" (94). Chiago's inability to verbalise the agonies of rape is not simply the product of an oppressive mechanism purpose structured to silence such articulation, but also a function of the universal, metaphysical difficulty of articulating corporeal experience. Elaine Scarry's research on pain's unsharability has challenged the power of conventional language to signify the reality of agonised bodies for "physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). The link between pain and silence embroils the female body in the structures of power, in that silence "permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice, [converting] real human pain ...into a regime's fiction of power" (18). Scarry's thesis illuminates how the collapse of language under the historical weight of systematic torture of black enslaved women, like Chiago, confirms the oppressor's status, and strengthens the impossibility of bringing into representation their agonized bodies.⁷²

Yet, torture under bondage and the manifestation of the girls' bare lives is not confined to acts of rape. The violent tenor of the slave girls' life is further manifested in Pa Malagada's disposition "to behave in a cruel and intemperate manner and in the spectacle of pain inflicted on the slave's body" (Mbembe, "Necropolitics" 32). As Hortense Spillers warns:

⁷² Scarry's statement has been challenged by Rajan in *Real and Imagined Women*, which focuses on the subject of sati. In her attempt to appropriate western mediations on the body in pain so as to re-introduce "the female subject as an agent" (15), Rajan counter-argues that "Scarry's notion of the radical subjectivity of pain, creates an absolute 'other' of the subject in pain" and forgets a number of variants such as "those who have a well-developed language for the trivialization of pain" (20), the fact that "pain constitutes subjectivity" in that the subject acts, by way of reacting, to the condition of pain (22), and most importantly, that "sympathy of pain is equally based upon the universal experience of pain" (20). Yet, Rajan's universal experience of pain figures subaltern subjectivity as a universalized and unified condition, which invokes the spectre of the European humanistic subject critiqued by Spivak. Additionally, as Boehmer has argued, "certain recuperative selves stand in place of others; there are those among the once-colonized for whom the silences of history have not ended" (Boehmer), and it is precisely this conditioning, which contributes to the black body's further "othering" and invisibility, that Emecheta's narrative dramatizes in its refusal to represent Chiago's rape.

it makes good theory, or commemorative “herstory” to want to “forget”, or to have failed to realize, that the African female subject, under these historic conditions, is not only the target of rape...but also the topic of specifically *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males. (387)

In *The Slave Girl* the physical violation of the slave girls’ bodies is a daily reality they have learned to endure. The narrator’s comment, that “the sound of the girls receiving punishment was something they were used to” (98), presents the physical subjection of their bodies not as an aberration, but as “an element in manners...an act of caprice and pure destruction aimed at instilling terror” (Mbembe, “Necropolitics” 34). As we learn, the only method Pa Palagada knows of making his slaves obedient

was by caning. If you did not look at him when he was talking to you, you got the cane. If you stared at him too much, you were caned. If you laughed at him, the same treatment would be applied... The man was crazy with power. (95)

Under the state of Pa Palagada’s terror the slave girls are forced into desperate conditions, living in a permanent state of exception, or what Mbembe calls a life in a “death-scape”, “a form of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Hoeller, Interview).

Interestingly, although Pa Palagada is considered as an abusive, tyrannical master, Ma Palagada is viewed as a benign mistress, and all the slave girls are attached to her to such an extent that when she dies they mourn. Thus, the girls under Ma Palagada’s ownership are grateful for their fair treatment: the refinement of their harsh provincial accents, their little white baskets that are full of clothes, unexpected gifts such as the blue muslin with which they were instructed to make their “own harvest gowns” (106) “in the latest fashion” and more importantly, their education in the Church Missionary Society School every Sunday. With the passage of time, whenever Ojebeta thinks nostalgically of her dead mother and father, she finds consolation in the thought that if they were alive “she would have never come to Otu in the first place and might not have known the kind of life she was now enjoying” (131). With all these testimonies, is it possible that Emecheta creates in Ma Palagada a figure of what Brodski calls “a benign despot”, one who “cares about her slaves” and proves that “slavery has a humane face—that of the harsh but

caring surrogate mother, who strives to create a version of an extended family, supported somewhat by her husband, Pa Palagada” (56)? Is it possible that she creates a repository of female nurturing values that mediates the conditions of the girls’ “bare lives”?

A close consideration of the essence of the liberties and prerogative positions Ma Palagada’s slave girls enjoy problematises Brodski’s argument, as every benevolent act is shadowed by the motive of self-interest. For instance, the slave girls’ Sunday education in the Church Missionary Society school under Mrs. Simpson’s catechism may appear as a progressive, benevolent gesture, but upon closer scrutiny, it points towards a web of hidden motives and intricate micro-politics that increase Ma Palagada’s wealth and power. Thus, we learn that although people were reluctant to send their own children to the colonial schools, “it was acceptable to send domestic slaves so long as their going did not tamper with their daily tasks” (102). It is not only that the missionary schooling takes place only once a week and does not destroy Ma Palagada’s business but there are also direct financial rewards for her:

More market stalls were assigned to Ma Palagada as an indirect result of this, and because of her connections she could buy any import at wholesale price before her rivals had time to do so. So she became doubly rich. Seeing that conversion from nothing to Christianity brought Ma financial rewards, a number of smaller traders followed suit, and when the “nobodies” saw that the rich were all going to this new place called church, many were converted to this fashionable religion. (103)

Ma Palagada’s conversion to Christianity, a signifier of colonial ideology, is conflated in another symbol of Imperial economies: The United Africa Company, which is run by Mrs. Simpson’s husband. The slave girls’ pious attendances signify money and power, since they “bestowed on the merchants privileges such as the monopoly and preferential trade terms that Ma Palagada enjoys” (Sougou 79). A further destabilization, subversion and finally reclamation of the slave girls’ humane treatment that spells out Ma Palagada’s calculated moves is reiterated in the blue muslin gift that made the girls feel “grateful for having been bought by her” (107). What the girls are unaware of is that Ma Palagada had ordered the muslin for her own use,

but some of the sailors had poured some drink on the bale and it had soaked through. They had promised to bring her a perfect, unsoiled one on their next trip.

Meanwhile she had offered to take this one off their hands, since it was no use to them. She knew it would make nice church outfits for the girls. (108)

In both incidents, Emecheta grounds Ma Palagada's benevolence in the enterprising realm of ownership, property and increase of her capital. Despite the differences in the politics of ownership, all forms of slavery can be levelled down to the same coda of property, exploitation and systematic dehumanisation of the African women.

Emecheta's gradual demystification of Ma Palagadas' pseudo-benevolent politics of ownership underlies these forms of enslavement that, through their camouflaged oppressive mechanisms, ultimately prove to be detrimental for the enslaved population. Through her mocking nurturing façade of ideal custodianship, Ma Palagada succeeds in subduing her chattels to a passive state of being that nullifies any capacity for resistance. Due to the concealment of her exploitative dynamics, the slave girls fail to detect her subtle forms of coercion. As a consequence, they do not examine nor critique the liaison between the *raison d'être* of Ma Palagada's trading empire and their existence in it, a necessary process for contesting slavery's system, and gradually claiming their freedom. If Pa Palagada coerces and abuses the bodies of his slaves, Ma Palagada materializes "the theft of the [slave girls'] bodies—a wilful and violent (and unimaginable from this distance) severing of the captive body from its motive will, its active desire" (Spillers 386). And Emecheta suggests that Ma Palagada's disciplinary tools are more effective in producing docile and domesticated slaves who fail to ponder or reflect upon the unnaturalness and injustice of their predicament. Once the body and the spirit is domesticated then the power and will to resist is pathologised; once the enslaved subjects are constructed according to the oppressor's interests, internalising his/her values then slavery becomes a natural condition of life.

The tragic consequences of Ma Palagada's "nurturing" ownership are revealed when Victoria, her daughter, comes and settles in the house in the wake of her mother's illness. Being spoiled as a girl and knowing nothing "about poverty" (113), for she never had to work or get involved in her mother's market, Victoria is unaware of Ma Palagada's "superior" techniques of treating the slaves. As a result, her harsh treatment of the slaves as slaves, and not "daughters", awakens Ojebeta to her status within the big house and the consequences of her status as a slave. One day, and while Ojebeta is taking care of her

two children, Victoria rushes into the room when the younger one has just tipped a china plate full of food over her head. This sight infuriates Victoria, who starts caning Ojebeta. As Victoria “pounced on Ojebeta, hitting, pulling, spitting at her” (114), she denigrates her verbally: “You good for nothing slave! You bush slave!” (114). When her brother Clifford tries to calm her, Victoria articulates a sentence that will reverberate in Ojebeta’s mind: “Why, she is only a slave...who had to be sold by her people!” (114). As the narrator explains

Ojebeta had by now grown accustomed to physical pain, and to the mental anguish of being disparaged as a slave by all and sundry; but seldom had people reminded her in so many words that she had been sold here by her own brother. (114)

Victoria’s harsh treatment of Ojebeta as a slave, and not as “daughter,” exposes the realities of her mother’s position and awakens Ojebeta to her reified status, to her value as a commodity. Yet, as we have seen, Ojebeta’s awakening comes too late, when “Not only is [her] self no longer recognised by the Other; but the self no longer recognises itself” (Mbembe, *Acts of Self-Writing* 241). Her status as a female slave has plunged her “not only into humiliation, debasement, and nameless suffering but also into a zone of nonbeing and social death (241- 242).

Having presented the slave girls’ inculcation into a perpetual state of exception, I would like to return to Agamben and explore the possibilities of transcending their “bare lives”, of assuming agency within the state of exception. In *The Open* (2004) Agamben traces the production of bare life in the workings of the “anthropological machine of humanism”, the biopolitical discourse of the occident:

What would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself—only a *bare life*. And faced with this extreme figure of the human and the inhuman, it is not so much a matter of asking which of the two machines (or of the two variants of the same machine) is better or more effective—or, rather, less lethal and bloody—as *it is of understanding how they work so that we might, eventually, be able to stop them*. (Agamben, *The Open* 37-8, emphasis added)

In a gesture of political critique that “is coupled with the tendency to describe his analysis as ‘lifting veils,’ discovering ‘inner secrets,’ and laying ‘bare’ the logic of the Occident”

(Agamben, qtd in Ross 9), Agamben's formulation here exposes his ultimate utopianism and Eurocentric allegiances. An interrogation of Agamben's political claim from the site of Spivak's irreducible and un-representable subaltern subject⁷³ problematises the agent who does the "understanding" and brings to a level of reflection the experiences shaped by the politics of exclusion. For who is the "we" who will enjoy the luxury of studying the "anthropological" machine and then apply this knowledge in order to alter it? Is s/he the "Western-trained informant" (Spivak, "Draupadi" 179), who after witnessing, through the safe distance of his/her computer screen or his/her books, the multiple plights and injustices committed on the multiple radical others, will then act and "speak on" their behalf? Besides the fact that Agamben's reflection on "the ways and forms of a new politics" (*Homo Sacer* 5) is directed towards a contemporary form of political activism, his suggestion enters to the dangerous terrain in which the privileged few will putatively represent the rights of the un-privileged many. The colonial and imperial connotations of such a gesture undermine the political potential of his "diagnostic task" (Ross 7). Equally, Agamben's "we" excludes the subjects of the state of exception, the "bare lives" of the "anthropological machine's" machinations, for they can't be simultaneously the "objects of sovereign's power" and the "subjects of political action." The acts of 'observation' and 'reflection' presuppose a moment of suspension, a luxurious pause/distance from the hold of sovereign power that, as we saw in Emecheta's narrative, amounts to an impossible act for those contained by it throughout their lives.

Indeed, the closing lines of *The Slave Girl's* narrative precludes the possibility of a "way out" of bare life. Although Ma Palagada's death symbolises the dawning of a new order: "what we will see tomorrow will be the beginning of another story. We may be part of it or plucked out like the foot lice. Let us go to sleep, at least get our energy back for the new order" (138), this new story does not signify the slave girls' freedom or their "rebirth" as free citizens; it rather opens new cycles of enslavement. And this study maintains that the slave girls' entrapment in new cycles of slavery is attributed to the

⁷³ I have to emphasise, that in examining Agamben's position through Spivak's questioning of the subaltern's representation I don't intend to draw any parallels between the "homo sacer" and the "subaltern". I rather want to juxtapose two different lines of political thinking and expose what the former forgets.

impossibility of enjoying the luxury of the ‘momentary pause’ outside the ‘anthropological machine’, for after slavery patriarchy rushed to claim their bodies.

The narrator offers little information about what happens to Ma Palagada’s slaves after her death, and it is mostly through her son, Clifford, that we learn about how most of them were set free and started their own business in Onitsa market (177). However, the narrator’s information about the lives of the two characters she follows, Chiago and Ojebeta, problematise Clifford’s testimony. Chiago, for instance, takes Ma Palagada’s role in the house as Pa Palagada’s wife for she gives birth to his child; she doesn’t have access to Ma Palagada’s power or status and she is in thrall to Pa Palagada’s power for the rest of her life. As the narrator notes, Chiago’s introduction to the house as the new mistress is done so subtly “that many people still regarded and treated her as a slave who had had the misfortune to have a baby” (139). Although she is allowed some liberties and her sphere of influence grows, as she plays a constitutive role in persuading Pa Palagada to let Ojebeta return to her village on the grounds that her “slave price” will be paid in the future by her people, her last appearance suggests that few things have changed. Her seclusion in Pa Palagada’s room holding with one hand “her baby on one side of her, picking up Pa’s dirty clothes with her other free hand” (143), undercuts celebrated prophecies of “freedom” and outlines the new terms of her domestic/gendered slavery.

Similarly, Ojebeta’s entrance to the new order of things becomes synonymous with a relative amount of freedom, which is however mediated and gradually reversed by the remnants of her enslaved years, through the internalisation of prescribed gendered roles. Being raised as a slave, Ojebeta moves from economic enslavement to traditional thralldom. Upon her return to her village, her chance for freedom and self-expression is undercut by her uncritical espousal of patriarchal values. Having spent a short period of time, in complete surrender to the newly imported Christian dogma, she then passes on to the last of her owners: her husband Joseph Jacobs. Impressed by his refined European clothes, accoutrements that Ojebeta has been taught to appreciate after “for her long stay with the Palagadas” (160), she decides to marry him. Yet, Joseph’s refined outfit veils his patriarchal dispositions, and the fact that he “would do nothing that went against custom, tradition or local mores” (168). After their marriage, Ojebeta enters a new form of

slavery, where the rhetorical question “Would she ever be free?” (168) is answered by the narrator’s comment on her wifely status:

One does not ask whether they loved and cared for each other after; those words make no sense in a situation like this. There was a kind of eternal bond between husband and wife, a bond produced maybe by centuries of traditions, taboos and, latterly, Christian dogma. Slave, obey your master. Wife, honour your husband, who is your father, your head, your heart, your soul. (173)

Ojebeta’s marriage precludes the question of happiness or freedom, and introduces her into new, yet familiar, structures of muteness and invisibility; although her life undergoes a minimal amount of changes, “Ojebeta was content and did not want more of life; she was happy in her husband, happy to be submissive, even to accept an occasional beating, because that was what she had been brought up to believe a wife should expect” (174). The similarities between the slaves’ and the wife’s status are further established when Joseph buys Ojebeta from the Palagadas, by way of paying back the amount her brother had taken from Ma Palagada. For once more, the official transferral of her ownership to Jacobs is conducted in her absence, when she is sent back to the kitchen to finish her cooking “leaving the men to finalise the arrangements of her permanent ownership” (177). Her second reduction to a living commodity for exchange is not marked by Ojebeta’s attempt to run away, as she did when at the age of eight Okolie sold her to Ma Palagada, and neither is marked by protests; it is rather sealed by her passive submission to her husband, whom she acknowledges with the following words: “Thank you my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master” (179). Her story closes with an ironic statement that exposes the allegiances between colonialism, slavery and patriarchy and questions the new era’s “post”:

So as Britain was emerging from war once more victorious, and claiming to have stopped the slavery which she had helped to spread in all her black colonies, Ojebeta, now a woman of thirty-five, was changing masters. (178)

Emecheta has changed masters, but her entrapment in new structure of muteness continues even after slavery.

Yet, although Ojebeta cannot resist, the experiences of her life cannot be easily accommodated under a tomb stone like Ma Palagada’s. Her story is echoed in the story of

the nameless “slave woman,” whose story emerges in *The Slave Girl*’s narrative and resurfaces in *The Joys of Motherhood*. In *The Slave Girl* the slave woman’s story is recalled by Chiago when Ojebeta’s arrival in Ma Palagada’s slave house brings her memories of her own introduction into the system of slavery. The sadness of her thoughts is reinforced by the impossibility of escaping her predicament. The thought of running away is shadowed by a knowledge of the fate that awaits the “runaway slaves”, for as she explains, “the slave who made an unsuccessful attempt to run away was better off dead. Such a slave would be so tortured that he or she would be useless as a person, or else might be used for burial” (61).

The slave woman’s traumatic story is revealed during one of the slave burials Chiago witnesses when travelling with Ma Palagada in the Ibo interior. Being the daughter of a chief captured from a nearby village, and having attempted to return to her people a number of times, the nameless slave woman is condemned to be buried alive with her deceased mistress, so as to accompany her in the afterlife. At the moment of the burial, she refuses to go down like a good, obedient, repentant slave and protests by pleading for mercy. Her pleas “amuse” the men standing around watching, and one of the chief’s sons “lost his patience” and “struck the defenceless woman hard at the back of her shaved head” (62). While the chief reprimands his son for his “brutality”, the slave woman, still alive and from within the grave, warns the chief that “For showing me this little mercy, chief, I shall come again, I shall come again...” (62). Before she is able to finish her sentence, the chief’s son gives the slave woman a final blow that knocks her down in the grave, but doesn’t kill her. The spectacle of the slave woman “struggling even when the body of her dead mistress was placed on her. She still fought and cried out so alive” (62) haunts Chiago, and her struggling voice that is silenced only “by the damp earth that was piled on both her and the dead woman” (62) reverberates in her ears. Some years later, Chiago eavesdrops on Ma Palagada telling to another woman in the market that the chief’s new wife had a baby daughter who was “very much like the princess who had been buried alive” (62). The slave woman’s return and the consequences of her haunting are deployed in *The Joys of Motherhood*. The circumstances of her burial are offered in an almost identical way, with the sole exception of the issue of her silencing. Whereas in *The Slave Girl* the blows inflicted on her head fail to silence her, in *The Joys of*

Motherhood the second blow “silences her for ever” (23). Yet, this silence is elusive. Through Nnu Ego’s life, the slave woman will perform her speaking by haunting the patriarchal society, and the system of slavery that condemned her in the first place.

The significance of the slave woman’s textual returns provide an alternative model of political thought and action than the one professed by Agamben, for, as Foucault has noted, they come from the site that astonishes a “society, in which political power had assigned itself the task of administering life”: the site of “death [which] is [biopolitical] power’s limit, the moment that escapes it” (“Right of Death and Power Over Life” 261). The slave woman’s multiple crossings between narratives and lives, and her defiance of death, threaten and haunt the hegemonic systems that have laid her life bare. This haunting “is the haunting of a subject prevented by alterity from closing itself off in its peacefulness” (Duffourmantelle 4), and illuminates the possibility of resistance within the realm of Empire from the site of the margins; from the site of the “gendered, racialised subaltern” that is always under erasure, but not fully erased; from the site of the “unthought” of the politics of denial that have rendered life an interminable state of exception; from the site of the historically conditioned bodies that have been forgotten, but return to haunt our memories. Thus, her textual retrievals from the site of death and silence, and her placements within new structures of death and silence confront with more intensity and urgency the question of “justice and injustice, equality and inequality....*on the basis of the imbalance(s) of power obtaining in any historically specific occasion*” (Spanos 188, sic). The slave woman’s last articulation “I shall come again, I shall come again” (62) anticipates her multiple arising(s) and returns to the world of the living, that intend to undo the silence that has followed her death. Her “undoing” is not conducted through the language of the ‘centre’, but through a language available only to those subdued by the hegemonic powers of the ‘centre’: the language of silence, of what resides in speech, and she will articulate “the question of the political ...as being the question that comes to us from the ‘foreigner’” (Duffourmantelle 68), from what we have excluded, abused and exploited. Thus, her questioning compels the rethinking of unevenness and injustice, of belonging and presence and re-introduces the “other’s” claim to representation, history and memory.

The slave woman's textual migrations link the plight of Ojebeta, Chiago and other slave girls with that of Nnu Ego, creating a story of suffering that transcends the borders of the personal and speak to different, yet related, historically conditioned sufferings. Her spectral, textual arising haunts with the same intensity both capitalist modernity and patriarchy. Similarly, her violent, abnormal death speaks to all those African people who endured the angst of separation and disorientation, "who were torn from their homeland, deprived of dignity and substance in a world that made of them provisional bodies, if not indeed ghosts" (Dickerson 210). Her torturing migrations from the world of the living to the world of the dead, and back again, to relive over and over again different, yet related, manifestations of death-in-life, alludes to the painful crossings made by the bodies of the Black Atlantic; her multiple blows that force her into her grave allude to the body of the Middle passage that is not to be forgotten: the black body forced into small "unlivable" spaces. And then she returns again back again to speak to all the slave girls whose crossings into the other world were not as violent as those who were taken away, but still have experienced the horror of slavery and their conditioning as exchangeable, exhaustible commodities.

The slave woman's spectre echoes Fatmatta's questioning of the constructions of communal belonging outside modalities of ethnicity, gender and race; she converses with Aidoo's ghost and empathises with its dilemma: to its "I don't know, I can't tell, I don't know, I can't tell", she responds "I will return, I will return"; finally, she wonders in Armah's slave castles, that haunt Accra and Baako's artistic enterprise, and visits not only the slave dungeons, but also the white washed terraces that overlook two sites of death: the Atlantic ocean and the dilapidated fishing village. From one of its huts she senses the gaze of a little boy, and she asks him to re-member. All these ghostly silhouettes, and many others, the spectres of the Black Atlantic, have different stories to narrate; they haunt from different localities, different historical moments, and different spatialities. But they all formulate a constellation of spectres that through the agency of haunting raise the question of ethics, politics and memory, not as problems of knowledge, policing and remembering, but as problems of relation with the "others".

A f t e r w o r d

“the afterword is not, that means ought not, ought never to be a last word.
It comes after the discourse, that's true, but detached enough not to accomplish,
finish off, close or conclude.
It lifts the closure but does not sublimate it”
Jacques Derrida, “Afterw.rds, or, at least, less than a letter about a letter less”

Afterword, and literarily ‘after’ Jacques Derrida’s ‘words’, as opposed to a conclusion, to any gesture, that is, that aspires to bring closure and thus introduces new structures of silencing and forgetting. Afterword like a P.S., a post-script in daily correspondences that points to the inexhaustible of every statement and defies the power of the full-stop in that it begs for more conversation, more discussion, more chances of relation. Afterword also as a reminder of what comes *after the word*, after the logos of the centre from the site of silence to haunt, like the afterword(s) of Fatmatta, of the ghost, of the slave castles, of the slave woman. Finally, afterword as a gesture that welcomes more “after words”: more research on the memory of the transatlantic slave trade in contemporary West African fiction, within disciplines, and across continents.

One of the aims of this study was to open up a space for more research on the theme of transatlantic slavery by examining the ways in which Syl Cheney Coker, Ama Ata Aidoo, Ayi Kwei Armah and Buchi Emecheta re-turn critically back, and thus, break the silence that pertains to its history. As I have argued, close readings of their texts through the lens of the history of slavery attest not only to the fact that African writers were never silent on the history of slavery, but that its pervasive presence, that is symptomatically read and noticed through its absence from local and global politics of representation, is intertwined in the cultural and communal fabric, and is used to comment upon and re-think crucial issues such as questions of belonging and ethnicity, the quandaries associated with the neo-colonial condition, violence and gender issues. In their attempts to speak to the divulging silence of slavery’s ghosts, these authors narrate stories of pain and trauma, of betrayals and duplicities, of denial and forgetting. Their need to address the historic invisibility of slavery, and thus gradually re-constitute its narrative in the present, is not a nostalgic turn to the past, but a political praxis that aims to problematise

the present and speak to its silences. It is not accidental that all the authors considered in this study explore these themes and open a “dialogue” with the spectres of history while writing from, or referring to, moments of political crisis in their respective countries, when, as Bakhtin notes, the national culture loses “its sealed off and self-sufficient character” (370). As we have seen, Syl Cheney Coker urges the re-thinking of the question of “ethnicity”, “hybridity” and “origins” from the standpoint of an “ethnic” civil war that ravaged his country for ten years; Ama Ata Aidoo, writing from the changing circumstances of the post-Independence period in Ghana, “creates absences” in celebratory nationalist constructions that promote the idea of Ghana as one of the “homes” of the black Diaspora, by unearthing a silenced and repressed/traumatic event in its history that critically undoes the idea of a stable and ideal “home”: the event of the “home’s” complicity with the transatlantic slave trade; Ayi Kwei Armah, writing from the same period of crisis as Aidoo does, responds to the need, and the urge, to disrupt the forgetting of slavery’s history and critically re-examine its legacy in the present so as to unveil the hegemonic and colonial frames of reference that keep his community enslaved in cycles of violence; finally, Buchi Emecheta returns to the crucial, but also “promising”, moment of slavery’s abolition in Nigeria, to expose the predicament of the slave women, who continue to lead a life in bondage, a “life-in-death” even after abolition. For these authors, “the past is not reclaimed for its own sake but because without a recognition of it, there can be no understanding of the present and no future” (Busia 27). And this study maintains that by understanding the present, and envisioning the future, through the process of historical revision, these four authors disrupt and challenge those internal and external structures that maintain and sustain the production of Others.

Yet, this is just the beginning. To return to the idea of the afterword mentioned before, it must be emphasised that to consider these authors’ breaking of the silence as the end of the discourse and the critical re-visioning of slavery’s history in West African literatures, would be to perpetuate the same destructive silencing enacted by the “violence of the abstraction in the writing of history” (Linebaugh 7), and by their local communities’ prevailing will to forget, dismissing altogether these authors’ calls to “remember to remember”. Rather, one of this study’s ambitions is to underscore the

necessity “to perpetually initiate rather than conclude the argument so that every new generation may visit and quarry its lessons” (Agyemang, “Cape Coast Castle” 28). Within the academic community, the act of ‘perpetual initiation’ can be probed by re-reading, and re-thinking, the works of other authors from the African side of the Atlantic ocean through the lens of slavery’s history, and attend to their respective dis/closures of history’s shadows. Apart from the works briefly touched upon in each chapter of this study, there are a number of others, such as Tess Onuweme’s *The Missing Face* (2002), Isidore Okpewho’s *Call me by my Rightful Name* (2004), Ama Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* (1995), Mohammed Ben Abdallah’s *The Slaves* (1998), to name just a few Anglophone works, as well as texts from the Francophone side, such as Yambo Ouologuem’s *Bound to Violence* (1971), which responds to the need to “find a language for identifying hauntings” (Gordon 7), and retrieve slavery’s spectral silences.

Equally, the “inexhaustible” claim of the afterword refers not only to the breadth of texts from within the African continent, but also to the impossibility of narrating, and thus restoring, the “whole” history of the Black Atlantic, and putting its ghosts at rest. Yet, besides the impossibility of fully reconstructing the story of transatlantic slavery, there is also the imperative need “to attend to a series of moments in which an array of African, Caribbean, North American, South American, or West European cultural, narrative, literary, historical, and ideological practices converge” (Baucom 7). Such a constellation of voices, experiences, and histories from across the three continents and across genres and disciplines will not complete slavery’s missing history, but will allow the gaps and the silences speak to the violence, the ruptures, and their resultant effects in the present. Ultimately, this study invites the opening of cross-continental dialogues, in which African, African-Caribbean, African-American and African-British writers can critically intervene in theoretical debates about memory and forgetting, the local and the global, slavery and modernity, and contribute to the rethinking of concepts such as “identity formation”, “colonialism”, “representation”, “violence”, “diaspora”, “trauma”, “history”, “hybridity”, “the body”, “the nation”, “origins”, and so on through the history of Atlantic slavery, through the perspective of the footnoted.

What brings these authors together, through their commitment to converse with the ghosts of history, is their rigorous critique of the “violence of the history of Occidental

thought and practice”, and their “thinking of the repressed event in terms of the implications of its persistent and anxiety-provoking spectral afterlife” (Spanos 205). Writing from the margins of the Imperial Logos, of the master’s discourse, and *after* its murderous politics of exclusion, the West African authors considered in this study—as well as authors of the diaspora, such as Toni Morrison, David Dabydeen, Caryl Phillips, Paule Marshall, Maryse Conde and Gayl Jones—project in their works the spectre as the menacing precipitation of modernity’s logos. Being under erasure but not erased, silent but not silenced, these spectres could potentially formulate the “spectral polity” (Spanos 191) of the Atlantic that rethinks, and challenges, modernity’s Imperial project from the position of the subaltern, of the exile, of the historyless subject, of the radical Other, of the displaced, of the stranger and the diasporic subject. Their respective hauntings from different histories and localities emerge as the “unthought” of Eurocentric logos that “describ[es] it in a language unavailable to those it has already subdued” (Said, qtd. in Spanos 200). Thus, they cannot be ignored, they cannot be contained and they cannot be silenced, through this facile silencing of the full-stop, of the end and closure. This study has shown in each respective chapter, but especially at the end of the last chapter, how the specters of the African side of the Atlantic perform and articulate their haunting; there are also studies, mainly those referred to in the introduction, that have engaged in similar projects from the other side of the Atlantic. What is yet to be done is the building of bridges that will bring the spectres of the Atlantic together. Their stories will be different, and even conflicting, but, still, these bridges will re-map the Atlantic and create a topos where the issues of the old and the new, the past and the yet to come, women and men will meet not in harmony, but in an agonistic dialogue that will wake the communities around the Atlantic from their Lethe.

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