

## INTRODUCTION

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*Metaphor and the Slave Trade* examines the hidden though significant role the transatlantic slave trade has played in the Anglophone West African imagination and the means by which it has been metaphorized in the literary production of the region. It explores how four canonical authors in particular—Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri, Ayi Kwei Armah, and Ama Ata Aidoo—integrated metaphors of the slave trade into their fictional worlds, metaphors that were inherited from or invented as a reflection of the coded discourse surrounding the slave trade in their cultures. In much of West African fiction—even in works that employ a seemingly timeless folk-style narrative as Tutuola’s does—we must read into the spaces where the slave trade lies lurking, beyond the layer of the explicit historical setting and into the realm of the metaphor, the rumor, the bodily expression of a long-resident wound. The slave trade hides in the proverbial bush of ghosts, a past always alive in the present, though it is sometimes unnoticed or obscured.

Conservative estimates established by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database determined that more than 12.5 million African people were held as cargo on ships destined for the Americas and slavery.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have managed to document almost thirty-five thousand ships that crossed the Atlantic during the era of the slave trade—a significant achievement in coming to terms with the nature and outcomes of the global commerce in human lives that spanned the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.<sup>2</sup> However, the estimates they are able to make of the African lives affected are limited to those who made it to the coast and embarked on ships headed for the Americas. This quantitative data cannot account for all the people who died in slave-raiding battles or wars, nor the multitude of people who died marching to the shore or in the barracoons, castles, and forts along the coast. These calculations cannot determine how many more people were brought into African domestic slavery as a result of the increased slave raiding engendered by the trade. They do not

tell us how many communities were destroyed or how many new ones were formed in the aftermath of wars waged in the pursuit of slaves.<sup>3</sup>

Nor can these calculations measure the significant personal and social costs of the trade. They do not reveal the suffering of those who lost their homes to warfare and were forced to trek across unknown lands to found new communities. They do not expose the violence people suffered in order to satisfy the desires of an expanding and careless European and American bourgeoisie or the material interests of African tyrants. And most of all, they do not reveal the sheer terror and incurable sorrow people must have felt as their neighbors, husbands, wives, and children were lost to them without explanation. As Carolyn A. Brown indicates, in some regions, there “was scarcely a village, kin group, or family that did not lose a relative to the trade.”<sup>4</sup> William H. Clarke’s narrative of his journeys through Yorubaland in the 1850s confirms that “nearly every kingdom in Africa could relate stories and adventures connected with” the effects of the “accursed slave traffic.”<sup>5</sup>

The transatlantic slave trade had profound economic, demographic, political, and social impacts on African societies and cultures. Patrick Manning notes that “the tragic experience of slavery in the modern world left Africans depleted in population, divided irremediably among themselves, retarded economically, and despised as an inferior race in a world which had built a vision of racial hierarchy based on the inspiration of their enslavement.”<sup>6</sup> The tragic centuries of the slave trade did more than simply pit Europeans against Africans; the significant demographic shifts and economic transformations inspired by the slave trade encouraged radical alterations in the political organizations within and among local African communities, which resulted in the favoring of strong centralized powers over smaller acephalous societies. As Joseph E. Inikori has documented, “The transatlantic slave trade seriously retarded the development of markets and the market economy in West Africa,” despite a robust economic network that crossed West Africa leading up to the rapid expansion of the slave trade in the middle of the seventeenth century. The shift from a trade based in currency in exchange for African-made goods to an exchange of European-made goods for human labor reduced the economic power of the African trading partners.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, as demand for captives to feed the transatlantic trade increased, cultural perceptions of slavery within African communities were altered and domestic demand increased as well. This increased demand and desire for slaves from both external and domestic clients had unintended consequences; for instance, many of those who fled raided villages formed

new refugee communities, some of which flourished, others of which fell to renewed warfare and political strife.<sup>8</sup> Class dynamics shifted in communities across West Africa as the disparity in wealth between the rulers and the ruled increased and as warrior and bandit classes took on a new dominant status on account of their role in producing slaves for the Atlantic trade.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, the effects of the slave trade cannot be measured simply in terms of the people who embarked on ships, who experienced the Middle Passage, and who were enslaved in the Americas. Instead, this study seeks to engage the violence and terror that the slave trade imposed upon the African continent, not simply for those African people who were its direct victims as enslaved captives, but for all those who remained in West Africa and their descendants. And these effects are not comprehensible in economic or demographic terms alone. In seeking out some of the ways people have expressed the anguish and suffering that accompanied these more quantifiable changes, we can engage the modes of representation through which West African authors have depicted the slave trade in the last few centuries, as this can expose us to the memory of loss and mourning that continues to shape West African life in the long shadow of the slave trade.

The present work, then, explores the unique forms of representation and remembrance of the slave trade that surface in Anglophone West African literature. While scholars of West African literature have diagnosed an amnesia in communal memory regarding the slave trade and mourn an alleged failure to memorialize it in creative forms, I argue that memories of the slave trade are overlooked in African literature because they are not revealed in the forms of overt narrativization so familiar in African American literature. My readings of West African texts reveal that Africans do not merely remember the slave trade differently from African Americans; they *represent* it differently as well. Drawing methodological inspiration from the work of interdisciplinary scholars such as Achille Mbembe, Ato Quayson, Marianne Hirsch, Luise White, and Rosalind Shaw as well as from trauma theory and work on collective memory, this study contends that the distant past endures in West African culture and literature in forms of “alternative memory” and metaphorization such as tragic repetition, fear and gossip, and tropes of suffering, bondage, and impotent sexuality—all of which expose the continued physical as well as psychological legacy of a past that no individual living now personally experienced. Overt narrativization, archiving, or even explicit cultural discourse are not necessary for a collective memory of the transatlantic slave trade to exist in West Africa. In fact, narratives of that kind are nearly nonexistent in the literature of the

twentieth century. And yet metaphors of the slave trade nonetheless memorialize that era in West Africa's past in its literature. West African authors express cultural memories of the slave trade in the alternative, metaphorized forms they encounter in their communities and in metaphors of their own creation that resonate with the distinctively African experience of the slave trade. These forms give expression to the way West Africans have archived the traumatic past for themselves.

In the first chapter of this study, I argue that the discourse of the transatlantic slave trade has largely been dominated by the literature, histories, and criticism written about and by African Americans, those whose lives are defined by the diaspora experience of the trade. There is no doubt, however, that the slave trade did not begin on the coastlines of Africa or on the Middle Passage. If we read West African literature for its own particular means of depicting the slave trade, our image and understanding of the encounter with the slave trade is radically altered. The slave ship is almost invisible, as the depictions of the trade move much further into the continent, into the homes of families who lost their children, into the forest where slave raiders and fears abound, to the suffering on the long march to the shore, to the barracoons where captives were held. These depictions turn away from official narrative histories that might ignore the painful era of the trade, toward whispered rumors, terrorizing fears, and bodily knowledges that express metaphorically the localized and splintered memory of the trade.

Thus, through a shift in contextual perspective, an entirely different system of tropes, figures, and images comes to light and represents both the horrors and the cultures produced by the slave trade. In this first chapter, I explore the implications of reading the literature of West Africa in search of the metaphorized expression of slave trade memory. Those metaphors work to express the lingering memory of the slave trade as well as its long-term effects. Writers employ metaphor as a means to critique contemporary political and social realities in West Africa as well. This chapter describes the mechanisms by which these metaphors of the slave trade function, to reveal their prevalence in the canon, and, through this analysis, I hope to provoke a greater awareness and discussion of the way the slave trade is represented in West African literature and culture.

In the chapters on Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri that follow, I contend that these Nigerian authors represent the means by which the memory of the trade continues to haunt the imagination of West Africa through metaphors of captivity and enslavement in the landscape of the bush. In my chapter on

*My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, for instance, I trace a genealogy of a centuries-old African trope I call “the body in the bag.” Through this trope, Tutuola depicts a haunting cycle of enslavement in which the African protagonist is chased by terrifying ghosts, made captive by them, forced to labor, and then escapes, only to be recaptured by some more horrible slave master. Tutuola employs this trope to depict continuities of memory and fear regarding captivity and the slave trade’s endemic presence in the African landscape. In my chapter on *The Famished Road*, I discuss Okri’s appropriation of Tutuola’s body in the bag, through which he critiques the project of global capitalism and redefines modernity in uniquely West African terms. For Okri, the haunted bush is not only the place where people like Olaudah Equiano can be captured and made a slave, but also a space that can be transformed into the tool of the captive, wherein the protagonist is able to subvert the power of the captor by inventing a personal independence, one that parallels the recently won independence of Nigeria. These chapters explore the production of anxiety regarding the slave trade and the metaphorical reproduction of those anxieties.

In the next two chapters, I discuss the means by which West African authors turn away from a focus on the fears of external predators associated with the slave trade to investigate African complicity and the way the slave trade permeates and violates even the most intimate of spaces, relationships, and even the body. Ayi Kwei Armah and Ama Ata Aidoo make this turn to the exploration of the African body through a critique of the slave trade’s contagious commodification of human lives. In Armah’s *Fragments*, the protagonist’s return to Ghana is marred by his lack of resources and his inability to provide for his family, which he implicitly and explicitly links with African participation in the slave trade. As a result, each time he contemplates the past, he falls into an undiagnosable illness, which forces him to vomit profusely, figuratively purging himself of this disease and releasing himself from bodily memories of the trade. My reading of Armah contends that his exploration of slave trade memory requires a renegotiation of our understanding of “trauma” and its metaphorical, physical, and psychological expression over long durations. In Aidoo’s works, memory of the slave trade surfaces as an unbridgeable division between men and women just as the memory of the trade continues to debase the body as a commodity to be exchanged and discarded. In both her play *Anowa* and her novel *Our Sister Killjoy*, human intimacy is thwarted by the insurmountable memory of the denigration of the value of human life, and the impotent body becomes a metaphor for the effects of the trade on the continent. I argue that Ama Ata Aidoo creates, in response, a “grammar

of memory” that aims to transcend the uniquely oppressive nature of slavery’s legacy on African bodies and to serve as a model for escaping the captivity that haunts many of the other metaphorical representations discussed in the study.

The final chapter, “The Suffering of Survival,” explores the long-term trauma that continues to afflict communities that were “left behind” on the African continent during and after the era of the slave trade. For people all along the coast, the slave trade remains an open wound and their experience of it is one marked by suffering that resulted from surviving a trauma and living to tell it. Brief readings of Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*, Achebe’s *Arrow of God*, and T. Obinkaram Echewa’s *I Saw the Sky Catch Fire* help to synthesize the claims of the preceding chapters, underscoring the way these metaphorical representations are a reflection of the transgenerational expression of the uniquely West Africa experience of the slave trade.

In the epilogue, titled “The Future of the Past,” I turn to the more recent writing of Nigerian author Obi Akwani and Ghanaian Kwakuvi Azasu, whose novels mark a historically driven response to the slave trade. In stark contrast to the metaphorical depictions of the trade that constitute late twentieth-century engagement with the trade, this more recent writing suggests the potential for an African historical novel tradition that seems to be emerging in twenty-first-century West African fiction. In this new mode, young authors attempt an overt and literal examination of the slave trade within its original historical frame. I contextualize this literary shift in the context of recent African apologies for the slave trade as well as the testimonial literature of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions that have followed conflicts in South and West Africa. The epilogue, then, sheds light on this emerging twenty-first-century trend, which indicates a departure from the metaphorical representations discussed in this study and toward a more overtly political and historicized literature of the slave trade.

In order to explore how contemporary African people have experienced and depicted the effects of the slave trade in their own lives, each chapter of this study engages a metaphor associated with the trade by putting a twentieth-century work of literature in conversation with an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century African representation of the slave trade. Reading twentieth-century novels and drama alongside letters, diaries, and autobiographies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century witnesses to the transatlantic slave trade reveals compelling continuities of expression. The usage of the trope of the body in the bag, for instance, can be traced back to the language used by victims of the slave trade to describe their own captivity. Such connections suggest

that the kind of metaphorization outlined in this book can act as an agent for transforming experiences of the slave trade into durable collective memories shared by members of the communities affected by the trade, even when the slave trade's resonance is sometimes unrecognizable to the people who currently use those metaphors. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility that new metaphors are also invented in contemporary circumstances and literature, which are meant to be suggestive of the African experience of the slave trade without having been employed historically. Indeed in the case of some of the metaphors of the slave trade discussed here, authors evoke the suffering recorded by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century witnesses as a way to create original literary metaphors, which provide a new voice for the African experience of the slave trade. In the turbulent seas of language, symbols and meanings chart irregular courses—receding, reemerging, and reinventing themselves in unpredictable ways. Whether inherited or invented, West African authors utilize the power of metaphor to speak for the seeming silence of slave trade memory.

Though the slave trade is not typically made explicit as the primary historical determinant or even mobilized as a central theme in the twentieth-century texts that are analyzed here, the experience of the transatlantic slave trade nonetheless erupts from scenes of contemporary life in the literature of West Africa. The metaphors studied here provide evidence of the way people remember things they would rather forget. They mobilize the silences enforced by institutionalized histories. They allow for representation when the past seems too difficult to confront. And they allow West African authors to engage a subject so significant to their collective past. As we will see, West African authors use metaphors of the slave trade to refute the false dichotomies of witness and silence, memory and forgetting, past and present, and representation and unutterability.