Postcolonial memory work as wake work

Posted on December 7, 2023 by Sakiru Adebayo
[vc_row][vc_column][vc_column_text]In my recent monograph, *Continuous Pasts: Frictions of Memory in Postcolonial Africa*, I argue that the colonial enterprise is a memory enterprise and that colonialism, among other things, is an attempt at wiping out a people's memory. It is this 'coloniality of memory' that postcolonial (African) memory narratives attempt to circumvent.

Continuous Pasts explores the emerging subfield of postcolonial memory studies. The traces of colonial post-memories are examined as well as the representations of the subtle and not-so-subtle afterlives of colonialism in postcolonial African memory narratives. I argue that postcolonial memory narratives are about being with the dead (Ruin 2019; Durrant 2004). Postcolonial memory work is wake work (Sharpe 2016), which is often replete with different kinds of ancestral veneration and anamnestic solidarity with the dead.

I call on *Continuous Pasts* as an aid for my forthcoming reading group that

will invite interdisciplinary perspectives and positions on these multiple threads. Despite the calls to move away from trauma paradigms in memory studies, postcolonial memory is still suffused with the discourse of memory as a discourse of trauma and mourning. I am interested in provoking new perspectives on postcolonial memory from the Reading Decoloniality interdisciplinary and international reach, asking questions such as:

1. What is memory in de/post/anti-colonial contexts?
2. What does it mean to decolonise memory?
3. What alternatives are there to mainstream memory frameworks and theories?
4. What does the question of futurity or ‘thinking the future’ pose for us in postcolonial memory work?

Because colonialism is by its very nature transnational, I maintain that postcolonial memory studies is also attuned to a transnational framework. The rise of postcolonial studies in academia has had an influence on the transnational and transcultural turn in memory studies and we must continue to think toward the future.

I believe that tropes of spectrality and ghostly presences are topical in postcolonial memory discourses and that haunting is, in fact, a constituent element of postcolonial life. For this reason, I ask readers to read two chapters of the book, the introduction and the first chapter.

The introduction lays out various permutations of postcolonial memory and (dis)engages with mainstream understandings of memory work.

The first chapter of the book attempts a multimethodological analysis of Chimamanda Adichie’s Half of a Yellow Sun, a novel centred on the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-970).

In the book, the novel is read as a work of postmemory because the author was born seven years after the war. Also in the chapter, I argue that it is the inheritance of trauma (from the war) that bestows the imperative to bear witness vicariously on Adichie. Hence, the novel becomes not only Adichie’s way of working through her traumatic inheritance but her way of memorializing, and bearing posthumous fidelity

to, some of her ancestors who died in the war. Drawing again from Adichie's interviews, I propose the concept of ancestral memory as a reworking of postmemory in a postcolonial African context. I argue that Adichie's copious reference to her ancestors in her interviews gestures toward the possibility of harbouring — uncannily and even unsuspectingly — the memories of her ancestor's experiences.

My writing is from a context where the continuous presence of the past, coupled with lingering injustices in the present, sees the future postcolonial, post-conflict Africa under siege. Victims and survivors of political violence in the postcolony are often unable to aspire to or imagine a desirable future because of the overbearing weight of the past and the unbearable nature of the present. It is this despairing disposition toward the future that the African writers that I study in *Continuous Pasts*, attempt to confront with the hope that their works will open up conversations about, and possibilities for, a just future.

[/vc_column_text][vc_toggle title="Reading group event details" open="true"]**Date:** 6th December 2023
Title: Postcolonial memory work is wake work
Speaker: Sakiru Adebayo
Chair: Rina Garcia Chua
Minuted by: Maria Jose Recalde-Vela[/vc_toggle][vc_toggle title="Selected minutes"]Garcia Chua introduced Adebayo and his accolades.

> 'Africanists have always explored issues such as the memory of slavery on the continent, the memory of pre-colonial Africa. The disruption of the precolonial past by the colonial experience and the need to reclaim the past through anti-colonial struggles, they are rereading colonial archives and many other memories, issues like these have been explored over the years by Africanists. So, in other words, Africanists have always been doing memory work, although they might have used vocabularies, methodological tools and theoretical approaches that are different from the ones that are already established in mainstream memory studies.' – Adebayo

‘Colonialism, amongst many other things, is an attempt to destroy and wipe out a people’s memory. So, my book intervenes by attempting to set convent what I call the coloniality of memory. My idea of the coloniality of memory is inspired, obviously, by Anibal Quijano’s idea of the coloniality of knowledge, coloniality of being and coloniality of power. So, I used the concept of the coloniality of memory to refer to the ways in which colonialism erases the pasts of colonised people, and how mainstream memory studies reproduces this colonial erasure through its existing theories, epistemologies, and framework. Therefore, my book Continuous Pasts explores the traces of colonial memories and postmemories in Africa’s postcolonial presence. It examines the subtle and not-so-subtle afterlives of colonialism.’ – Adebayo

‘To sum it all up, my book argues that postcolonialism has various memory dimensions. In fact, the act of writing back is invariably an act of remembering a past that is marked with ruptures and dismembered by colonial violence. A postcolonial memory work is, amongst many other things, a work that attunes itself to deconstructing also the orthodox structures of witnessing and configurations of temporality.’ – Adebayo

‘So in in South Africa there is the TRC, right? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, created as a way of uncovering, unearthing the truth about what happened during the apartheid regime and the assumption, of course, is that people would come to the front and talk about what happened in the past. But one of the stories that I studied, Zulu Love Letter by Bhekisizwe Peterson, one of the main characters there, was opposed to the TRC and there are many reasons for this. The first was that there were no talks about reparations. It was more ‘come and tell the truth and we will grant you amnesty’. And mind you, the word amnesty also comes from the word amnesia, but that’s a topic for another day.’ – Adebayo

‘We both live here in the Okanagan, and we’ve learned a lot from Indigenous people and Indigenous scholars, and there is this very grounded idea—no pun intended—that land has memory. You know, the land has memory. So, what does it mean that the land, you know, tells its own story?’ – Garcia Chua

‘I’m based in South Africa and like one of the most interesting things or conversations that we’re having right now is that as one of the youngest post-colonial states in Africa, South Africa is still in that conversation part where we are talking about changing the names of streets and changing the names of cities and it’s always so interesting to me as an academic. I also work as a diversity trainer to kind of engage people on why it’s important to change the names. What always sticks out for me is the fact that, for white people in South Africa, if you understand the South African context. These are names that they hold dear, but they are essentially what continues to connect us to colonialism. When I go anywhere in Europe, I’m like, ‘I can’t believe this is just a copy and paste job’ and like being forced to live through a copy and paste job but as an African, as a black South African, when I see the names that are now being brought back, I’m always struck by the fact that for people who don’t understand or know those names, they seem new. But for the people who have always lived on their land, we are going back to the names that were there before. So, it’s a remembering.’ – Reader

‘If you go to the Apartheid Museum, which I have done so many times, it’s so Eurocentric, as well as any memorials in South Africa. And the question is how do you decolonise even those institutions and how do you decolonise the museum, the Eurocentric Museum? For example, how do you decolonise the British Museum? If you decolonise the British, it’s probably going to be empty. And what does an empty museum look like, you know? And so, these are tough questions for white people,

especially in the South African context.' – Adebayo

'One of the things that I also notice in many post-colonial nation-states in Africa is that when the colonial powers left, it's not really like they've left. They may have left physically in some parts of the continent while in other parts they're still there.' – Adebayo

'What I see in many of these post-conflict fictions of memory is actually the struggle to act, to escape precisely the idea of the nation-states. And part of the ways in which that is done is in trying to remember – trying to think about forms of remembering beyond the nation-state.' – Adebayo

'The nation-state is so inadequate in explaining the lives of, for example, Indigenous people. In Okanagan, it's the ancestral territory of the Syilx People. But the Syilx People also live in Washington, right? So there are people here in Okanagan who have family members in Washington and so, if they have to go see their family member in Washington from Canada to the US, do they need a visa or a passport to go? Thankfully the governments of the United States and Canada have now recognised that, and a lot of indigenous people do not need travel documents.' – Adebayo

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The conversations that filled this session were rich and engaging. I gave my take on ideas around the coloniality of memory, decolonial approaches to witnessing, and the regimes of genocide in postcolonial Africa. Readers expanded on of these provocations for literature across several African, South American and Asian contexts. In dialogue with these contexts, I was particularly drawn to elaborate on the forms of nonhuman witnessing

(Michael Richardson) that are commonplace in postcolonial climes. Conversations also touched on the ways in which postcolonial fictions of memory in Africa attempt to circumvent the hegemony of the nation-state by offering other frameworks of collective memory. The discussion ended with an explanation of how postcolonial memory (which I describe as wake work) is, invariably, about the future. In other words, the session settled on the idea that the postcolonial fiction of memory in Africa and elsewhere illustrates the importance of remembering and not losing sight of the future.

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Editor: CLAIRE FRENCH
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