The Curse of Constant Remembrance: The Belated Trauma of the Slave Trade in Ayi Kwei Armah's *Fragments*

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THE CURSE OF CONSTANT REMEMBRANCE: THE BELATED TRAUMA OF THE SLAVE TRADE IN AYI KWEI ARMAH'S *FRAGMENTS*

LAURA MURPHY

> In the early days our forebears sold their kinsmen into slavery for minor items such as beads, mirrors, alcohol, and tobacco. These days, the tune is the same, only the articles have changed into cars, transistor radios, and bank accounts. Nothing else has changed, and nothing will change in the foreseeable future.
>
> Ken Saro-Wiwa

Conservative estimates established by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database determine that between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, nearly twelve million African people were held as cargo on ships destined for the Americas and slavery. Those who survived what we call "the Middle Passage" found that life in Brazil, the Caribbean, and North America was violent and brutal, and entailed such a traumatic break with their own personal pasts and social milieux that they encountered what Orlando Patterson has described as "social death" (38). Likewise, the trans-Atlantic slave trade had an immediate, detrimental, economic, demographic, political, and social impact on African societies and cultures and continues to do so well into the twenty-first century. On the coast of Africa, the loss of millions of people, even spread over three centuries, significantly impaired Africa's growth to the extent that Walter Rodney describes it as the source of Africa's "underdevelopment" (113). Though some of these changes–such as increased warfare, loss of lives, and transformations in the meaning and determinants of wealth–would have been self-evident to the people who were living in Africa at the time of the slave trade, we can also identify larger trends from our position of temporal distance.

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The traumatic effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade have had centuries to unleash themselves, unlike those of other equally dramatic but more recent historical events like World War I, the Holocaust, or the bombing of Hiroshima. Now, in the postcolonial and post-independence era, historians, critics, and creative writers are in a unique position to describe the long-term effects of one of the most significant traumas of the African past.

This position of temporal distance is unique not only in that it provides a more extensive appreciation of the effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, but also in that it provides an opportunity for us to reconsider our conceptions and definitions of trauma in general. The term "trauma," as it is understood by psychoanalytic authors from Sigmund Freud to Cathy Caruth, is characterized by a "wound" (Caruth 3). However, the "wound of the mind…is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that…is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor" (Caruth 4). Thus, trauma is both an immediate experience, a wounding, and the belated effects of that wound.

This double valence of the term "trauma" lends it the potential for an expansive temporal longevity. Though most psychoanalysts and psychoanalytic critics limit the extent of trauma to the life of the individual who personally suffered the initial "wound," recent critical interventions have understood trauma to last beyond the event and even beyond the life of an individual. Notable among these critics is Marianne Hirsch, who describes the phenomenon of grief passed down through a generation of Holocaust survivors to their children. Though the second generation did not personally experience the Holocaust, they lived with the constant haunting specter of that traumatic era in their lives nonetheless. Naming this condition "postmemory," Hirsch argues that the memory of a past that a person has never lived can persist, though it has ceased to exist, because many second-generation survivors feel compelled to "re-member, to re-build, to re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair" (243). The sense of distance and belatedness that postmemory inflicts on this second generation is revelatory of the sense of loss that they experience, a loss of the ability to actively respond to the originary trauma that they, from the distance at which they stand, have no ability to prevent or alter. Despite their inability to intervene in the conflict, they are nonetheless sentenced to live with its aftermath.

People may indeed experience the persistent residues of the distant past and unsuspectingly harbor memories of the most significant experiences of their ancestors. Sigmund Freud, toward the end of his career, began to delineate an analytical means of comprehending traces of memory that seem to originate in some distant past but that are not overtly transmitted between generations. In *Moses and Monotheism*, he writes, "when I speak of an old

tradition still alive in a people, of the formation of a national character, it is such an inherited tradition, and not one carried on by word of mouth that I have in mind.…If we accept the continued existence of such memory traces in our archaic inheritance, then we have bridged the gap between individual and mass psychology" (157-58). Freud thus concluded that the future of psychoanalysis would most likely move toward analysis of the "archaic heritage of mankind," which would include "not only dispositions, but also ideational contents, memory traces of the experiences of former generations" (157). Scholars continue to debate to what extent we might be able to extend Freud's theories of the individual to the level of the community. However, his speculation that there might exist "memory traces of the experiences of former generations" that affect the lived experience of individuals for hundreds of years provides us with an opportunity to explore the extremely long-term effects of trauma and those traces of memory which might arise to consciousness generations after a traumatizing event has taken place.

The study of these transgenerational inheritances indicates the usefulness of developing a comprehension of the continued wound of a trauma through generations, even beyond second-generation postmemory. Ranjana Khanna, following Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, reads in postcolonial settings a persistent haunting and the presence of melancholia born of "a transgenerationally transmitted signifier of repression [that] originates in a trauma or a repressed secret" (255). Theorists have thus indicated that transgenerational trauma is possible and that work to investigate postcolonial memory allows us to explore traumas experienced among those people Freud labeled "primitive," traumas that might otherwise have been overlooked because of Freud's own political, racial, and imaginative limitations. Thus, I do not want to dispense with the word "trauma" altogether in describing the experience of people who live hundreds of years after an originating traumatic event; the analytical framework of trauma provides us with useful tools with which to read some experiences of the postcolonial era that might otherwise be overlooked or discounted. Furthermore, reading the work of postcolonial writers in dialogue with notions of trauma adds geographical context and historical specificity, both of which challenge and expand upon our somewhat codified, limited, and (in some cases) Eurocentric definitions of trauma.

I argue that late-twentieth-century West African fiction, in particular, compels us to consider the enduring suffering that trauma inflicts over the course of generations. The distinctive characteristics of trauma as we have come to describe it over the last century–the sense of amnesia or forgetting of the event itself, the latency or belatedness of the experience, the repetition, acting out, or embodiment of the traumatic event, the mourning and melancholia associated with the trauma, and the possibility for working through trauma that the psychoanalytic model suggests–are all manifest in West African fictional representations of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. These representations associate

images of the slave trade with typical post-traumatic responses in characters who live hundreds of years after that era of violence and loss that marred the African memoryscape. Through depicting the intimate relationship between the slave trade and contemporary suffering, this fiction can expand our notion of the extent of trauma's consequences.

Several West African literary critics, including Achille Mbembe, make the claim that West Africa is experiencing a sort of amnesia regarding the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its traumatic effects on African life (259). Even this sense of amnesia itself is a marker of trauma as we generally understand it. Furthermore, despite critics' claims, numerous accounts of slave trade memory surface in the West African literary canon, depicting the way in which surviving the slave trade might have persistent traumatic effects on the lives of Africans, even in the postcolonial era. The authors who do engage the history of the slave trade seem to respond to Cathy Caruth's astute question, "Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of surviving it?" (7). Indeed, the suffering of survival seems to haunt the rhetoric of West African discourse, as authors provide depictions of the unique forms of survival that West Africans have experienced even two hundred years after the legal abolition of the slave trade.

The Been-To and the Malady of the Past

Ayi Kwei Armah's second novel, *Fragments*, is largely focused on the rampant consumerism of postcolonial Ghanaian culture; but I argue that, more significantly, it constitutes Armah's exploration of the twentieth-century effects of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, of which that materialism is but a symptom. The novel, set in 1960s post-independence Ghana, is centered on the protagonist, Baako, who returns to his hometown after living for some time in the United States. He represents the classic "been-to" character of West African literature: as a Ghanaian who has been to America and has returned to his family after several years' absence, he is expected to return wealthy and overwhelmingly generous (Lawson 10). However, Baako finds that he has not made the return–either emotional or financial–expected of the "been-to." He returns home only to find that he feels completely alienated, that he cannot be employed, and that his family hopes he will resign himself to a life as a wealthy and successful corporate or government drone, thereby producing the funds to build a house, maintain a car, and display the level of unambiguous, overt consumerism that will place him in high regard in their society. Struggling to understand what is expected of him, Baako stumbles from family member to family member, disappointing everyone's expectations and hopes. Unable to fulfill his own dreams or those of his family, he falls into what is characterized–by his family and critics alike–as an insane depression.

Many critics attribute Baako's inability to function within his native society to the disturbing materialism, urged on by Western standards of living, that has

altered West African values. Certainly, Baako's disorientation in confronting this materialism is much the same experience that Armah had when he returned from America: "With the dawn of independence in Ghana, Armah, returning to his country, was shocked to realize that independence was the fellow-traveler of both materialism and Westernization and that political corruption also followed in their trail" (Ayuk 33). Postcolonial reality had been an overwhelming disappointment to Armah as Ghanaian society appeared to be obsessed with material wealth–which was certainly not the culture Armah had hoped would be ushered in by the previously promising change in Africa's governance. Armah turned to writing to express his anxiety over the materialistic corruption that seemed to be endemic to this stage in Africa's long history and to explore what he thought were its causes. According to most critics, Armah's writing thus focused on a Westernized West Africa that produced distorted traditions and psychologically disturbed characters whose identities were replaced with mere markers of consumption.

I argue that these readings only touch the surface of Armah's compelling critique of contemporary West African culture and consumerism in *Fragments*. Critics locate Armah's first level of critique regarding the materialist culture of contemporary Ghana; but beyond that initial critique, Armah is also exploring a gap in historical consciousness, a kind of amnesia, which allows for this materialism to persist. Demonstrating the belated traumatic effects of the slave trade as they are made manifest in contemporary relationships, practices, and memories, Armah delves into his character's distress by tracing this contemporary materialism back to the history of the slave trade. Baako's failure to produce wealth satisfactorily is only the surface cause of the problems he encounters at home, including the debilitating illness that eventually results in his ostracism and institutionalization. Instead, the more central and compelling source of Baako's pain is repeatedly located in his recollection of and desire to represent the traumatizing effects of the slave trade. Throughout the novel, Armah links Baako's stress and existential nausea to his psychic and physical acting out of the memories of human trafficking and the Middle Passage, making explicit links between the materialism of postcolonial Ghana and the earlier vicious and deadly consumption of human lives. Linking Baako's illness to the return of the repressed memory of the slave trade is integral to understanding Armah's larger critique of West African history as well as current trends in politics and community life.

The Curse of Constant Remembrance

The first time Baako experiences his malady, he is in the United States. We learn of his illness from Efua, his mother, who is awaiting his return to Ghana. She tells Juana, a woman she meets on the beach, "It has been confusing. They say there was nothing wrong with his body. The prophet says it was a sickness of the soul" (35). This introduction to the unusual nature of Baako's illness occurs,

not coincidentally, as his mother stands with Juana under the looming "white form, very small at this distance, of the old slave castle which had now become the proud seat of the new rulers, the blind children of slavery themselves" (30). The two women stand beside Christiansborg Castle, built by the Danish in 1661 as an early trading post where they exchanged European goods for slaves and gold from the interior of the Gold Coast. Ironically, the castle was made the seat of Ghana's government when independence was wrested from the British in 1957. The significance of housing the seat of the newly-formed independent government in the edifice built for those who sought to exploit the African continent for their own material gain is explicit here, even as Armah dubs the government "the blind children of slavery themselves," and Juana expresses her concern that the correlation between the European rulers of the castle and the newly installed Ghanaian leaders is not so obvious to those who pass by the castle as part of their daily routine.

This is representative of the collective amnesia that Juana describes as the affliction of all of Africa: "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 Christiansborg Castle stands as a monument to a historical past that is marked by pain and suffering and might act as a site of memory for West Africa. The memory of such suffering might even preclude the possibility of repetition of similar forms of corruption and oppression from taking place in that location. Indeed, it awakens in Juana what she calls a "curse… [of] constant remembrance" (30), which is double-edged in that she regards the memory of the slave trade as critical to African consciouness but feels nonetheless a constant discomfort as a result of those memories. Despite Juana's remembrance, however, Armah indicates that the history of the trading castle has been elided through the replacement of its previous incarnations with a new Ghanaian institutional power. This power seeks to ignore the traumatizing memories associated with the site and, Armah implies, to replicate, to some extent, the crimes of the past. The monument's power over the representation of the country's past and its present erases recognition of the corruption of both.

As Juana and Efua contemplate Ghana's lapse in historical memory under the shadow of the castle, the mention of Baako's "soul sickness" takes on a new dimension as it is immediately and intimately juxtaposed with Juana's musings about the double-bind of the "curse" of the memory of destruction and the destructiveness of forgetting. The reference to Baako's illness at the foot of the slave castle thus implies a possible revelation of the memory of the slave trade, the kind of memory that Nora describes as "the body's inherent self-knowledge, unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories" (13). Throughout the novel, Baako psychically and physically experiences the memory of the slave trade as the "curse" that Juana describes as he exhibits a bodily rehearsal or acting out of the pain of the slave trade, which becomes more evident as the

novel proceeds. This early connection between Baako's illness and the image of the slave fort marks the trade as a germ of disease in the novel, uncovering the historical context of a problem of contemporary life and creating a lens through which to read Baako's later disturbance.

A Language No One Can Hear

On his return to his home in Ghana, Baako believes that he may be able to find some constructive way to alleviate the communal forgetting regarding the violence of the past that he, like Juana, abhors in Ghanaian culture by conveying that past to other Ghanaians. Through this historical intervention, Baako seeks to diminish the dread and unease that he suffers but has not fully comprehended as yet. His desire to communicate the history of the slave trade represents an attempt to assimilate the trauma of the trade both for himself and within the narrative of the Ghanaian past. Baako optimistically explores his opportunities for expression through writing for television. Explicitly acknowledging the centrality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade to the development of West Africa's contemporary cultures, Baako produces unorthodox manuscripts that both explicitly and metaphorically depict images of the haunting presence of the slave trade. One of his screenplays opens with the towering image of the slave castle with its "sharp-edged pillars, shafts, all white, superimposed on recipients of violence" (146). The evocation of a violent racialized past bursts into the drama of immediate and present violence staged under the ghostly and threatening figure of the slave castle in the background:

> LS: OVERVIEW, COASTAL VILLAGE, QUIET CIRCULAR,
> DARK.
> NIGHT.
> MS: SECTION OF CASTLE,
> GUNS POINTING OVER VILLAGE,
> PILES OF CANNON BALLS BESIDE THEM.
> SENTRY PACING.
> CUT TO VILLAGE.
> HOUSE WITH ROUND WINDOW OPENING TO A SMALL VIEW OF CASTLE.
> THREE WOMEN AND TWO MEN SITTING, STARING MUTE AT FLOOR.
> CHILD LOOKING OUT THROUGH WINDOW. (146)

Just as Juana stands in the shadows of the slave castle at the beginning of the novel, in Baako's scripts, the villagers cower below the sights of slavery's weaponry. Mute, the villagers signify the way in which Ghanaian voices and memories have been silenced by the domination of the castle. The script, which involves the lives of the people who work in a slave castle during the era of the trade, juxtaposes the ominous symbol of violence and the eclipsed and silenced villagers below.

The form of the television drama itself allows Baako the opportunity to present history dramatically, whereby the event becomes real, human, and immediate. It crosses timelines so that the historical is presented in live action, performatively exploring the relationship between the present and the slave trade era. He chooses this medium because he is particularly concerned that his messages reach everyone in Ghana, even the people in the villages, people who might be illiterate or otherwise unable to access knowledge of Ghana's past. He contends that television is "a much clearer way of saying things to people here" (80) because it would be a "matter of images not words" (81). Baako recognizes the difficulty of communicating historical trauma: audiences eager to discuss this aspect of Ghana's history are few, and most people are openly resistant. He refuses to accept, however, the idea that this history must remain silenced or that the people of Ghana will not or cannot accept their history. Thus, as Baako intends to face the painful past directly by inserting a record of the era of the slave trade into the narrative of Ghana's history, he responds to both the repression of the memory of the trade in Ghanaian culture and to the anguish he has felt as he is compelled to remember it himself.

Baako utilizes the visual juxtaposition that television provides him to map the slave trade past onto the present landscape in order to reveal his critique of contemporary consumer society. He recognizes that the slave trade sowed the seeds of materialism, introducing a wealth of foreign goods that were bought at the hideously high price of human life–an exchange that he continues to witness in his community as the worth of individuals in the post-independence era is regularly determined by the value of foreign goods they are able to supply. Baako's compulsion to write about historical encounters with the West, including the era of the slave trade, seems to his colleagues and family to be disconnected from the concerns of contemporary society. However, Armah himself once claimed that "Creative Writing engages the reader in a constant interactive process between the past, the present, and the future, calculated to make educated persons not passive endurers of present conditions, but active protagonists aware of past causes, and willing to use their awareness to help shape future results" ("Teaching" 994). As Armah points out here, the role of the artist is that of an educator who "opens our vision" to those aspects of the past that might have been forgotten or overlooked, events that continue to have an effect on present-day life whether people are aware of them or not. Clearly, Baako is precisely one of those creative writers who takes it as his responsibility to interact with the past in his work. He is particularly invested in revealing those parts of the Ghanaian past that most people dare not mention, as they are too painful to remember or too traumatic to recount. In order to do this most effectively, Baako attempts to find an alternative method of communication that is more likely to be transmitted and, even more important, more likely to be received.

Baako's increased attention to the medium of television and his search for an alternative language in which to communicate with Ghana's citizens recognize implicitly that without a receptive audience, all communication is essentially impossible. So long as he has hope that his television screenplays will communicate to a Ghanaian audience, Baako's nausea is in remission. Seemingly cured of his illness, he feels none of the pains of memory because he is producing work that will give voice to the history that he believes is plaguing Africa in its very silence. When asked what his work is about, he answers flatly, "Slavery," and his boss interrogates him:

> "Why such a choice of topic?"
> "How do you mean, why?"
> "You understand me, Mr. Onipa," said Asante-Smith, with a small yawn. "Look, we're a free, independent people. 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." (146-47)

Baako's superiors actively refuse to disseminate the narrative of the past that Baako considers so essential to the vitality of the nation. They seek to replace that past instead with an essentialized, positive narrative of the African past. It is increasingly necessary for Baako, as he feels it is for the nation, to confront the gruesome history of the slave trade. However, at every turn, he is silenced or reprimanded for his desire to expose his "free, independent" people to a narrative of their country's history that is inclusive of even the most disturbing aspects of the slave trade. Baako's boss goes so far as to refute any impact the slave trade might have had on Ghana's culture, asserting, "What you've just said has nothing to do with our people's culture–all this slavery, survival, the brand" (147). It is in these responses to Baako's work regarding the slave trade that we see the critical erasure of memory that Armah believes haunts life in contemporary Ghanaian society. In fact, however, through Baako's work as well as his illness, Armah indicates the way in which surviving the trans-Atlantic slave trade has altered African lives and perceptions despite all pressure to ignore and erase its impact.

Jonathan Peters argues that the rejection of Baako's work results from the fact that his writing requires "attention and reflection" (29). This is absolutely the case, but Baako's colleagues are not merely lazy or unthoughtful. They have a particular aversion to the content of Baako's scripts. They actively refuse to disseminate the information Baako considers so essential to the narrative of the nation. Moreover, his colleagues are unable or unwilling to hear it themselves. He critiques society's refusal to understand the past at the same time that he insists through his writing that it persists in his memory and has had a significant effect on his life. When Baako finds that no one is interested in the work he is trying to produce, his illness returns, and he becomes physically and psychically overwhelmed by the past. Without a

receptive audience for this exploration of the past, activation and assimilation of the traumatic memory is thwarted and undermined, repressed so that it can continue to exert its deleterious power upon the present. It is as if, even in his attempts to find an alternative language for his communication, Baako is speaking a language–the language of a traumatic and violent past–that no one is willing to hear or understand.

Purging Slave Trade Memory

Recognizing the futility of his attempts to communicate a history that he feels is traumatic both at the level of his own personal life and at that of his nation, Baako quits his job, tears up his manuscripts with the titles "Slavery," "The Brand," and "Survival"; and immediately falls seriously ill: "Open or closed his eyes hurt, his head, his whole body hurt, his eyes were not steady… He wanted sleep for a body bruised all over from the fever within,…three days in bed already, too ill and too weak to get up when he wanted to. He turned on his belly to loosen the discomfort. That hurt too, and the sheet under him felt wet and clammy from his sweat" (155). Physically exhausted from the effort to communicate and purging from every orifice, Baako's body is made the site of an allegorical illness. He admits that a "whirling torture" had "filled his mind" (131) and that he "found no way to get away from the mixed uncertainty" (155) he was experiencing.

Baako's illness is repeatedly attributed by critics to his feeling of impotence in his inability to provide materially for his family and his repulsion against the corrupt, money-obsessed elite classes. His concerns are certainly piqued by the corruption he encounters in his family and among the people with whom he works. Indeed, Baako seems to contract a unique form of homesickness in which he is actually made sick by the interactions he experiences on his return home. However, he is not nostalgic for some bygone era of pre-consumeristic Ghanaian society. He has no delusion that it has ever existed. Instead, at the heart of his homesickness is his comprehension of the way in which a materialistic mentality is linked to the tragic past of the slave trade and the forced recognition of his inability to represent that part of Ghana's history in a meaningful, communicative way. By the time Baako quits his job at Ghanavision, he has nearly been convinced of the futility of his efforts to participate in conversations regarding Ghana's history, but his mind obsessively returns to the manuscripts that he wrote and the way they were overlooked or sanitized for popular viewing. Again, he attempts to produce creative work regarding the slave trade and he begins to vomit profusely, dredging up, through this excrement, the history that his community attempts to repress. Just after Baako has been interrogated by his mother regarding his writings and writhings, his illness resurfaces:

> His mouth filled up as if his saliva were flowing to escape some pressure from below, and it would never stop. His eyes felt out of the sockets, floating

> detached in a steady blast of warm air getting hotter every moment. There was one sharp needlepoint of pain boring into his skull from the top of his head, and the cold line along his neck was spreading. There was no more room in his mouth, and the moisture was in his throat, threatening to choke him. He ran…to the bathroom…before the huge vomiting fever came draining out of him, tearing itself out of a body too weak to help or resist it…tasting all through his head the thick bitterness of his own closed-up bile. (159)

Baako's purgation of his "closed-up bile" is an alternative means of releasing the repressed history that he attempts to impart to his community, and it resembles the vile sickness that enslaved persons experienced on the Middle Passage.

Baako's body has become a site of memory. As Baako's literary representations of Ghanaian historical trauma have failed to reach an audience, Armah finds another location through which to express this painful memory. If Baako cannot effectively communicate a past that seems to defy reception (if not representation), then his body comes to effect a space through which that information can take shape in a sort of body language. This body language cannot be refused or ignored by his family and friends. His physical illness reveals itself in a way that is evident to all those who encounter him; it also communicates that which his scripts could not: it expresses the radical alteration of the African body and psyche by the encounter with the slave trade.

If trauma is the belated experience of an event so violent that it cannot be processed, then Baako's body conveys a doubled enactment of the trauma associated with the unassimilated violence of the distant slave trade past–his body articulates both the physical violence of the Middle Passage and the narrative violence committed in the drive to shed the memory of the slave trade. Just as Geneviève Fabre describes the embodiment of the memory of slavery that exists in contemporary African American dance–"the body, that was so central to the lived and felt Middle Passage experience, is entrusted with the task of representation and figuration" (39)–so Baako's body becomes a vessel of memory, and he purges that memory in order to survive the pains it induces in him. If that purging cannot come through the communicative act, it effects itself upon his very body.

The history of the slave trade has returned to Baako in the form of the abject: "There looms within abjection, one of those violent dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there quite close, but it cannot be assimilated" (Kristeva 1). Baako is faced with the challenge of the memory of the slave trade: that it is unthinkable and yet it is always in thought, as the repeated image of the slave castle reminds us. Though he attempts to create representations of this history, his body reacts intuitively against the memory of men in chains and the commodification of human life. He is unable to make complete sense of this era of Ghana's past in

his writing, and he is drawn "toward the place where meaning collapses" (2). There he is face-to-face with the abject, with that which is "discharged like thunder" (9); "disturbs identity, system, order" (4); and which is "constantly remembered" (9), like Juana's curse of constant remembrance. For engaging the slave trade is to look upon the utmost of grotesque horrors. The slave trade turned a global enterprise into death for millions; it reversed several generations of legitimate trade relationships into centuries of deplorable exchanges; it transformed an internationally developed system of capital and credit into an impetus for warfare and terror. Thus, the slave trade is the worst kind of abjection: "immoral, sinister, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sets you up, a friend who stabs you…" (4). The abject events of Ghana's terrorizing past haunt Baako, and it is only through writing that he seems to be able to assimilate these most offensive of memories that have come to him across generations.

The Human Cost of Cargo

As he suffers his memories alone in bed, Baako once more feels a compulsion to write, and this writing takes the form of a fractured play that again delves into the enduring effects of the slave trade on Ghanaian culture. Aware that the slave trade's commodification of human life and his family's vision of him as the deliverer of consumable "cargo" are intimately connected through a layered temporality, he writes a short diaristic treatise on the relationship between the so-called cargo cults of Melanesia and his own post-slave trade culture. The cargo cults are a ritualistic religious expression of the fetishization of material goods introduced to Melanesia by Europeans. Purportedly, when the Melanesians first saw the wealth that colonists (and, later, soldiers) brought with them, they believed that Europeans had some spiritual connection that entitled them to these extravagant goods. Melanesians began to build ports, in the hopes that ships would come to the shore to bring them riches. Generations later, Melanesian millenarian groups await a savior who will bring them goods that will usher them into modernity and into a superior status to those Europeans who oppressed them.[1] Baako fears that he is supposed to be the savior who returns home with the Western goods so long denied the African people.

Baako evokes, through a parallel with the Melanesians, the historical era of the slave trade in Ghana and the way in which, in Ghanaian history, it was people who were exchanged for that cargo. He asks himself how close Ghanaian culture might be to the Melanesian cargo worship, and he responds with images of an African exchange with a distant continent that occurred hundreds of years previous: "Two distinct worlds, one here, one out there, one known, the other unknown except in legend and dream. But the twilight area between the two is also an area of knowledge, twisted knowledge perhaps, but

knowledge resulting from real information in the form of incoming goods, outgoing people. The main export to the other world is people" (156-57). The trade that Baako evokes in this passage is not the Melanesian one but that of the slave trade in West Africa. The commodities being traded are human lives, and as he extends the historical effects of that exchange to the present, Baako correlates the desires and Messianic expectations of contemporary society with the historical ships that carried material goods to the shore in exchange for human cargo during the era of the slave trade. This commitment to material wealth in contemporary Ghanaian culture is figured as a human sacrifice, which becomes quite literal when his infant nephew dies later in the novel as a result of his family's extraordinary greed. Baako's family is often represented as exhibiting a "slavish consumption of things" (Fraser 38) and as being "slavishly worshipful in their attitudes toward white values" (Wright, "*Fragments*" 46); their contemporary consumer desires are inextricably bound to the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Baako's analogy of the cargo cults reinforces his insight that this materialism is no modern, post-independence malady. In fact, the disturbing Ghanaian consumer mentality is the result of hundreds of years of cargo exchanges, which worked to lower the value of human life while increasing the value of "wealth-in-things." Though their ancestors survived the trans-Atlantic slave trade safe on Africa's shores, post-independence Ghanaians are, in Armah's estimation, still haunted by a fate of enslavement even two hundred years later as they act out the tragic sacrifices of human life that were characteristic of the slave trade.

Incorporating Abjection

By articulating the unfortunate legacy of the slave trade either through writing or through his body, Baako incorporates the abjection of the slave trade and thereby assimilates it into his understanding of himself and his culture. His purging of history into some legible, communicative format is a viable alternative to the physical incorporation of the abject that caused Baako to physically purge himself of the memory. Thus Baako realizes that he is able to relieve some of his pain through writing about Ghana's past, as his "urge to trap it [in writing] before it disappeared made him forget the general pain of his body" (156). As a result of this reprieve from his illness, his life becomes one of complete reflection, a kind of reflection that his mother, who wishes to help him, cannot penetrate or understand. Robert Fraser appropriately identifies Baako's problem as one of "self-communion," which his family can only understand as a dementia resulting from "committing thoughts to paper apparently for no eyes but his own" (36). The silence that this entails, and the lack of a correspondent audience for his writing, is construed by his family as a kind of lunacy that must be treated. Baako's illness is associated with the thwarted act of communication and the closed system in which he is attempting to effect that communication.

Communication is at its most basic both the production of a message and the process of its reception. Discussions of pain such as that by Elaine Scarry indicate that certain experiences resist our ability to process them through language (4). In representing the history of slavery, there is a sense in which the trauma of the past exceeds the bounds of human language, and as a result, that trauma is nearly impossible to communicate. William Wells Brown, an American slave narrator, expressed his inability to describe his experiences of enslavement by claiming that there was either no way to explain the pain or that, if there were, it would be inappropriate to express it to an audience (82). Likewise, many West African authors have avoided the direct historical treatment of the slave trade in their works. This seeming "amnesia" might similarly indicate some impediment to naming the trauma and iterating the resulting pain; alternatively, it might result from the possible impropriety of such a representation for any number of reasons, such as the political implications of speaking of such a topic, the lingering discomfort with the experience of enslavement, or the more immediate necessity of writing about more recent traumas on the continent including colonialism or contemporary forms of oppression.

However, Baako does not appear to encounter any obstacle to articulating the trauma that seems to possess him; in fact, he explicitly depicts the slave trade and its effects in his writing. Perhaps, then, it is more useful to consider the second part of the transaction of communication: reception. Without a receptive audience, any speech act is rendered meaningless. When an author manages to find the language through which to situate his pain or the pain of generations, the communicative project is still not completed. In order for a speaker or writer to have communicated, an audience must be receptive to his or her language.

Though the history that Baako invokes in his writing is hundreds of years past, he elicits in his audience the same reaction as contemporary survivors of trauma evoke from their listeners: "Insofar as they remind us of a horrible traumatic past, insofar as they bear witness to our own historical disfiguration, survivors frighten us. They pose for us a riddle and a threat from which we cannot turn away. We are indeed profoundly terrified to truly face the traumas of our history" (Felman and Laub 74). As Felman and Laub describe, audiences to the narrative of survivors are limited–few people want to confront their greatest terror. Similarly, Baako's friends and family are repulsed by the narrative he tries to communicate. Indeed, for those who are aware of his contemplations, he appears to exhibit signs of madness. As far as the community is concerned, Baako, in his literary and physical incorporation and representation of Ghana's abject past, becomes the abject himself.

The community's refusal to comprehend the narrative that Baako attempts to construct thus leads to tragic results. Just as Baako recovers from his illness and his revelation regarding the cargo mentality of Ghanaian society, he

encounters his uncle and other family members who corral him and take him to the insane asylum without explanation. The members of the posse shout:

> "Stay far from him. His bite will make you also maaaaad!"
> To this another, closer voice added in sage, quiet tones, "The same thing happens if he should scratch you."…
> In a while Araba's sobs subsided and she said in the uncertain silence, "Tie him up."…Now the others were quick with the speed of fearful men about to be released from their fear. (170)

Baako's family violently expels him from their midst in sheer terror, treating him like the innocent but rabid dog Baako saw brutally murdered in the street at the beginning of the novel. His family seeks to distance themselves from his alleged madness, exonerating themselves from its claim upon them, terrified by what they consider its literal power of infection. Instead of attempting to hear Baako's message, the community makes Baako himself into the form of the abject, that part of the community that its members wish to expel because it so reminds them of their most disturbing memories. When a bystander asks what happened to Baako that he needs to be put down in this way, the response is "It was books, they say" (171). The community's unwillingness to reconcile themselves with the past and to accept the narrative that Baako attempts to write leads them to exile Baako to the depths of an insane asylum rather than come to terms with their own symptoms of that tainted past. It is almost as if there is no audience for Baako's work and words though it is clear he attempts to make his work as accessible as possible. His role as a communicator is radically and universally refused. Again, his language, though accessible, is not accessed. The past, though narrativized, is not heard.

Pathologizing Memory

The question of Baako's "madness" guides the action throughout the rest of the novel, and critics have attempted to understand it since the novel's first publication. Ayo Mamadu claims that "Baako…broods his way literally into the asylum" (242), and William Lawson attributes his insanity to intense alienation (79). D. S. Izevbaye claims that "there are hints within the novel that Baako had neurotic tendencies before his return to Ghana," which lead to "full madness" (23) by the end of the narrative. In Derek Wright's configuration, the "neurotic" Baako is "hounded by his family into the mental exile of madness" (*Ayi Kwei* 139), which exhibits itself, "finally, as clinical insanity" (148). Baako is by turns diagnosed as schizophrenic (Fraser 36), regarded as having an "emotional disorder" (Lawson 73), and compared to Hamlet in his madness (Owusu 361). If this rehearsal of the critical discourse surrounding Baako's illness is overwhelming, it is strictly because the consensus regarding Baako's condition is nearly unanimous. Armah's critics unintentionally align themselves with the position of Baako's family in the text: equally unresponsive

to the way in which Baako's problems are related to history (and in particular to the history of the slave trade), they are all too willing to believe his family's unprofessional diagnosis of Baako as mentally ill. Despite the fact that Juana–the only professional psychiatrist in the text able to diagnose Baako's disease–is not convinced that Baako is mad, critics are generally willing to accept his family's verdict in their own work. Throughout the text, Armah reveals that the madness instead is in the culture that has developed in Ghana, which makes it possible for rich administrators to fight each other to the ground to steal televisions from the poor, for families to allow their children to die for an opportunity to increase their wealth, and for a community to beat a man to the ground because he quietly writes alone in his room. As Kofi Owusu puts it, "Society's unreasoning 'reason' condemns Baako's reasoned 'unreason' as 'madness'" (363). The community's rabidly violent treatment of the harmless Baako reverses the critical diagnosis, allowing us to recognize the reason in Baako's illness and the lack of reason in a society that would censure him.

Despite Armah's explicit contempt for the society that condemns Baako to the insane asylum, Baako, in his role as the abject of his society, is read as hysterical as his body manifests the anxieties that his society dare not speak. It is indeed true, that each time that Baako's desire to express the repressed history of the trade is silenced, his body manifests that abject history. However, Armah's negative depiction of Ghanaian society reveals that Baako's condition should be read as pathological only insofar as this diagnosis is understood as a construct of those who wish to excise that which stands outside their own system of order and control. The label of hysteria or madness is a means by which to exorcise those who speak:

> "in the mode of a paralyzed gestural faculty, of an impossible and almost forbidden speech…and the drama of hysteria is that it is inserted schizotically between that gestural system, that desire paralyzed and enclosed within its body, and a language that it has learned in the family, in school, in society, which is in no way continuous with…the 'movements of its desire.'" (Irigaray 136)

Baako is forced to write to himself, like "having a conversation with no one, talking alone to yourself" (158), as his mother puts it, because for those on the outside, his language and ideas are repulsive and disorderly: they appear "somewhat mad from the standpoint of reason" (Irigaray 29), and they are, indeed, nearly inaudible to those to whom he speaks. His pain, fostered by his inability to communicate, is manifested bodily and read by others as a sign of their propriety in diagnosing him as hysterical, insane, mad. However, Baako's writings are representative of the way in which the slave trade continues to resonate in the minds of contemporary African people in much the same way that Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, and Carl Pedersen describe the memory of the Middle Passage, in that it "emerges not as a clear break with

the past and present but as a spatial continuum….[s]ubmerged beneath the surface of the dominant language, it constantly seeps through and inevitably affects it" (8).

If Baako appears to be mad, it is only in the reception of his message, or in the mis-reception of his communication, that we can come to understand the madness that is inherent in the exchange. Baako's problem is not an inability to find a language for that painful past he wants to communicate and assimilate but the inability to find an audience that is receptive to his message. The madness does not lie so much in Baako's language or lack thereof but in the conditions of society that make his message and his radical revision of history unacceptable and unheard. Armah's critique, then, is not of consumer culture itself, nor is it of the difficulty of articulating the history of a disconcerting past; it is of the unwillingness of the community to receive the transmission of information regarding the slave trade and its effects on contemporary life and culture.

Conclusion

Baako, though confined within his own society, represents for Armah a possibility for Africans to reach outside of the materialism that has been inscribed on them by the slave trade. By making contact with the past, Baako works to transform the curse of constant remembrance into a narrative that incorporates the effects of the traumatic slave trade era and thus potentially overcomes the experience of memory as a curse. Reiterating his thesis regarding the memory of the slave trade, Armah ends the book with Naana, Baako's blind, elderly, traditional grandmother, who contemplates her life, Ghana's past, and Baako's future. In her reflection, she asserts that it was the slave trade that brought a materialistic and destructive condition to West Africa. She refers to the child of Baako's sister, which died at its own birthing ceremony because the family was more interested in collecting monetary gifts from their guests than tending to the child. Naana links this contemptible behavior to the sacrifice of human lives that the slave trade exacted. She claims that "[t]he baby was a sacrifice they killed, to satisfy perhaps a new god they have found much like the one that began the same long destruction of our people" (199). She refuses to forgive those in her community, past and present, who "split their own seed and raised half against 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 women to any passing white buyer and himself waits to be destroyed by this great haste to consume things we have taken no care nor trouble to produce." Again, past and present are conflated here, as Naana critiques the way in which the slave trade has created a contemporary obsession with materialism. Baako's mother and sister and all those who participate in this murderous consumerism are not a new invention of post-independence modernity: they are the ideological descendents of slave raiders

and elite slave traders who valued their own wealth over the lives of their fellow-human beings. Naana is the only one able, then, to see what Baako has seen. And she is the only one who has hope for Baako, that he can continue to fight this corruption born of the slave trade. She admits that "in all that noise I thought he would surely die," but she leaves us with a more hopeful (though uncertain) outlook for Baako's ability to finally communicate successfully: "Happy event if in his future there is yet something hidden that will reveal itself with time" (199). There is a last hope that Baako will rise above the pathologization that haunts him to find an audience who will allow him to reveal a silenced, traumatic past.

The practice of sacrificing human lives for the sake of material gain is a legacy of the devastating devaluation of human life that was integral to the workings of the slave trade. Engaging these historical legacies allows us to examine contemporary politics, community, and memory. Indeed, as Paul Gilroy reminds us, "the history of the black Atlantic since [1492] continually crisscrossed by the movements of black people–not only as commodities, but engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship–provides a means to re-examine the problems of nationality, locality, identity, and historical memory" (16). This critical ability is often devastating for Baako, but the novel's exploration of Baako's Atlantic return mobilizes his experience of the crossing to evoke historical memory and to resist the silencing of it.

Caruth claims that trauma is experienced "solely in the *structure of its experience* or reception: the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (4-5). If this is how we define trauma, then Baako has indeed experienced a form of trauma. Despite the fact that Baako experiences trauma some two hundred years after the trans-Atlantic slave trade was legally abolished, the apparently unassimilated past returns to possess him, both psychically and physically. His active attempts to work out these memories are thwarted by his family and community who pathologize his process of narrativizing and assimilating the trauma of Ghana's past. It is his community's refusal of that knowledge, the knowledge, as he puts it, "in the form of incoming goods, outgoing people" (157), that makes him appear to be not simply someone who is struggling with the past but someone who needs to be expelled because of his relationship to the past. For Armah, it is precisely the diagnosis of this return as pathological that marks a debilitating disengagement with the past that corrupts Ghanaian culture in the post-independence era. Through this indictment of Ghana's blind embrace of the materialistic legacy of the slave trade, Armah indicates that the "curse of constant remembrance" that Baako experiences is also liberatory in that it can release him from the contemporary enslavement of materialism, greed, and corruption. Thus, the physical and psychical upheaval that Baako experiences, in and of itself, is not pathological but merely a part of the process

of an active and positive engagement with and incorporation of the traumatic past.

By depicting the long-term effects of trauma, Armah alters the discourse of psychoanalysis to include not only the African historical context but also the "memory traces of the experiences of former generations" (157) to which Freud referred. In his transgenerational extension of the process of trauma, Armah still holds out hope for the transformative effects of working through trauma. In his ambiguous and uncertain ending, he forces us to consider whether exploring the distant traumatic past could lead not to the pathologization of memory but to a change on the continent, to a successful communicative act that might be received by society and digested without the need to continually purge it. We are left to wonder whether the abject slave trade can be processed in narrative form such that it can produce a shift in African culture away from the devaluation of human life that Armah claims is endemic. Kristeva astutely asks us a similar (though possibly rhetorical) question when she writes, "Does one write under any other condition than being possessed by abjection, in an indefinite catharsis?" (208). Indeed, Baako's possession by the abject of the slave trade works as a sort of catharsis for him, which he hopes will work as a sort of catharsis for his community as well. Just as each moment of remembrance of the slave trade for Baako is a moment of purging, it works for the audience as an opportunity for catharsis and healing–but only if we are willing to listen.

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NOTE

[1] For information regarding the Melanesian Cargo Cults, see Williams, Worsley, Lawrence, and Lindstrom.

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