Many Seasons Gone: Memory, History, and the Atlantic Slave Trade


In Two Thousand Seasons, the great Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah describes the effects of centuries of European exploitation and violence in Africa and the alienation and death that separated Ghanaians in 1973 (when the book was published) from those before them. “Pieces cut off from their whole are nothing but dead fragments,” he laments. “From the unending stream of our remembrance the harbingers of death break off meaningless fractions. Their carriers bring us this news of shards. Their message: behold this paltriness; this is all your history” (Armah 1973:2). It is this seeming paltriness, this history of meaningless fractions that Anne C. Bailey and Saidiya Hartman explore in their latest works, identifying and mending shards of memory and written and oral fragments into recognizable and meaningful forms. As with Armah in Two Thousand Seasons, for Bailey and Hartman, “the linking of those gone, ourselves here, those coming ... it is that remembrance that calls us” (Armah 1973:xiii). Both of them, haunted by remembrance and driven by a personal quest for reconciliation with the past and a scholarly desire for the truth, are unwilling to accept the past as passed, or to settle for the scattered silence that so often substitutes for the history of Africans and those of the diaspora.

Focusing on the transatlantic slave trade in Ghana and its legacies, Bailey’s African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade and Hartman’s Lose Your Mother are two of the most significant recent works in a field of “history-memory” studies that attempt to illuminate the past from the perspective of Africans,
as well as those of the diaspora. Unlike others in the field, however, Bailey and Hartman seek less to separate the muddied waters of memory and history than to plumb their confluence for unspoken truths. Where other scholars have warned against conflating history (“the critical, skeptical, empirical source-bound reconstruction of past events”) and memory (“the spontaneous, unquestioned experience of the past”) (Bailyn 2001:249, 250), Bailey and Hartman, in very different ways, combine the two so that, at times, neither is quite recognizable from the other. They also challenge those historians who would admonish against “exploring the slave trade through the moral dimensions of local African memory” (Austen 2001:237). Their aims, though not identical, are more in line with those of Rosalind Shaw, who has sought “a history of moral imagination . . . told primarily in the language of practical memory through places and practices, images and visions, rituals and rumors” (Shaw 2002:22). While Bailey and Hartman scrupulously document the oral and written sources they cite, their works – told in their unfaltering, immediate voices as narrators – are unlikely to win over scholars wary of emotion and present-day concerns in historical writing.

As much as African Voices and Lose Your Mother share in subject matter, they differ greatly in style, approach, and substance. Bailey’s African Voices, a revision of her 1998 dissertation, centers upon the slave trade as experienced by the Anlo Ewe society in what is now southeastern Ghana. Bailey seizes on vast gaps in the written record and, through evidence collected during 42 interviews conducted between 1992 and 2001, weaves together competing narratives that add African voices to those of Europeans and Americans, reorienting the chronology of slave trading in the area in fundamental ways. Perhaps the most important of her findings is the significance of “the Incident at Atorkor” in the historical memory of the Ewe people, an event in 1856 that signaled a turning point in the nature of slave trading along the West African coast – traders were now kidnapping members of coastal communities that were long-established intermediaries between European and American traders on the coast and domestic traders in the interior (p. 27). Bailey thus concludes that the transatlantic trade was a cycle that began with the kidnapping and general chaos wrought by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans. This initial period was followed by an era of “systematized operations” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (through which coastal African peoples supplied slaves from the interior to European and American traders). Then, mirroring to some degree the disarray of the slave trade’s initial phases, “a period of disorder and chaos” emerged around 1856,

in which random incidents, such as that which occurred at Atorkor, fed the increased demand for illegal slave voyages to Cuba and Brazil (p. 151).

Bailey successfully synthesizes “the fragments, the broken pieces of history and narrative that periodically, but not consistently, break the overwhelming silence on this period of slavery” (pp. 21-22). *African Voices* is a straightforward academic exploration of slavery in West Africa, the workings of the transatlantic slave trade, and the effects of both on the peoples of West Africa, presented in an accessible way that might appeal to undergraduates in an African history survey or a course on the transatlantic slave trade. But it is also a case for Western culpability and a passionate argument and justification for “some sort of redress” for the “real and devastating impact of the slave trade on the Ewe community” and other African peoples (p. 225). In her final chapter, Bailey not only offers a brief, excellent overview of the history of the reparations movement, but outlines two forms of reparations “worthy for consideration” — reparations as redress and as “rememory” (p. 229). “That there is a debt to be paid, there can be little doubt,” she argues (p. 225). In this way, *African Voices* is as much a call for justice and action in the present as it is an explanation of how the slave trade may have functioned in Atorkor, Bono Manso, and other sites in West Africa in the past.2

Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* is also an investigation of splintered pieces of the past as well as an exploration of the very processes of remembering and forgetting today. She, like Bailey, wants to know why we choose to remember, forget, or silence the past and how, particularly, such processes affect the representation of slavery and the slave trade in Ghana today. Fragments, shards, and broken memories drive Hartman’s quest to reconcile and reconstruct the African past, as well as her own, a genealogy that “added up to little more than a random assortment of details about alcoholics, prosperous merchants, and dispassionate benefactors” (p. 77). Hartman’s journey along the slave routes of Ghana is, more than Bailey’s, a search for her own identity, for belonging, for a home. Like the “spectral figures” (p. 81) that haunt her research, an unspoken question colors nearly every observation she makes on contemporary Ghanaian society: how African or how Ghanaian is an African American academic from New York City, with roots in rural Alabama, Curacao, and Ghana?

Written more as memoir, biography, or novel than academic prose, *Lose Your Mother* reveals itself in fragments, in broken pieces, in thoughts and

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2. For more on the role of historians and anthropologists in the reparations movement, see the conference papers delivered at “Repairing the Past: Confronting the Legacies of Slavery, Genocide, and Caste,” Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition, Yale University, October 27-29, 2005, http://www.yale.edu/glc/justice/index.htm.
events that defy chronology – much as a dream or a series of memories might be hastily (but eloquently) scribbled down before one forgets. For example, Chapter 4, “Come, Go Back, Child” begins at the entrance of present-day Elmina castle, where Hartman stands reading a sign declaring, “No one is allowed inside this area except tourists” (p. 84). At the sounds of the voices of youths attempting to woo foreign visitors to the castle, her thoughts center on the words of one of the children: “Because of the slave trade you lose your mother” (p. 85). Parting with the present, Hartman ruminates on the roots and meaning of the Akan word *odonkor*, or slave; she then jumps to the island of St. John and recalls the details of a slave revolt that occurred there in 1733, only to move on to thoughts of her grandfather in Brooklyn in the twentieth century. Finally, she returns to Elmina Castle, where she stands in “the dark recesses of the holding cell for female slaves” contemplating her isolation and the terror of the past (p. 99). Hartman’s transitions – geographic, thematic, and chronological – are as seamless as they are dramatic.

The power and charm of Hartman’s narrative stem from her ability to allow herself certain liberties typically untaken by the straight-laced scholar. She recreates lengthy conversations that entertain as well as depict various events, places, and characters in fine-grained detail. In fact, in a number of instances, she simply imagines what she could not find in written records or the memories of those she encountered, as she does with the experiences of Kwabena, or Ottabah Cugoano, in the dungeon at Anomabu or Cormantin. Unsatisfied with Cugoano’s brief published account of his experiences (containing, sadly, more silence than description), Hartman describes in lurid detail what he *might* have experienced, based upon her reading of his 1787 antislavery tract, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery*. Like her many frustrations with other accounts in the book, written and oral, Hartman admits, “I was most interested in the story he had been disinclined to share” (p. 123). Indeed, some of the most compelling passages of *Lose Your Mother* are conversations between Hartman and herself, history imagined (and probable, believable) but unsubstantiated, as in the five-page description of those who “fled from slave raiders and traders from Asante, Gonja, Dagomba, and Mossi” (pp. 222-26). But need history have a footnote, if we *know* that it happened?

Most impressive is Hartman’s treatment of several key historiographical issues that have dominated the work of Africanists and Americanists since the 1960s, especially those concerning Africans’ roles in the transatlantic slave trade. Both Bailey and Hartman resolve the question of African involvement in the trade by illustrating damaging effects of the trade, on the one hand, and compelling examples of African agency and resistance on the other. For Bailey, “dual involvement of Europeans and Africans in the slave trade ... did not imply *equal* partnership but rather parallel lines of activity originating from different cultural and political spaces” (p. 65). In document-
ing the operations of the trade, Bailey convincingly shows that European and American actors controlled five of its six “legs” (p. 151). For Hartman, the “unequal returns” of the trade are best illustrated in the flow of cowry shells to West Africa as inconvertible currency: “War and predation enabled Africa to produce slaves and purchase luxury goods, and permitted Europe to accumulate the capital necessary for economic development” (p. 208). Both authors agree with much of what Walter Rodney and Eric Williams had to say about the slave trade’s deleterious effects on African society and its contribution to furthering economic and political institutions in Europe and America.

For Bailey and Hartman, it is less a question of deciding whether Africans were complicit in the transatlantic trade (it is clear that many were) than determining which Africans, in which areas, and during which periods, chose or were driven to participate as actors in the commerce. Bailey argues that “class issues were at the heart of the level and depth of slave trading that became systematized in the eighteenth century in the Ewe example and at other periods in other regions” (p. 89). Hartman sees kinship, rather than class, as the determining factor in who sold whom into slavery. “Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery,” she concludes. “They sold strangers: those outside the web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners and barbarians at the outskirts of their country, and lawbreakers expelled from society” (p. 5). For both authors, the memory of African complicity in the trade, as well as the guarded knowledge of who descends from slaves and masters – and who not – in contemporary Ghanaian society, explains much of the silence on the issue and clarifies why ancestors’ involvement in slavery and the slave trade – either as slaves or masters – is still a source of shame today.¹

Looking out across the Atlantic in Two Thousand Seasons, Armah asks, “Is it a wonder we have been flung so far from the way? That our people are scattered even into the desert, across the sea, over and away from this land, and we have forgotten how to recognize ourselves?” (1973:2). Writing nearly thirty-five years later, Bailey and Hartman share Armah’s dedication to remembrance and his conception of African diaspora history and the history of the transatlantic slave trade, still largely written only in groupings of shards, fractions, and fragments. But, as Bailey and Hartman demonstrate, a new generation of scholars has begun to answer his elegy for mutual recognition and shared identity. In two vastly differing accounts of the memory and legacies of slavery and the slave trade in Ghana, Bailey and Hartman demonstrate that a shared, recoverable past is more than mere possibility. For

¹ For examples of how this and related issues are represented in mainstream African media today see, for example, Duodu 2003, 2005 and M’Bokolo 2003.
Bailey, the prospect of reparations promises hope for “healing the wounds of the past” (p. 230). For Hartman, the singing of four girls jumping rope in Gwolu provides the conclusive proof of the existence of a common past: “Here it was – my song, the song of the lost tribe. I closed my eyes and I listened” (p. 235).

REFERENCES


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