

THIERRY BOUDJEKEU KAMGANG

Writing the Slave Trade Trauma in Francophone Africa

A Study of Selected Novels



AFRIKANISCHE LITERATUREN TRANSMEDIAL/TRANSREGIONAL/TRANSKULTURELL 1

**Herausgegeben von
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THIERRY BOUDJEKEU KAMGANG

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Thierry Boudjekeu Kamgang is a researcher in African literary and cultural studies affiliated with the University of Bayreuth. His work examines memory, historical trauma and the cultural afterlives of slavery in African and Afro-diasporic literatures, with particular attention to how contemporary writers engage collective mourning and historical repair.

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Umschlagabbildung: ASSIN – Charly Djikou (2012); Ouidah, Benin © Thierry Boudjekeu Kamgang (see page 8)



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*To my dear wife, Amélie Lando, and my twins,
Jelani Siwo and Jabari Keune.*

To my late father, Kamgang Noé.

*To the African souls lost in the Atlantic.
May they never be forgotten.*

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The completion of this book bears the imprint of all these generous souls, though any shortcomings remain entirely my own.

Cover Illustration

In Vodun spiritual traditions, an *assin* is a family altar, a living memorial tended for their departed kin to sustain the bond between generations.

Borrowing this form, artist Charly Djikou erected his monumental sculpture facing the Portuguese fort of Ouidah, on the Route des Esclaves, to honour the wandering souls of those deported during the transatlantic slave trade, the millions for whom no family altar was ever built, no ceremony ever performed. A miniature slave ship crowns a conical iron structure from which weapons – rifle, axe, horn – evoke the logics of capture, the rust and patina of the metal speaking of time and of the traces this violence left behind.

The novels studied in this book – by Kangni Alem, Léonora Miano, and Wilfried N'Sondé – are themselves literary *assins*, altars built for the unnamed dead of the slave trade, drawing on the spiritual and cultural memory of the African continent to do what official history has not.

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1. Introduction: Locating the Slave Trade in Contemporary Francophone African Fiction

The slave trade stands among the defining traumatic events in African history, one that has been systematically suppressed and, in many contexts, largely forgotten, yet continues to shape the cultural identity, as well as the perception and status of Africans across the world. Declared a crime against humanity, the slave trade is the story of a four-century commercial practice wherein millions of people were captured, deported and forced to work under inhumane conditions. Despite the significant scholarly interest in the history of slavery in the Americas, and despite efforts of international organisations to preserve the slave trade's memory on the African continent, such as UNESCO's 1994 "Slave Route" project,¹ very little has been said and written about it in sub-Saharan Africa in general, and in the Francophone sphere in particular. The persistent centrality of colonialism as both an intellectual and political preoccupation, one that both succeeded and, in many ways, overshadowed the history of the Black Atlantic, helps account for this relative silence. Most literary works and critiques focus almost exclusively on denouncing colonial atrocities and their devastating consequences on postcolonial African society, including dictatorships² and the appalling Rwandan genocide.³ Yet, it was through the slave trade that sub-Saharan Africa was first integrated into global systems of extraction, as a source of both human and material resources. Centuries of capture, deportation, enslavement, and

¹ UNESCO. 1994. "The Slave Route Project", <https://en.unesco.org/themes/fostering-rights-inclusion/slave-route>.

² See, among others: Beti, Mongo. 1954. *Ville cruelle*. Paris: Présence Africaine; Beti, Mongo. 1956. *Mission terminée*. Paris: Présence Africaine; Sembène, Ousmane. 1956. *Le Docker noir*. Paris: Présence Africaine; Kourouma, Ahmadou. 1968. *Les Soleils des indépendances*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

³ On literary engagements with the Rwandan genocide, see for example: Monénembo, Tierno. 2000. *L'Ainé des orphelins*. Paris: Seuil; Tadj, Véronique. 2000. *L'Ombre d'Imana : voyages jusqu'au bout du Rwanda*. Arles: Actes Sud ; Waberi, Abdourahman A. 2000. *Moisson de crânes*. Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes; Diop, Boubacar Boris. 2014. *Murambi, le livre des ossements*. Paris: Zulma; Mukasonga, Scholastique. 2014. *Notre-Dame du Nil*. Paris: Gallimard.

killing have transformed relationships between communities and have undoubtedly influenced self-perception among Africans.⁴ However, it is not possible to address the problems of the present by ignoring the past, whose methods and conditions persistently shape Africa today. Confronting this tragic past is essential for a deeper understanding of the psychological, cultural and political conditions in countries once affected by the slave trade. This study therefore examines how contemporary literatures memorialise the slave trade and, in doing so, seeks to contribute to both the poetics and the historiography of African literatures.

The research seeks to demonstrate that literary imagination can serve as a powerful historical tool that enables the recovery of people's suppressed memories. In a context marked by contradictory institutional and popular discourses surrounding a history that is often both forgotten and manipulated, literature serves as an excellent lens for redemptive transfiguration,⁵ enabling the restitution of lived experiences necessary for the reconstruction of collective memory. The study thus examines the literary responses of African authors through the thematic and aesthetic (r)evolutions of their art as they address the challenges of writing the history of a people in their quest for identity.

This study focuses on three literary texts that capture this highly traumatic period in the history of sub-Saharan Africa: *Esclaves* (2009) by Togolese author Kangni Alem, *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013) by Cameroonian writer Léonora Miano, and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) by Congolese author Wilfried N'Sondé. It examines the modalities and processes of reminiscence of the slave trade trauma in creative writing, specifically the topics discussed, the aspects raised, and the untold stories represented in the Francophone sphere. It also analyses the "traumatic knowledge",⁶ defined as the traumatic event

⁴ Miano, Léonora. 2013. *La Saison de l'ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 65.

⁵ Alem, Kangni. 2006. "La mémoire des traites et de l'esclavage au regard des littératures africaines," *Notre Librairie*, no. 161: 24–29, 29.

⁶ Geoffrey H. Hartman defines "traumatic knowledge" as a form of knowledge that cannot be fully retrieved or communicated without distortion. It consists of two contradictory elements: the traumatic event, which is registered rather than experienced and appears to bypass perception and consciousness, and a form of memory of the event that is continually shaped by a dissociated psyche. This

and its repercussions,⁷ as produced and mediated within recent Francophone sub-Saharan African narratives.

This comparative study enables a better understanding of the various narrative techniques, metaphorical symbols and philosophical concepts that the authors use in their texts and how these contribute to the literary memorialisation of slave trade trauma. It also sets out to examine the literary approaches and mechanisms used to revisit and (re)store the trajectories of sub-Saharan characters' specific historical experience prior to the "dismemberment"⁸ that forced them out of their land, crammed them into the holes of slave ships into the New World and compelled them to live there in resistance, resilience and affirmation of their troubled identity.

The selection of Alem's *Esclaves*, N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, and Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* for scholarly exploration is driven by their critical engagement with the complex legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in Francophone African literature. A key reason for this selection lies in the temporal scope these novels cover. The three novels span significant historical periods, from the pre-colonial era, through the height of the transatlantic slave trade, to the aftermath of abolition. Alem's *Esclaves* draws readers into the political landscape of the nineteenth-century Kingdom of Danhomé, revealing how the legacies of enslavement persist even amid movements toward freedom. By contrast, Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* looks back to the pre-slave trade era, probing collective memories of capture and loss that precede the early days of the slave trade. Meanwhile, N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* traces the Atlantic crossing through

knowledge lies between ignorance and understanding, making it complex and inherently paradoxical. See Geoffrey H. Hartman. 1995. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History* 26, no. 3: 537–563, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20057300>.

⁷ Hartman, Geoffrey H. 1995. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies," *New Literary History* 26, no. 3: 537–563.

⁸ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o describes "dismemberment" as the cultural, psychological, and intellectual fragmentation that African people experienced due to colonialism, enslavement and cultural imperialism, that led to the dehumanisation of African societies. See Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2009. *Something Torn and New*. New York: Basic Civitas Books.

the figure of Nsaku né Vunda, who travels from the Bakongo Kingdom to the Vatican. Together, these temporal frameworks provide a comprehensive perspective on the slave trade across its historical arc.

These novels approach the legacy of slavery from distinct thematic angles. *Esclaves* exposes the clandestine persistence of enslavement through an examination of power and complicity in the aftermath of formal abolition. Alem's narrative traces the complex networks of power that supported the slave trade. N'Sondé's narrative interweaves themes of faith and endurance through the figure of Nsaku né Vunda, whose captivity and displacement anchor both the spiritual and historical dimensions of the novel. Miano's novel probes collective memory, examining how these past wounds continue to resonate within the cultural memory of Francophone African societies.

Stylistically, the three novels illustrate the formal diversity of Francophone African literature. Alem's deployment of historical fiction, anchored in the political dynamics of the nineteenth-century Kingdom of Dahomey, produces a narrative attentive to the mechanisms of power and complicity. N'Sondé's elegiac prose, with its autobiographical register, enacts a sustained meditation on faith, compassion, and survival amid enslavement. Miano's inventive blend of the fantastical with investigative narrative results in a symbolically dense and historically grounded text. This formal diversity reflects the polyphony of Francophone African literary expression.

Importantly, these novels mark a departure from earlier African literary works that often approached the theme of the transatlantic slave trade through oblique references and veiled symbolism. By situating their narratives within the crucible of the slave trade itself, they represent a paradigm shift. These novels confront the realities of enslavement and resistance directly and thus engage more explicitly with this painful history.

Of particular interest is the contemporaneity of these literary works, all published within a relatively recent period. Their publication dates – Alem's *Esclaves* (2009), Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013), and N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) – signal a renewed interest in the transatlantic slave trade. This urgency reflects a broader desire to grapple with historical traumas and their implications for contemporary society. The temporal breadth and contempo-

rary relevance of these narratives reinforce their significance in the understanding of the human experience under slavery. Through their detailed historical portrayals and thematic depth, Alem's *Esclaves*, N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, and Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* stand out as significant contributions to Francophone African literary scholarship. They deepen our understanding of the complexities surrounding the transatlantic slave trade and its lasting influence on the Francophone African imagination and beyond.

This work is based on the premise that artistic production offers new perspectives that complement the memorialisation of the slave trade. Through their thematic and narrative choices, these texts reconstruct the human episodes of the slave trade and give life to the historical discourse, which can at times be insufficient to convey the depth of trauma associated with this experience. These productions are part of the reconstruction of the repressed memory of slavery. To rebuild an emancipated African image on the continent and around the world, African literary works trace a lost identity and reconnect with the history of their ancestors. This counter-narrative awakens suppressed memories and restores to the slave victims their dignity and identity, once lost in the Middle Passage. Fiction, as a counter-narrative to dominant historical accounts, revisits history and examines its shadowed spaces to unveil the deep wound(s) it constitutes and brings to light the ethical, psychological, cultural, political and ideological issues involved. These efforts aim to foster genuine awareness and reconciliation, which are essential for the recovery of Africa's self-image. The rewriting of the slave trade also uncovers how the dynamics of precolonial power have been reproduced within neo-colonial and imperialist forces that continue to influence Africa today.

The analysis of the selected texts is guided by the following questions: How do contemporary Sub-Saharan authors engage with the tragic legacy of the transatlantic slave trade? What specific features of these narratives and what contributions do they make to revisiting the traumatic memory of the slave trade in Francophone Africa? What do the texts' literary imagination and language reveal about the authors' vision for reactivating memory and reconciling Africans with their forgotten history? What aesthetic techniques do the authors use to memorialise the slave trade in their works? What linguistic and

metaphorical devices memorialise the historical trauma experienced in the texts?

Contemporary African literary production remains inextricably linked to its historical past, yet fictional texts in French by African authors that directly address the slave trade are relatively scarce. As Miller aptly observes, Francophone literature is full of allusions to slavery, yet there remains a certain silence about the slave trade. The trauma surrounding this history persists in an absence that stems not only from the seemingly distant memory and pluralistic nature of concerns of the African postcolony, but also from the shame and guilt associated with confronting its complexity and paradoxes. Consequently, writers who venture into this domain face a twofold challenge. Firstly, they must undertake meticulous research into a history that is often obscured, forgotten, or distorted, as the archives are generally authored by the perpetrators. Secondly, they must find ways to capture this pain, allowing it to resonate with readers while managing the complexities of language and representation. These writers bear the responsibility of accurately portraying the horrors of the slave trade, respecting the dignity of those who suffered, and avoiding trivialisation within a historical context charged with political, economic, and ideological stakes. This constitutes a delicate balancing act, as the weight of the past bears heavily on the present, shaping the collective memory of African communities. Addressing the enduring legacy of the transatlantic slave trade in African literature requires confronting the deep-rooted impact of colonialism on African societies. Centuries of exploitation, violence, and forced displacement have left lasting scars that continue to shape the continent's cultural, social, and economic fabric. In response to this historical trauma, African authors take on the roles of storytellers and memory keepers, endeavouring to give voice to silenced narratives and to facilitate the healing of past wounds.

Central to our inquiry is historiopoesis, a framework in which history and literature intersect, interweaving memory and reflection. Drawing on White's understanding of history as narrative,⁹ Semujanga's insight into the transgenericity that already characterises African

⁹ White, Hayden. 1973. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

novels,¹⁰ and Gröning's narratological approach to historical novels in marginalised regions such as the Caribbean,¹¹ this analysis provides a framework to examine the relationship between history, memory, narrative, and collective consciousness. Semujanga's concept of transgenericity offers valuable insights into the nature of the African literary novel, including those under study here. The African novel, as Semujanga posits, inherently intertwines multiple genres, creating hybrid forms that defy easy categorisation.¹² In the case of slave trade trauma novels, this transgenericity becomes a potent tool for rendering the complexities of historical trauma. Alem, N'Sondé, and Miano employ various literary techniques and genres, ranging from political narrative and historical fiction to autobiography and fantastical storytelling, to capture the complex nature of the slave trade's memory. These novels, therefore, transcend conventional boundaries, offering innovative and multi-layered narratives that reflect the diverse experiences of African peoples.

Semujanga defines transcultural poesis ('poétique transculturelle') as a method for examining how a work of art explores both the cultures of 'Self' and 'Other' by crossing boundaries between various artistic and literary genres.¹³ The term "transcultural" refers to a perspective that transcends cultural and literary borders, fostering dialogue among different national and international contexts. This approach goes beyond national frameworks, revealing a broader spectrum of cultural connections that lend the work greater international significance. In analysing African novels written in French about the transatlantic slave trade, this study adapts the concept of transcultural poesis to focus on historiopoesis. This approach examines narrative strategies in which the dynamics of literary genres acquire a historiographical dimension. Historiopoesis suggests that these novels use a

¹⁰ Semujanga, Josias. 1999. *Dynamique des genres dans le roman africain*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

¹¹ Gröning, Sarah. 2016. *Historiopoeten: Formen literarischer Geschichtsschreibung im französischen Roman der Karibik*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang.

¹² Semujanga, *Dynamique des genres dans le roman africain*, 187.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

“vast repertoire of motifs and formal traits”¹⁴ inspired by historiography to create a continuum between history and fiction. This strategy allows for the exploration of historical narratives while incorporating elements of fiction, thereby building bridges that deepen our understanding of historical events. Gröning’s concept of historiopoesis, building upon Semujanga’s insights, offers a compelling framework for analysing Francophone African literature. This approach facilitates analysis from multiple perspectives while adding depth to narrative interpretation. It also illustrates how blending literary genres leads to innovative interpretations of historical events and their broader implications for African consciousness.

Historiopoesis emphasises the significance of narrative structure and technique in conveying historical trauma, a feature commonly observed in these novels through fragmented narratives and multiple perspectives. It also enables a critical examination of the relationship between history and memory, which is especially relevant in narratives that trace the intergenerational repercussions of historical trauma on identity and remembrance. Through meticulous analysis informed by Semujanga’s transgenericity and Gröning’s historiopoesis, this study examines slave trade trauma literature and establishes the enduring significance of these narratives in shaping collective memory and understanding. In examining these novels, a historiopoetic approach reveals the significance of narrative structures in shaping the interpretation of historical events. The three authors employ various narrative forms to present the shadowed history of the slave trade from an African perspective, thereby contributing to the collective memory of these traumatic events. By analysing the narrators, narration, and narrated content, this study seeks to deepen understanding of the relationship between history, storytelling, and memory in Francophone African historical novels on the transatlantic slave trade.

As writers deeply engaged in exploring historical themes, Miano, N’Sondé, and Alem bridge history and imagination, thereby humanising the past and opening it to collective reflection. This historiopoetic analysis argues that African historical novels in French centred on

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

the transatlantic slave trade can be regarded as *treatises on history*,¹⁵ as defined by Glissant's vision. By conducting rigorous documentary research, these Francophone African authors imbue their literary creations with varying degrees of historical credibility, grounding their narratives in real periods and events. They incorporate historical dates, figures, legends, anecdotes, and testimonies to construct compelling narratives that intertwine reality with fiction. This conscious blending of historical and literary elements liberates the writer from binary oppositions, transforming both the content and the form of their works. In examining these novels, a historiopoetic approach, inspired by White's concept of the content of the form, reveals the significance of narrative structures in shaping interpretations of historical events.¹⁶ The authors employ various narrative forms to present the shadowed history of the slave trade from an African perspective, thereby contributing to collective memory. By analysing the roles of narrators, narrations, and narrated content, this study seeks to deepen understanding of the relationship between history, storytelling, and memory in Francophone African historical novels on the transatlantic slave trade.

In literary criticism, the role of the narrator has undergone a significant transformation since the advent of the linguistic turn, particularly evident in postmodern and postcolonial texts. In these narratives, the narrator is perceived as a fictional construct and is often considered unreliable. The prevalence of multiple perspectives and the presence of a manipulative narrator accentuate the narrative uncertainty, thereby calling into question both subjectivity and the certainty of compre-

¹⁵ Édouard Glissant's concept of the "treatise on history" (*traité d'histoire*) emerges as part of his larger philosophical framework exploring history, memory, and identity in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Rather than a formal historiographic account, Glissant's treatise on history envisions literary and creative works as an alternative means of engaging with historical memory and its complexities. In this regards, Francophone African historical novels can be read as vessels of historiopoetic expression, offering a multifaceted and relational understanding of history that challenges linear historiography. See, Glissant, Édouard. 1981. *Le Discours antillais*. Paris: Seuil (1st ed.; reedited in collection Folio Essais, Gallimard, 1997).

¹⁶ Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

hending the past.¹⁷ Far from being a mere purveyor of knowledge, the historiographic narrator assumes a deeper function as a voice that prompts readers to reflect on their own historical position. This contemporary role of the narrator finds expression in abandoning realistic writing in favour of heightened narrative involvement, foregrounding the process of literary fiction creation and underscoring that the text represents a plausible reality rather than a faithful reproduction.¹⁸

Regarding the narration, an examination of historical novels reveals narrative structures that can be categorised into three main types: progressive, cyclical, and contingent.¹⁹ These narrative patterns highlight the ambivalence between the actual past and the imagined past, thereby challenging their construction and dependence on prevailing historical contexts. Investigating historiographic narration poses unique challenges, as this approach has not yet received substantial scholarly attention. A relativistic and postmodern-narrativist perspective acknowledges that the structuring of the narrative influences the understanding of the content it presents. Meanwhile, the structural features of historiographic narration aim to establish factual accuracy by minimising elements of fiction and subjectivity. The contrast between the framing and inner narratives results in the crossing of metaphysical boundaries, giving the narrative a self-regulating, constructed quality.

Thirdly, the analysis turns to the narrated content, highlighting key elements of action such as space, time, and characters. This approach draws on the notion of “commonplaces”, as defined by Glissant,²⁰ which embody the complexity of African identities as expressed in literature and the arts. The objective is to highlight the condensation of space-time figures within Francophone African novels dealing

¹⁷ Hutcheon, Linda. 1989. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, 117.

¹⁸ Gröning, Sarah. 2016. *Historiopoeten: Formen literarischer Geschichtsschreibung im französischen Roman der Karibik*. Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 76.

¹⁹ Mengel, Ewald. 1986. *Geschichtsbild und Romankonzeption: Drei Typen des Geschichtsverstehens im Reflex der Form des englischen historischen Romans*. Heidelberg: Winter, 48.

²⁰ Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (Orig. pub. as *Poétique de la Relation*. Paris: Galimard, 1990).

with the slave trade. The notion of trace can be associated with Pierre Nora's *lieux de mémoire*,²¹ although they differ in significance, as commonplaces do not propose alternatives but rather a common ground that opens the way to multiple interpretations. These commonplaces may be considered *chronotopoi*, a concept introduced by Bakhtin,²² where spatial and temporal characteristics merge into a concrete and meaningful whole. This amalgamation offers an indefinite modal interpretation of the past in historiopoetic writing, allowing for a myriad of historical perspectives where the past, present, and future coexist and overlap. Glissant's conception of commonplaces is linked to Bhabha's notion of the *third space*,²³ which represents an ambivalent realm of knowledge where cultural identities are interrogated. These places act as organising centres of the subject's fundamental events, guiding the actions of individuals. In this approach, the dynamic relationship between narration, history, and memory comes to the fore, highlighting the narrator's power to shape the interpretation of past events while inviting the reader to an intimate immersion within this reimagined and revisited memory. Through this analytical lens, the historical novel emerges not only as a vessel of storytelling but also as a potent means of engaging with the past and sustaining its complex legacy.

In their polymorphic narratives, Miano, N'Sondé and Alem represent the slave trade in its historical depth while demonstrating the capacity of literature to recover silenced voices, bearing witness to the resilience²⁴ of the human spirit amidst the darkest chapters of the

²¹ Nora, Pierre. 1989. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations* 26: 7–24.

²² Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1981. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press.

²³ Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

²⁴ The study approaches "resilience" as a multidimensional construct that transcends survival, encompassing spiritual fortitude, cultural preservation, personal agency, and regenerative capacity in the context of the slave trade's historical trauma. Postcolonial resilience is analysed through the remembering of colonial fractures (Ngũgĩ 2009), women's strength in resistance (Miano 2013), and spiritual traditions as sources of empowerment (Alem 2009).

African collective past. Thus, their works stand not merely as literary artefacts but as potent testaments to the enduring capacity of storytelling to transcend time and forge connections across the chasms of experience. By engaging with these texts in this manner, the analysis aims to uncover the strategies these novels use to represent the horrors of the slave trade, render past suffering legible, and pave the way for reconciliation and peace.

The first chapter establishes the specific social and historical context in which the trauma narratives under study are produced and received. This chapter presents the three authors under study, their sources of interest and the context of production of their respective works on the slave trade. The chapter is based on a discussion of Mbembe's assertion that the slave trade has been a subject of persisting silence in Francophone African creative production.²⁵ The narratives under study can thus be considered creative attempts by the authors to fill in this memory gap in distinctive ways. While Miano approaches the slave trade as a psychological and cultural disaster, Alem and N'Sondé adopt more explicitly historiographic approaches that reveal the complex political constellations underpinning the system, thereby stimulating renewed debate within Francophone African contexts.

The second chapter examines historiographies and (counter)narratives of the slave trade in Francophone Africa. It analyses the ways in which the memory of the slave trade has been constructed, silenced, and contested within African historiography, highlighting the political and ideological dimensions of forgetting. The chapter further explores the politics of silence, memory, and guilt in Francophone African literature, showing how these dynamics shape representations of the slave trade. It also investigates literary engagements with silence, trauma, and memory, demonstrating how writers navigate both explicit and indirect modes of representing this traumatic past.

The third chapter presents the literature review and theoretical framework. It examines how the slave trade traumatic memory is addressed in Francophone literature and outlines the theoretical concepts relevant to the study. It also reviews recent critiques directed at

²⁵ Mbembe, Achille. 2000. "African Modes of Self-Writing." *Public Culture* 14, no. 1: 239–273.

decolonising trauma studies and making them applicable to postcolonial contexts.

Chapter four examines the works of Alem, N'Sondé and Miano from a historiopoetic perspective. The chapter analyses the narrative voices, forms, structures, and symbolism used in the selected novels. Each novel is considered individually before a comparative analysis is undertaken to highlight the different ways in which these works approach the task of documenting historical trauma. An intricate examination of these novels underscores their inherent complexity, as each novel operates within a distinct temporal and narrative frame within the broader history of the slave trade. Miano anchors her narrative in the precolonial epoch, a period marked by the relentless fervour of capture, while N'Sondé plunges readers into the heart of the slave trade apparatus, depicting its sprawling reach and inherent brutality. Alem, by contrast, crafts a narrative immersed in the clandestine shadows of the trade's twilight years, where covert dealings persist amidst the encroaching winds of abolition. Yet, beyond their historical moorings, these literary works transcend mere chronicles, interrogating the very act of narrating trauma. N'Sondé adopts the guise of imminent testimony, intertwining fiction with the poignant echoes of autobiography to offer a visceral exploration of individual experience amid the tumult of history. Miano, in turn, employs oral tradition and investigative metafiction, peeling back the layers of memory to reveal the haunting spectres of trauma and loss in the wake of enslavement. Meanwhile, Alem boldly embraces revisionism, wielding the pen as a potent instrument of reflexive reclamation, as he resuscitates forgotten figures of the Dahomey slave memory and reshapes the contours of historical discourse to centre the marginalised.

Chapter five discusses strategies for representing the trauma of the slave trade, with a focus on the tropes of capture and deportation. This study argues that the slave trade narrative in the present corpus is constructed around these two motifs. The chapter analyses the aesthetic representation of trauma, drawing on Frantz Fanon's analysis of the psychological effects of colonialism and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of "dismemberment" to examine the traumatic effects of forced exile as represented in the selected texts.

Chapter six addresses the philosophical questions of mourning and renaissance by examining the role of literature as a catalyst for re-memoration and psychic restoration. By giving a voice to victims and unearthing the traumatic sufferings and post-traumatic wounds of the slave trade, authors contribute to reactivating and in so doing contesting, an institutionalised and occluded history, working toward the recovery of African self-consciousness through the dialectic of aesthetics and ethics.

2. Historiographies and (Counter)Narratives of the Slave Trade in Francophone Africa

Over the past two decades, the Atlantic slave trade and slavery have emerged as major subjects of international public and scholarly concern, reflecting the growing urgency accorded to their history and memory. In 1994, the UNESCO project “La Route des esclaves”, launched in Ouidah and other memorials came about because of several initiatives by African intellectuals and activist governments on the continent to counter dictatorial regimes and (neo)colonial systems still in place after official independence.²⁶ The Durban Conference against Racism in 2001 broke the silence on the history of slavery and the Atlantic slave trade as a major episode, which has immensely influenced the perception of Africans and the black body around the world.²⁷ Recent academic research and events on slave memory have resulted in significant publications on the traumas engendered by slavery. In America, social debates and numerous national commemorations reveal the thorough quest for justice as concerns race. In France, the historic Taubira Law²⁸ crystallises the official recognition of the slave trade as a crime against humanity and institutionalises remembrance through annual commemorations of abolition between 27 April to 30 May.²⁹

By contrast, within Africa, where the effects of the slave trade are still heavily felt, much work is still to be done to give this painful past more public visibility. In 2010, the Senegalese National Assembly adopted a law making Senegal the first and only country on the continent to declare the slave trade and slavery a crime against humanity. In an article in *Jeune Afrique* magazine, Karfa Diallo, Senegalese essayist and founder of “Association Mémoires et Partages”, deplores the fact that Africans have not yet sufficiently assumed the history of the slave trade and slavery, a history of a global capitalist economy

²⁶ UNESCO. 1994. *The Slave Route Project*, launched in Ouidah.

²⁷ United Nations. 2002. *Durban Declaration and Programme of Action* (A/CONF.189/12).

²⁸ France. 2001. *Loi no 2001-434 du 21 mai 2001. Journal officiel de la République française*, 23 May 2001.

²⁹ UNESCO, *La Route des esclaves*.

in which millions of African lives were sacrificed by Western structures of violence.³⁰ He adds that the slave trade and slavery are the history of 15 million Africans deported by the Europeans, with Africans enslaved by the Arabs for 14 centuries. This fact resolutely positions the slave trade and slavery among the most tragic episodes of human violation the world has ever witnessed. Given that Africans were the main target and currency of the economy of the slave trade, the silence of African states on this tragic past may reveal the difficulty of these countries to consider the complex implications of the trade and to come to terms with the traumatic effects caused upon African societies. Many scholars agree that there seems to be no public drive to effectively transform this human tragedy into a redemptive experience and a pathway to recreate a collective memory in Africa. According to Diallo, in postcolonial Africa, where Africans put their lives at risk to cross the Mediterranean, bridging Africa with Europe, the history of the slave trade urgently needs to be inscribed in the political and socio-cultural education of African Youth.³¹

Most African countries have not yet taken the necessary political responsibility to give African youths the chance to revisit African relationships with the world based on an awareness of their past and their importance in the world, in a bid to escape from suffering, pathos, victimisation, resentment and racism. Engaging with the memory of the slave trade and slavery gives an all-encompassing view on centuries of deprivation of Africans for the respective benefit of first the Arab World and later the West. To explore this question of memory is to investigate how strategies and tactics of permanent resistance to injustice have hatched a new humanity that can feed a renewed African consciousness. How can we explain the silence of African countries regarding this painful past, whose persisting effects affect the perception of Africans and the African consciousness throughout the world? What attempts have been undertaken to tell the story of the slave trade and slavery in Africa? In other words, how has the slave memory been approached in African historiography?

³⁰ Diallo, Karfa. 2021. "[Tribune] Esclavage: c'est à l'Afrique d'écrire sa propre histoire." *Jeune Afrique*, 27 April 2021.

³¹ Diallo, "Esclavage: c'est à l'Afrique d'écrire sa propre histoire".

2.1. The Slave Trade in African Historiography and the Politics of Forgetting

In the early years of independence, the slave trade and slavery in African societies were topics of interest and a significant part of the study of African collective memory. At a time of dictatorial regimes and neo-colonialism, nationalist and pan-Africanist movements emerged to reclaim African liberation. In this context, as Seck remarks, African historiography on the slave trade and slavery in French-speaking Africa was both an academic and political project.³² In this regard, reviewing the various forms of slavery, M'bokolo identifies three key stakes in writing the history of slavery: political, intellectual, and educational.³³ Africa had undergone political transformations accompanied by a deep desire to break away from dictatorial and (neo)colonial oppression. The intellectual scope concerns the multiplication of passionate academic publications on the history of the slave trade and slavery. The historiography, as written by certain African historians such as Eric Williams demonstrates the flagrant correlation of slavery with the contemporary African condition.³⁴ The educational issue is essentially about the urgent need to restore the truth about slavery and the slave trade to preserve the living together of the nations and peoples of the world.

The aim of African historians within these dynamics was to reconnect with the African consciousness that was subdued by colonial ideologies enshrined in the racist theories that legitimised the deportation and slave exploitation of Africans in the New World. For the sake of unity, African historians tended to overlook the role the continent played in this painful past, mobilising instead a glorified vision of history to support liberation and pan-Africanist aspirations.

³² Seck, Ibrahima. 2007–2008. “Esclavage et traite des esclaves dans les manuels de l’enseignement secondaire du Sénégal.” *Afrika Zamani* 15–16.

³³ M'bokolo, Elikia. 1994. “Who Was Responsible?” *UNESCO Courier* 47, no. 10: 11–14.

³⁴ Williams, Eric. 1944. *Capitalism and Slavery*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

From its inception, Francophone African historiography was mainly concerned with restoring African historical consciousness shattered by colonial ideology. Similarly, at the dawn of independence, the need to “Africanise” school curricula became apparent in academic circles and public debates. Groups of historians joined forces to write about the past of Africa in the former French colonies and beyond. This is how several history textbooks were included in secondary schools’ curricula. The slave trade is one of the most important episodes in history that is referenced in these textbooks. Europeans and Arab slavers are very often assigned the main role. In a secondary role are the Africans, accomplices and actors in the slave trade and perpetrators of domestic slavery. This commercial practice is presented as the uprooting of Africans from the motherland to unknown parts of the New World. The dichotomy of an external enemy and an internal victim effectively excludes the forms of internal slavery that were common in precolonial Africa. While it is acknowledged that such forms of enslavement did exist, trans-Saharan and slavery form a greater part of the historical framework unto which the studies are centred.

Another historiographical approach sought to reconnect with a glorified vision of precolonial Africa, often downplaying internal conflicts and divisions that facilitated external interventions such as the slave trade and colonisation. One of the most cited references is *Histoire de l’Afrique noire: d’hier à demain*³⁵ (History of Black Africa and Prehistoric Africa) by Joseph Ki-Zerbo, a prominent African historian of the time. This book is the very first synthesis of the history of black peoples written by an African, in which Ki-Zerbo intends to draw on authentic ancient tradition and civilisation, the little-known face of yesterday’s Africa, thus providing the basis for a healthier approach to building future Africa. In a pedagogical style, the historian portrays an Africa whose past can serve as a fruitful source of inspiration for the continent’s future vision. This book is at the origin of the eight volumes of the General History of Africa that came out in the 1960s.³⁶ The lat-

³⁵ Ki-Zerbo, Joseph. 1972. *Histoire de l’Afrique noire: d’hier à demain*. Paris: Hatier.

³⁶ UNESCO International Scientific Committee for the Drafting of a General History of Africa. 1981–1993. General History of Africa. 8 vols. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.

ter brought together hundreds of African and international historians with the aim of “reconstructing a history of Africa free of the racial prejudices inherited from the slave trade and colonisation and promoting an African perspective”. Although this significant intellectual contribution makes several references to domestic slavery, mainly in the fifth volume, these references are, however, limited to the encounter with Europe. As Ibrahima Thioub notes, the institution of enslavement or even forced labour has not been systematically investigated.³⁷ According to him, while Ki-zerbo’s approach to Cheikh Anta Diop’s demonstrations has the merit of restoring a past that reveals the truncated and distorted history of Africa, it nevertheless reproduces European elitist models and is deadlocked into the chromatic paradigms produced by racist ideologies at work in eighteenth-century Europe.³⁸ Furthermore, the elitist orientation of nationalist historiography tends to appropriate the social discourse of the indigenous dominants, a discourse that veils the hierarchical structures that form African societies. Consequently, the slave trade is studied as a practice that was imposed upon Africans who bear the role of victims of the European capitalist system. In this tragic story, naive and innocent Africa is caught in the trap of the economic system propelled by lawless entrepreneurs devoid of all humanity. Walter Rodney’s argument is regularly used to fuel and ground this stance of the power asymmetry between Africa and Europe regarding the slave trade.³⁹

The centrality of exogenous factors in the writing of the history of African societies has reinforced a tendency to privilege work on social aspects and characters directly related to the Atlantic experience, undermining or denying other historical processes and events not directly connected to this dynamic. The historiography of this period tends to reduce its reading of the past to the relationship between

³⁷ Thioub, Ibrahima. 2005. “Regard critique sur les lectures africaines de l’esclavage et de la traite atlantique.” In Issiaka Mandé and Blandine Stefanson, eds., *Les Historiens africains et la mondialisation*, 271–292. Paris: Karthala.

³⁸ Diop, Cheikh Anta. 1967. *Antériorité des civilisations nègres: mythe ou vérité historique*. Paris: Présence Africaine.

³⁹ Rodney, Walter. 1972. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. London: Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications.

indigenous elites and European actors in the context of the Atlantic slave trade, followed by the conquest and the institution of colonial regimes. It should be noted that the intellectual debate on the history of the slave trade in Africa is increasingly being challenged and reconfigured. Contemporary West African historians from French-speaking countries engage the topic and explore the intricacies of a complex memory that is often hidden or simply forgotten. Through conferences, exchanges and publications, these scholars from the West African coasts are breathing new life into the subject of the slave trade through more in-depth critical analyses.⁴⁰

Reviewing African historiography in Francophone Africa and France, Thioub examines the intriguing management of the historiography of the slave trade and slavery on the continent.⁴¹ Beyond the long historical sequence that took place in Africa, he questions the way in which the various actors have ensured the management of memory and identity in relation to slavery and the slave trade over time. He explains how African intellectual discourse, in its attempt to dismantle and deconstruct colonial ideology and domination, has anchored its arguments in the racial paradigm, a category created by the West to legitimise these slavery practices in Africa. While it is true that the radical identification criterion of race has led to the perception of Africa as a unified entity in the face of the colonial enemy, this chromatic factor has led to a simplistic appreciation of the phenomenon of the slave trade. These readings reinvent Africa as a 'black' continent, portrayed as savage and in need of civilisation, or, conversely, as the cradle of the world's earliest civilisations. This racial paradigm attributes to all Africans the profile of victim of the slave trade and, at the same time, tends to erase the systems of domination endogenous to the continent and the African shareholders who also bear responsibility in the Atlantic slave trade.

⁴⁰ Examples include Félix Iroko 2003, André Salifou 2006, Maurice Bazemo 2007, Ibrahima Thioub 2002, 2005, 2008, 2007.

⁴¹ Thioub, Ibrahima. 2005. "Regard critique sur les lectures africaines de l'esclavage et de la traite atlantique." In Issiaka Mandé and Blandine Stefanson, eds., *Les Historiens africains et la mondialisation*, 271–292. Paris: Karthala.

While these limitations do not alter the significant contribution of independence approaches to the understanding of power relations in the period between fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, they do tend to obscure the indigenous processes of domination, exploitation and oppression that preceded or coincided with the Atlantic slave trade.⁴² These criticisms of African historians confirm the remarks of several prominent researchers who have examined the question of the memory of slavery in West Africa.⁴³ The strategy of elision observed in African research circles thus reflects a broader politics of forgetting.

The scarcity of documentation, the late and fragmentary nature of the data, the risk of political recuperation, the risk of exposure of certain slave-owning groups and individuals, and the silence of oral traditions are many arguments to explain the selective amnesia about internal slavery. However, in view of these shortcomings, history and other forms of writing about memory must now explore the slave trade and slavery in a more critical manner to shed light on the dividing lines between victims and perpetrators, both external and internal to the African continent. This will enable all forms of servitude, past and present, to be unravelled; painful experiences that were and are the result of complex historical processes.

In various African countries that were deeply impacted by the slave trade, such as Benin and Senegal, remembering the slave trade has materialised in memorial heritage sites, symbolic routes, museums, and the enhancement and conservation of cultural heritage linked to the Atlantic slave trade. Local governments have erected commemorative sites to promote cultural heritage tourism around slave memory, welcoming ever-increasing waves of visitors from around the world, mainly African-Americans retracing the steps of their ancestors. According to many researchers, instead of breaking the silence, these heritage sites, supported and classified by UNESCO, have shadowed

⁴² Thioub, "Regard critique sur les lectures africaines...", 271–292.

⁴³ Shaw, Rosalind. 2002. *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. University of Chicago Press; Akyeampong, Emmanuel. 2001. "History, memory, slave trade, and slavery in Anlo (Ghana)." *Slavery and Abolition* 22, no. 3: 1–24; Klein, Martin A. 1989. "Studying the history of those who would rather forget: Oral history and the experience of slavery." *History in Africa* 16: 209–217.

the existence of domestic slavery, trans-Saharan slave trade and African participation in the Atlantic slave trade.⁴⁴ Consequently, these joint national and international initiatives staging of the memory of the slave trade do not come without reviving local conflicts of memory. In Benin, for instance, counter-initiatives, carried out individually or collectively, now saturate the memorial landscape by attempting to inscribe their popular reading of the past in these spaces. Indeed, the study of the Slave Route is part of current debates in the historiography of the slave trade and the evolution of its representations. It is also integrated in the contemporary challenges of heritage sites, especially in Benin.⁴⁵ Heritage sites and memorial discourses, have come to obscure the local slave system. Coastal sites such as Gorée, Elmina and Ouidah attract all the attention, shadowing inland sites such as Galam, Kumasi and Abomey which carry one of the essential moments of the slave industry: capture and transportation through the bush right to the slave ship. In Senegal, this exclusive zoom on the official memory site is called the “Gorée syndrome”, the deconstruction of which must necessarily involve new historiographical and pedagogical orientations that would help to dissipate the shady clouds that still cover the modalities of enslavement on the continent.⁴⁶

How, then, can Africa truly take hold of the memory of the slave trade and slavery? For Africa to take hold of its history, its painful past must be told and retold. The intrinsic limitations of history as a disciplinary practice, the political stakes of a possible disintegration of African nations and the need to invent a narrative that confronts the

⁴⁴ Holsey, Bayo. 2008. *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Bellagamba, Alice, Sandra E. Greene, and Martin A. Klein, eds. 2013. *African Voices on Slavery and the Slave Trade*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Noret, Joël. 2011. “Le sens du passé: patrimoine et mémoire en Afrique subsaharienne.” *Afrique contemporaine* 238: 27–40.

⁴⁵ Ciarcia, Gaetano. 2008. “Mémoire de l’esclavage au Bénin.” *Gradhiva* 8: 4–9; Law, Robin. 2004. *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving ‘Port,’ 1727–1892*. Athens: Ohio University Press; Landry, Timothy R. 2011. “Touring the Slave Route: Inaccurate Authenticities in Bénin, West Africa.” In Helaine Silverman, ed., *Contested Cultural Heritage*, 205–231. New York: Springer.

⁴⁶ Seck, Ibrahima Thioub. 2007–2008. “Esclavage et traite des esclaves dans les manuels de l’enseignement secondaire du Sénégal.” *Afrika Zamani* 15–16.

coloniser, not to mention the West's throttle on the development of the discourse, are all factors that hinder the full and sincere expression of the memory of the slave trade in Africa, leading to its obscurity. Through social and political mobilisation for the respect of human and citizens' rights, the victims of slavery or their descendants are increasingly making their voices heard. African citizens are now demanding that their governments take account of this past and the wrongs that they or their ancestors suffered because of the slave trade and slavery. The memory of the slave trade and slavery in Africa is generally accompanied by contemporary social, political and memorial demands. In recent years, the George Floyd affair in the United States has given rise to the Black Lives Matter movement, which has rekindled among Africans and the diaspora the need to understand the memory of slavery, which is closely linked to the memory of racism, which is at the root of many tensions, discriminations and attempts to negate humanity as evidenced in the slave trade, apartheid, and eighteenth-century racial theories based on hierarchies of race.

In order to make African countries assume this political responsibility, many civil society initiatives and advocacy initiatives have been launched by associations across countries such as Senegal, Guinea and Benin, some of which have been working for more than a decade to call on States to commemorate the memory of slavery. These initiatives mobilise around questions of memory, criticising the predominantly touristic management of this history and advocating for a more memorial, intellectual and political approach to memory. They claim the need to address issues of African complicity in the most tragic human trafficking in history. These initiatives bring to the public arena the memory demands of Africa. They also bring the demands of the American diaspora whose fate is still highly conditioned by the racism inherited from the slave trade and slavery. These call for historical truth that accounts for the complex contexts, divergences, and convergences between different slave trades, while also demanding symbolic and material reparations, including the removal of statues, the renaming of streets associated with slave traders, and other acts of memorial justice. The imperative, as these initiatives make clear, is not simply to remember but to translate memory into political accountability – and to do so before the window of post-BLM moral urgency closes.

On 25 March 2026 – the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade – the United Nations General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution (A/80/L.48), spearheaded by Ghana on behalf of the 54-member African Group, formally declaring the trafficking of enslaved Africans and racialised chattel enslavement of Africans as “the gravest crime against humanity”. The resolution, adopted by 123 votes in favour, 3 against (Argentina, Israel, and the United States), and 52 abstentions – including all 27 European Union member states and the United Kingdom – affirms that these historical wrongs justify reparatory justice, calling on member states to engage in dialogue on formal apologies, restitution, financial compensation, and the return of cultural artefacts to their countries of origin. The vote carries no legally binding force, but its political weight is considerable: it marks the first time the UN General Assembly has applied the designation “gravest crime” to a specific historical event, thereby elevating the transatlantic slave trade above the category of crimes against humanity in moral and memorial terms. As such, it constitutes precisely the form of international political acknowledgement that the civil society initiatives documented in this chapter have long demanded. That the resolution was adopted on the anniversary of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, and that it explicitly grounds its call for reparatory justice in the “enduring consequences that continue to structure the lives of all people through racialized regimes of labour, property and capital”, resonates directly with the argument advanced throughout this study: that the memory of the slave trade is not a closed historical question but an open wound whose literary, political, and cultural treatment remains urgently unfinished.

2.2. Politics of Silence: Memory, Guilt, and Representation of the Slave Trade in Francophone African Literature

Having noted the persistent silence regarding the memory of the slave trade and slavery in West Africa in general, it is important to first ex-

plore and understand the reasons for the absence of traces of the slave trade in the cultural memory of the Francophone space.

Mbembe decries the general amnesia about the effects of the slave trade on Africans on the continent.⁴⁷ He points out that the repercussions of silence on the trauma of the slave trade are visible in the everyday life of contemporary African societies. He argues, as seen earlier, that African intellectuals are deluding themselves in the narrative of a mythological Africa. Likewise, Jewsiewicki and Mudimbe underline the fact that Afrocentric critical approaches have elided the period of the slave trade and thus the traumatic episode has been in favour of the narrative of a glorious, mythical and unified Africa.⁴⁸ Of course, to get this narrative across, it is necessary to get rid of the difficult and embarrassing episodes of history to focus on the epic moments that Africans, crumbling under successive colonial rule, need to regain a shred of humanity and imagine a better future. However, to leap ahead and avoid such a momentous period in the history of the continent and of humanity delays the resolution of the underlying tensions and the healing of the still-open wounds left by the slave trade and inherited by subsequent generations. This nihilistic intellectual approach is not the only reason for the silence around the issue.

The absence of the slave trade and slavery in general in literature and in discourse is accounted for by the stigma associated with it. The descendants of both enslaved individuals and slave-owning Africans prefer not to mention their history in order not to awaken the haunts inherited from slavery. When asked about their ancestors and the slave past, their answers remain very general. They simply repeat the official discourse propagated on the issue. Moreover, family histories emerge and are very often unrelated to the slave trade. The term slave has almost disappeared from the vocabulary and former slaves have become brothers or members of the family. People avoid using the word "slave" and avoid recalling the origins of any family member with a strange

⁴⁷ Mbembe, Achille. 2000. "African Modes of Self-Writing." *Public Culture* 14, no. 1: 239–273.

⁴⁸ Jewsiewicki, Bogumil, and Valentin-Yves Mudimbe. 1993. "Africans' Memories and Contemporary History of Africa." *History and Theory* 32, no. 4: 1–11.

structure for fear of reprisals or of being punished by fate for having violated the silence.

Another reason for the silence on the slave trade is the cohabitation of the descendants of slave traders and slaves on the West African coast. This is the case in port cities such as Ouidah, where slave-owning families continue to quietly enjoy their wealth. Their origins date back to the dark days of the slave trade. The prestigious status of these families, sometimes in decision-making positions in the country, perpetuates the silence on the traumas of the past. Indeed, during the slave trade, several African elites, very often from noble families and nowadays occupying high positions of responsibility, served as intermediaries in the trade. They provided countless human victims for both local exploitation and deportation across the Atlantic. These numbers were acquired through raids, kidnappings, sacrificial rituals and abusive judgments among others. The stigma of slavery is still very much alive in African societies. The origins of slavery and the status of slaves, which are still relevant today, lead people to want to get rid of this heritage by remaining silent. It is through this other factor that we can understand why the history of the transatlantic slave trade has not been the central impetus for narratives in French-speaking African cultures and, by extension, in their literature.

The complexity of this silence is further intensified by the paradoxical position of formerly enslaved individuals who later participated in the slave trade. In fact, many freed Africans who returned from the New World became entangled in the slave trade themselves. The phenomenon of Afro-Brazilians, whose identity is deeply shaped by the paradoxes tied to slavery, illustrates the complexity of this past. Araujo analyses how the memories of slavery are constructed and renewed, highlighting the cultural claims of Afro-Brazilians and the challenges related to the recognition of their heritage.⁴⁹ Similarly, Goussanou examines the memorialisation of slavery in spaces like Ouidah and Nantes, highlighting how these sites serve as arenas where memory,

⁴⁹ Araujo, Ana Lucia, and Ana Seiderer. 2007. "Passé colonial et modalités de mise en mémoire de l'esclavage." *Conserveries mémorielles* 3.

silence, and history intersect.⁵⁰ In Alem's *Esclaves*, this contradiction is vividly dramatized through the story of the son of Santana. As a descendant of actors involved in the Malês revolt in Bahia, Santana's son returns to Porto Seguro after the repatriation of freed Africans.⁵¹ Rather than rejecting the systems of oppression, he paradoxically engages in the slave trade, illustrating how individuals, shaped by complex histories, can embody the ambiguities of power, survival, and complicity. Through these narratives, we see how Afro-Brazilians reflect both the scars of slavery and the agency within its paradoxical legacy.

The memory of the slave trade and slavery has been partially obscured both in Western and African contexts, albeit for different reasons. In Europe, this obscuration is often linked to a troubled historical conscience, while in African societies it is tied to the difficulty of confronting the shame and trauma associated with this past. It is important to distinguish the slave trade from slavery, which has always existed, since antiquity, in Greco-Roman society, in the Arab world and among various African ethnic groups, where the traditional, highly hierarchical society was governed by a caste system: prisoners of war between rival kingdoms became domestic slaves and sometimes became part of the family circle to the point of being adopted, freed or even ennobled by the master.⁵²

The imprint of the colonising country has significantly shaped how slave memory manifests in formerly colonised regions. Miller demonstrates how the French Atlantic triangle of trade created enduring cultural and literary hierarchies that continue to influence historical memory.⁵³ As Vergès argues, institutionalised memorialisation of slavery often remains empty of real social content or function and fails

⁵⁰ Goussanou, Rossila. 2018. "La 'Route de l'esclave' de Ouidah (Bénin)." *Cahiers Mémoire et Politique*, 111–129.

⁵¹ Alem, Kangni. 2009. *Esclaves*. Paris: JC Lattès.

⁵² Andreau, Jean, and Raymond Descat. 2011. *The Slave in Greece and Rome*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press; Lovejoy, Paul E. 2000. *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Klein, Martin A. 1998. *Slavery and Colonial Rule in Africa*. London: Routledge; Fynn-Paul, Jeff. 2023. "Slavery and the Slave Trade, 1350–1650." *Oxford Bibliographies*.

⁵³ Miller, Christopher L. 2008. *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Durham: Duke University Press.

to address ongoing racial hierarchies and socio-economic inequalities in the Francophone world.⁵⁴ She examines why memorial initiatives frequently neglect to recognise the myriad other legacies of brutal exploitation and colonial violence. Araujo reveals how international recognition often privileges narratives compatible with Western historical frameworks, rather than local understandings of trauma.⁵⁵ Laura T. Murphy⁵⁶ examines how West African writers employ metaphors to negotiate the trauma of the slave trade in their literature, demonstrating how these literary devices serve as mechanisms for cultural memory and recovery in postcolonial contexts. Metropolitan policies regarding historical guilt and reparative justice typically cascade throughout former imperial networks. When colonising nations delay acknowledging past atrocities or implementing meaningful cultural and legal reconciliation measures, this institutionalised amnesia becomes replicated in former colonies, whose political, legal, and cultural frameworks remain deeply influenced by colonial precedents.

French authorities have played a decisive role in shaping school curricula and political discourse. In this context, descendants of slave owners and traders often retain the institutional power to downplay or reject the significance of this historical period, as acknowledging it may undermine their legitimacy within contemporary communities. Thus, the shame of the slave trade past is shared by both slave descendants and slave traders. Neither community is particularly invested in revitalising this past or in exploring how the slave trade may have contributed to enduring disparities in wealth and power, disparities that continue to manifest in contemporary politics, social relations, and kinship structures. For both groups, their legitimacy as citizens of relatively new nations, free nations of free peoples, rests on the repudiation and delegitimisation of this part of their past.

⁵⁴ Vergès, Françoise. 2015. "Cartographies of Memory, Politics of Emancipation." In Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson, eds., *At the Limits of Memory*, 229–248. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

⁵⁵ Araujo, Ana Lucia. 2020. *Slavery in the Age of Memory: Engaging the Past*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

⁵⁶ Murphy, Laura T. 2012. *Metaphor and the Slave Trade in West African Literature*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press.

European forces took on the compromising topics of slavery to facilitate acceptance of their role as civilisers and later as cultural models in the post-colonial era. In order for the colonial power to claim moral and political superiority, it could not activate a narrative of slavery that implicated it as the perpetrator of a holocaust. Thus, African school-children were not taught about the atrocities of the slave trade during the colonial period. Instead, they were taught that it was the greed of certain African leaders and personalities that sparked European interest in the human trade on the continent. These teachings shifted the European responsibility for the slave trade onto African cultures and implied the natural slave status of Africans. It was on these racist grounds that European colonisers also justified their civilising mission in Africa. Students learned that the internal violence observed among African communities during the slave trade called for a European invasion to give Africa a chance to survive and participate in the civilised world.

The silence surrounding the slave trade reflects a complex dynamic of narratives and memory management, particularly in West Africa, where the subject remains fraught with contradictions. The narratives in school curricula often underscore the complicity of Africans in the trade, positioning this as a defining element of Africa's historical trajectory. Pupils are led to understand that Africa cannot solely assign blame to Europe for its tragic history, as foreign exploitation operated in concert with local allies.⁵⁷ This framing subtly shifts attention away from European colonial powers, focusing instead on internal dynamics within African societies. This dynamic is nowhere more visible than in the management of memorial sites: heritage spaces such as Gorée, Elmina and Ouidah stage an official memory that centres the Atlantic trade and African victimhood, while systematically obscuring the inland sites of capture, the role of African intermediaries, and the broader continuum of trans-Saharan and domestic slavery. Laura T. Murphy further notes how the memory of the transatlantic slave trade has largely been excluded from public discourse in West Africa.⁵⁸ This silence is not only evident in schools but also across broader societal

⁵⁷ Seck, "Esclavage et traite des esclaves ..."

⁵⁸ Murphy, *Metaphor and the Slave Trade*.

contexts, where the legacy of the trade remains obscured. Importantly, Murphy highlights the role of complicity in the slave trade, acknowledging the complex dynamics within African societies at the time. While school narratives often emphasise this complicity to deflect accountability from European powers, the larger societal silence around the slave trade complicates this narrative further. Sites of memory, such as former slave trade ports, play a significant role in shaping public understanding. Murphy highlights how contemporary West African literature engages with this suppressed past. By rearticulating these memories, such literary works challenge dominant historical accounts and offer alternative ways of understanding this traumatic heritage.

Whether articulated by Africans or Europeans, narratives about Africa's past have very often expressly avoided the era of the slave trade. All in all, many factors have worked and are still working against the creation of an unabashed and explicit account of the role of the transatlantic slave trade in the history of sub-Saharan Africa in general and Francophone Africa in particular. African critics fear that for African writers, confronting the past that is so tainted by violence and involves African responsibility might mean erasing the whole period from memory. This is particularly risky when the painful past one attempts to avoid is still very much present.

Eliding the slave trade era or merely attributing the responsibility of the disaster to one side will certainly result in the mirage of consciousness.⁵⁹ Recounting the slave trade as an episode where both Africans and Europeans have had a part to play will foster the appeal to race as the moral and political basis of solidarity. According to African critics,⁶⁰ African discourse regarding the slave trade must formulate a narrative of incorporation and assimilation of the most sinister and the most divisive aspect of the past to provide a minimum ground for truth upon which racial solidarity can stand. African scholars are urging the continent's writers to write about the slave trade to open

⁵⁹ Mbembe, Achille. 2001. *On the Postcolony*. Translated by A. M. Berrett, Janet Roitman, Murray Last, and Steven Rendall. University of California Press. (Orig. pub. as *De la postcolonie : Essai sur l'imagination politique dans l'Afrique contemporaine*. Paris: Karthala, 2000).

⁶⁰ Mbembe, "African Modes of Self-Writing," 253.

avenues for healing narratives of these harrowing centuries of the victims of the trade and their descendants in the black diaspora and on the continent at large. Retelling the horrors of the slave trade could bring much-needed reconciliation for the suffering experienced on both sides of the Atlantic.

How can Africa truly and resolutely take hold of the memory of the slave trade and slavery? For Africa to fully engage with its history, its painful past must be continually narrated, interrogated, and critically reassessed. Through increasing social and political mobilisation for the respect of human and citizens' rights, the victims of slavery and their descendants are asserting their voices with growing force. These demands have gained renewed urgency in recent years. The issue of the memory of the slave trade and slavery in Africa is inseparable from contemporary social, political and memorial protests. In recent years, racial injustices, including police brutality against Black people, such as the cases of George Floyd in the United States and Adama Traoré in France, have catalysed global movements such as Black Lives Matter. These protests have rekindled among Africans and the diaspora the need to understand the memory of slavery, which is closely tied to the memory of racism, a root cause of many tensions, discriminations and attempts to negate humanity (as seen in slavery, apartheid, and related systems).

To make African countries assume this political responsibility, several civil society initiatives and pleas have been launched by associations in Senegal, Guinea and Benin. The association *mémoires et partage* has been working for more than a decade to call on States to commemorate the memory of slavery. These initiatives deplore the essentially touristic management of memory and advocate a more memorial, intellectual and political approach. They claim the need to address issues of African complicity in the most tragic human trafficking in history. These initiatives bring to the public arena the memorial demands of the African people who are subjected to the pain and suffering of the neo-colonial system that plagues the continent through unemployment, poverty and misery. These initiatives also carry the demands of the American diaspora, whose fate is still highly conditioned by the racism inherited from the slave trade and slavery. These demands for historical truth must be told to explain their contexts,

the divergences and convergences between the traffics, and to demand reparations, even symbolic ones (e.g. reversal of statutes, questioning the names of streets dedicated to slave traders and slavers), which carry meaning and hope for equality between men. It is necessary to say that to resist to remember, is to resist to heal.

In as much as the intricate meanders of slavery and the slave trade are hardly discussed and highly politicised in Francophone Africa, close attention to the language of silence reveals unexpected alternative forms of remembrance. Beyond the silence of a commemorative *lieux de mémoire* lie strategies of remembering the past without speaking of it. The first is Rosalind Shaw's⁶¹ analysis of how image expressions of divinatory activities associated with witches and raiding spirits among the Temne communities in Sierra Leone express memories of the slave trade. The second example is Argenti's⁶² examination of the terrors of slave raiding expressed in the mask and dance traditions of the Oku communities of Cameroon. These performances, which translate into grotesque realism in the Bakhtinian sense, recall the unprecedented violence and atrocities committed during the slave trade. The third case study is White's famous investigation of how images of vampires and bloodletting in East Africa convey the anxieties of colonial oppression. Speaking with Vampires is a groundbreaking study that examines rumoured vampire stories as historical sources for reconstructing the memory of colonial violence.⁶³ Finally, Murphy's analysis examines the use of metaphors as a political and social tool in West Africa. Through a selection of works by Anglophone writers, Murphy argues that West Africans have mastered the art of metaphoric representations to describe the traumatic effects of the past on their contemporary experiences.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Shaw, Rosalind. 2002. *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶² Argenti, Nicolas. 2007. *The Intestines of the State: Youth, Violence, and Belated Histories in the Cameroon Grassfields*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶³ White, Luise. 2000. *Speaking with Vampires*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁶⁴ Murphy, *Metaphor and the Slave Trade*.

The wishful call for an explicit representation of the slave trade does not revoke the subtle metaphorised approach that African writers have adopted. Critics do not merely deplore the silence about the slave trade, for silence is not tantamount to failing to deal with the past, far from that, in literature and discourse, they are not lamenting about amnesia but rather challenging writers to resolutely go for more overt narratives. African critics call for very specific forms of representation which directly address the political consequences of the past.

This urge by African critics can be explained in comparison with the African American tradition of slave narratives, for example, Toni Morrison, Charles Johnson, and Robert Hayden. African writers, unlike their African American and Caribbean counterparts, have invested their work in a more figurative and metaphorical approach to the slave trade.⁶⁵ The role of metaphor in West African literature, as noted by Murphy, is crucial in addressing the memory of the slave trade, a subject that is often unspoken or obscured in official discourses. West African writers have found metaphor to be a powerful tool to express deep, often unarticulated realities, allowing them to circumvent the silence surrounding the past of slavery. Through figurative language, they manage to convey the unspeakable, evoking the suffering and violence inherent in the history of slavery, while also prompting reflection on its lasting consequences. This metaphorical approach is not just a way of confronting a deep trauma, but also a means of engaging the reader in critical reflection on the social and political legacies of the slave trade. This approach can be justified by the fact that African writers of early generations used metaphors of the slave trade and the slave past as signs and forms of representation through which to interrogate contemporary political realities, thereby linking past violence to its ongoing manifestations in the present and its implications for the future of the continent and its peoples.

While it is true that the traumatic memory of the slave trade remains largely elusive, the question arises as to how writers remember the tragedy of the slave trade. This question highlights the importance of revisiting the ways in which French-speaking sub-Saharan literatures remember the transatlantic slave trade.

⁶⁵ Murphy, *Metaphor and the Slave Trade*.

2.3. Silence, Trauma, and Memory: Literary Representations of the Slave Trade in Francophone Africa

Tradition has, for too long, confined Africa to the role of a victim of Europe and then of neo-colonial imperialism, as if the men and women who live there were incapable of conducting their own history without outside help. This perception is not without consequences for the future of the continent, both through the condescending view of its political and economic partners and through the psychological blockage that it tries to maintain among Africans by persuading them that they are incapable and, therefore, victims doomed to survive only in a condition of assistance. This position seems to us to be all the more unacceptable and dangerous because it is deliberately maintained by those who profit from it with concealed racist overtones.⁶⁶

Traditional slavery is the main subject of the first French-speaking African novel, *L'Esclave* by Félix Couchoro.⁶⁷ In this work, published in 1929, the protagonist bought at the slave market and then adopted by his master, appears to be the victim only of the slavery of his own passions. The novel – which bears the subtitle *Une nuit d'amour sous les tropiques* (A night of love in the tropics) – marks the beginning of an awareness of the conflict between old and new values among the colonised, it however, contains no criticism or indictment of practices that are still in place. Published at the height of French colonialism – historians agree that the year 1930 was the triumph of colonial literature – this psychological novel, strongly impregnated with Western morality, follows the Christian model right up to its denouement and, at the end, the slave is punished for his crimes: jealousy, ambition, adultery.

From the 1940s, Abdou Serpos Tidjani's *Les trois amis*, a work of oral literature on slavery, is worth mentioning. The book tells the story of a young man who, by trickery – a recurrent topos – succeeds in

⁶⁶ Mudimbe, Valentin-Yves. 1994b. *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind*. London: James Currey; Cyrulnik, Boris. 2002. *Un merveilleux malheur*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

⁶⁷ Couchoro, Félix. 1929. *L'Esclave: Une nuit d'amour sous les tropiques*.

selling the man who considered himself his best friend to a slave trafficker. The author addresses the issue of betrayal in the context of slavery. Traditional institutionalised slavery, deeply embedded in customs, appears in many works of this period. These texts frequently refer to captives (as if the word slave carried a sort of taboo), who became servants or concubines of chiefs who had won one of the many wars of conquest that were commonplace between neighbouring ethnic groups. A similar avoidance operated around the trade itself: for a long time, writers and scholars named the practice obliquely rather than directly. The lesson of the tales stemmed from the oral tradition refers us to other genres of the oral heritage which have been the subject of non-exhaustive research.

Still in the 1940s, a few committed poets had already evoked the horror of slavery, such as David Diop (Senegal), whose collection *Coups de pilon* was published in 1956, and Bernard Dadié (Côte d'Ivoire) in *Hommes de tous les continents*, which brings together all his work since 1943. In the theatre, it was Bernard Dadié who developed the theme in two important plays, *Béatrice du Congo* and, above all, "*îles de tempête*" a historical drama devoted to Toussaint Louverture on the eve of Haiti's independence.

The consequences of the slave trade have been explored to some extent in the literary production. Some works have referred to the exactions of the slave traders in the heart of the Black continent, which later favoured the European expansionist wave in a weakened Africa, as well as to the struggles of certain chiefs who opposed the slave trade at the cost of their throne and sometimes their life. Literary and cinematographic works, dramas and epics, tell of the struggle of Soundjata Keita, founder of Mali, against the institution of slavery. We can also read about the refusal of the Zulu chief Chaka to open his country to slave traders, the fierce resistance of Samory Touré to the conquest of Guinea by the French, or the choice of prison and exile rather than submission to the European invader by the Dahomean, King Behanzin.

Other writers, including Mongo Beti, Alioum Fantouré and, most notably, Ousmane Sembène, have also endeavoured to recall all the corollaries of slavery in the colonial era. In Sembène's work, fiction, most often based on a news item, allows him to evoke various real

episodes, in particular the exploitation of immigrants and the repression of strikes, which he recounted as early as 1956 in *Le Docker noir*,⁶⁸ whose protagonist is a Senegalese trade unionist in the port of Marseilles who authors a novel entitled *Le Dernier voyage du négrier Sirius*. In *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*,⁶⁹ he recounts the revolt of the labourers on the Dakar-Niger railway line – surpassed only in the number of victims by the infamous construction of the Congo-Ocean – which is at the centre of the novel. Finally, in *La Noire de ...*, he depicts a form of neo-colonial slavery which leads to the suicide of a young woman exploited by her French bosses.⁷⁰ This work, later adapted into his first feature film in 1966, won numerous international awards.

Of the entire West African coast, which has long and massively undergone the torments of the slave trade and slavery, literature seems to have forgotten a traumatic event whose practices have punctuated the life and relationship of Africans with the rest of the world: the internal African slave trade, the trans-Saharan slave trade with the Arab world, and the transatlantic slave trade with the West. It is in the scarce literature that we find representations of the endogenous dimension of the slave trade, namely the history of the trade. The first novel to break with tradition and demystify the Edenic and innocent images of Africa was *Le Devoir de violence* by the Malian Yambo Ouologuem,⁷¹ which won the Prix Renaudot in 1968. Rewriting history in a way that goes against the grain, he draws on all sources to paint a picture of horrors, including anthropophagy, sadism, and sexual perversions, thus showing that oppression also existed in precolonial Africa. An entire chapter traces the history of the slave trade in West Africa from 1200 to the present day – from the Eastern slave trade to the clandestine trade that continues despite official abolition – and its avatars, including the zombification practised by both Europeans and Africans. The fate of the serfs and captives who were raided – veritable undead, because they were depersonalised and alienated – and used as free labour, occupies the greater part of this complex work, which puts all violence

⁶⁸ Sembène, Ousmane. 1956. *Le Docker noir*.

⁶⁹ Sembène, Ousmane. 1960. *Les Bouts de bois de Dieu*.

⁷⁰ Sembène, Ousmane. 1966. *La Noire de ...*

⁷¹ Ouologuem, Yambo. 1968. *Le Devoir de violence*. Paris: Seuil.

on trial. This anti-conformist novel reveals an Arab-Islamic colonisation that has moreover succeeded the previous subjugation that was already rampant on the continent. "In this age of feudalism, in order to sing their devotion to lordly justice, large communities of slaves saw, in addition to forced labour, many of their own people being walled up alive, covered in the blood of slaughtered children and disembowelled pregnant women ... this was the case in Tillabéri Bentia, in Granta, in Grosso, in Gagol-Gosso, and in many other places mentioned in the Tarik el Fetach and the Tarik el Sudan of the Arab historians."⁷²

The revelations made in Ouologuem's book were followed up in 1985 in the novel *Le Dernier Survivant de la caravane* (The Last Survivor of the Caravan) by Étienne Goyémidé.⁷³ In this novel, a small village in Banda country is subjected to a violent raid by "men dressed in black, with turbaned heads and hooked copper-coloured noses."⁷⁴ In this way, the author vividly describes the warriors determined to Islamise the African masses who are considered vulnerable and heretical. Goyémidé's book is a great classic of literature both in terms of its thematic choice and its oral aesthetics, notably the tales, the lineage narratives and the metaphors used to tell the story. The novels *Paradise* and *The Clove Trees of Zanzibar* by Tanzanian writers Abdulrazak Gurnah and Adam Shafi Adam are also in the same vein. Both novels tell of the realities and little-known history of the slave trade on the eastern coast of Africa. In his story, Adam Shafi tells the story of the 1964 slave revolution and the break-up of the feudal sultanate of Zanzibar through the story of Kijakasi, the servant of Lord Malick, and his son Fouad. *Paradis* tells the story of the young Yusuf, sold by his father and embarking on a tumultuous journey with his mistress. Both novels reflect the intermingling of people and cultures, the result of a tormented history whose vestiges, like the merchant buildings, serve as places of memory.

In his novel *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir*, Beyrouk reminds us of the slavery mentality that persists in social relations in the Sahara. He portrays the difficulty of love between blacks and whites. Through the

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Goyémidé, Étienne. 1985. *Le Dernier Survivant de la caravane*.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 41.

political rise of Mahmoud, a freed slave, and Lolla's love for Béchir, the son of the Oulad Ayatt, the author depicts the frustration of those in contemporary Mauritania who continue to suffer the humiliations associated with slavery. This unease about the cohabitation of freedmen with their former masters takes another form in the relations between freedmen who have returned to African lands. This is the case of many former slaves who returned from Brazil to the continent: the agoudas. The history of this community has built its identity on its Brazilian heritage and is distinct in its language, dress, religion, architecture and more. In *Les Fantômes du Brésil*, the Beninese Florent Couao-Zotti imagines the conflicting relationships that the Agouda people have with other existing communities. In the book, the Agoudas are seen as an impenetrable community, difficult to subvert and whose nerve centre is located in Salvador de Bahia, the Brazilian city of their deportation. The complexity and the richness of the links between Africa and Brazil are widely addressed in this book, which tells the story of the impossible love between Pierre Kpossou, son of Ouidah, and Anna Maria do Mato, a young Agouda girl.

In contrast to narratives of return of Afro-Brazilians, Tierno Monénembo's novel *Pelourinho* narrates the story of an African writer's journey to South America in search of his roots in Brazil.⁷⁵ Monénembo situates the narrative within a contemporary Brazilian setting, exploring the experience of exile while addressing the traumatic legacy of the slave trade and slavery, deeply embedded in the historic city of Salvador da Bahia. The enduring African presence is vividly reflected in the city's neighbourhoods, squares, people, and customs. This novel provides an insightful examination of trauma, re-articulating the themes of memory and exile to investigate how the "reappropriation of spaces" can reconstruct memory and create a discursive space for the exile when the physical return across time and space becomes unfeasible.

David Diop's *La Porte du voyage sans retour* is a narrative set in 18th-century Senegal; the novel follows Michel Adanson, a French botanist whose journey to West Africa ostensibly centres on scientific discovery but gradually unfolds into an intimate engagement with

⁷⁵ Monénembo, Tierno. 1995. *Pelourinho*.

the region's histories of love, loss, and displacement.⁷⁶ Diop depicts the lush beauty of the Senegalese landscape and the enduring scars of the transatlantic slave trade, crafting a narrative that reflects both individual and collective traumas. Through the lens of Adanson's experiences, the novel reimagines historical connections between continents, highlighting the ways in which memory and storytelling can serve as a bridge for understanding and reconciliation.

⁷⁶ Diop, David. 2021. *La Porte du voyage sans retour*.

3. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

3.1. Literature Review

This chapter examines Francophone sub-Saharan literary texts that address the themes of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade. It brings together critical reflections on how these issues have been explored in French-speaking African literature. These themes have been discussed in master's theses, doctoral dissertations, and academic articles. However, an analysis of these publications reveals that literary works from sub-Saharan Africa receive limited critical attention. The few analyses that exist often focus on a small group of authors who have gained greater visibility due to their geographic location, international recognition, and literary awards. A possible explanation for this limited focus is the relative marginality of the subject of slavery and the slave trade, which has only recently become a more prominent theme in artistic works. This book focuses on three key texts: N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018), Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* (2013), and Alem's *Esclaves* (2009). Scholarly research on these novels remains limited, likely due to their relatively recent publication and, in the case of the first two authors, varying degrees of visibility. In contrast, Miano's text, published in 2013, has been the subject of significant scholarly attention and has received several awards. The academic works analysed in this chapter primarily consist of articles, interviews, monographs, and dissertations. As the discourse surrounding slavery and the slave trade transcends the boundaries of the selected corpus and the French-speaking sub-Saharan region, the chapter concludes by examining broader critical trends. These include the engagement with such themes in Anglophone African literature, the wider Francophone literary tradition, and the legacy of American neo-slave narratives, thereby situating the discussion within a more expansive intellectual and cultural context.

As previously mentioned, research on the slave trade in Francophone Africa remains scarce, whether in the realms of art or literature. Borgomano, in her article "La littérature romanesque d'Afrique noire et l'esclavage: Une mémoire de l'oubli?", highlights this gap, questioning the notable absence of slavery as a subject in sub-Saharan Afri-

can literature. She laments the lack of ‘romans-bilans’ that address this sensitive historical legacy, suggesting that this omission stems from the profound pain and shame associated with slavery.⁷⁷ To trace echoes of this memory, Borgomano compiles a chronological overview of references to slavery found in West African novels spanning from the 1950s to the 1990s. She observes that only a small number of early writers have addressed slavery, doing so subtly – either by embedding it in the background, mentioning it briefly, or framing it as a coded reference.

Similarly, Alem surveys African narratives that commemorate slavery and the slave trade in his article “La mémoire des traites et de l’esclavage au regard des littératures”. He contends that the relative silence of African writers on this subject stems from the shame associated with African complicity in the slave trade. Expanding on Borgomano’s inventory, Alem identifies additional literary works by Ouologuem, Goyémidé, Gurnah, Adam and Couao-Zotti, whom he identifies as precursors in drawing attention to the peculiarity of the tragic history of the slave trade. According to Alem, approaching this subject through literature while acknowledging its sensitive nature, can lead to a productive engagement with the theme.⁷⁸ Such engagement, he argues, fosters diverse perspectives that challenge generalisations. He further emphasises literature as a medium through which the legacies of slavery can be critically examined, offering resources for healing and reflection. However, he warns that persistent silence within African fiction will continue to hinder confrontation with this deeply embedded taboo.

In discussions of literature by French-speaking authors and the transatlantic slave trade, specialised studies often highlight European, Caribbean, and Antillean contexts and rarely engage with Africa’s role and experiences in this history. This oversight may partly stem from the limited accessibility of literary works published on the African

⁷⁷ Borgomano, Madeleine. 2000. “La littérature romanesque d’Afrique noire et l’esclavage.” In *Esclavage et abolitions: mémoires et systèmes de représentation*, edited by Marie-Christine Rochmann, 99–112. Paris: Karthala.

⁷⁸ Alem, Kangni. 2006. “La mémoire des traites et de l’esclavage au regard des littératures,” 29.

continent due to underdeveloped distribution networks. However, it also underscores a broader disregard for African literature on the subject. This is evident in Françoise Simasotchi-Bronès' article "Littératures francophones et esclavage transatlantique", where the ambitious title contrasts with its actual focus on Creole-region novels that address transatlantic slavery.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, her observations on the approaches of Caribbean writers reflect the desire for emancipation and the desire to challenge the conventions of historical writing, a dynamic that also characterises sub-Saharan authors such as Kangni Alem and Léonora Miano. Simasotchi-Bronès observes that these Creole writers, dissatisfied with the answers provided by historiography, embrace unconventional methods that blur the lines between history and literature. By doing so, they establish a distinct voice on the global literary stage.

In his effort to examine the cultural and literary representations of the slave trade and its enduring traces in French culture, Miller discusses France's reluctance to confront its slave-trading past and highlights the perceived silence of African writers on the subject.⁸⁰ A small section of his book focuses on African representation in Francophone West African literature, primarily examining films alongside the works of writer and filmmaker Sembene Ousmane. Among these, *Le Docker noir* (1956) is particularly noteworthy and widely celebrated as a masterpiece that shows the profound legacy of the French slave trade triangle in Africa.

In *Esclavage et Littératures: représentations francophones*, Christiane Chalet Achour and her fellow contributors examine various literary works addressing slavery in the francophone world, analysing the issues at stake and the prevailing representations. This collective work aims to equip readers, educators, and scholars with tools to better understand, teach, and present literary texts on slavery. The articles primarily focus on Caribbean authors, with the notable exception of one piece dedicated to Léonora Miano, the sole sub-Saharan African au-

⁷⁹ Simasotchi-Bronès, Françoise. 2013. "Littératures francophones et esclavage transatlantique." *Diasporas* 21: 196–214.

⁸⁰ Miller, Christopher L. 2008. *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Durham: Duke University Press.

thor featured in the collection. In her article, Achour analyses the representation of slavery in Miano's novel. She identifies internal slavery, capture, and naming as recurring motifs and symbols that underscore the violence of this dehumanising practice. Achour highlights Miano's rich text as a foundation for deeper reflection, particularly in its didactic elements and its narrative treatment of the slave trade process.⁸¹

In the preface to *L'œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano*, Marie René Abomo-Maurin introduces the eighteen contributions compiled under the direction of Alice Delphine Tang. These articles, which examine Miano's complete body of work, identify six key themes, including the slave trade, the female experience, and the quest for identity. In her article, Achour argues that *La Saison de l'ombre* embodies the 'devoir de mémoire' [duty to remember] through an initiation narrative that recounts the epic journey of a community of men and women devastated by the raids of slave-hunting neighbours.⁸² In this article, Achour examines the silences and unspoken elements in the novel while addressing the interrogation of slave history in official historiography and the unequal relationships with Europeans, which she considers fundamental to the misfortunes of sub-Saharan Africans. The symbolic use of the "shadow" in both *Les Aubes écarlates* and *La Saison de l'ombre* reflects a deliberate effort to confront and break the silence surrounding the memory of the slave trade in Africa.

In "Faire parler les ombres: les victimes de la Traite négrière des guerres contemporaines chez Léonora Miano", Irena Trujic examines the consequences of forgetting within African societies as represented in Miano's *Les Aubes écarlates*. This article analyses the role of the "disappeared (les disparus)" in the contexts of trafficking and war, while also examining the voices present in the novel. Trujic introduces the notions of "integral witnesses [témoins intégraux]" and "witnesses in

⁸¹ Achour, Christiane Chaulet. 2016. "L'Esclavage dans *La Saison de l'ombre* de Léonora Miano: Donner corps à un espace cicatriciel." In *L'œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano*, edited by Alice Delphine Tang, 123–140. Classiques Garnier.

⁸² Achour, Christiane Chaulet. 2014. "La force du féminin" in Delphine Tang (dir.), *L'œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano. Fiction, mémoire et enjeux identitaires*, Paris, L'Harmattan.

absentia [témoins in absentia]”⁸³ to distinguish between the “shadowed” victims whose stories can no longer be accurately recounted and the authors who, through their characters, attempt to reconstruct the fragmented memories of the disappeared.⁸⁴ These reconstructions emerge through dreams and rituals, bearing witness to the communal belonging and existence of these forgotten figures. Trujic also highlights Miano’s use of the maternal figure as a crucial vehicle for the transmission of memory. The novel weaves a strong connection between motherhood and memory, reflecting their shared importance in preserving collective history. Trujic further emphasises the significance of the dream mode, which Miano frequently employs to enable communication between the disappeared and their mothers. Themes of dreaming and the fantastic recur throughout Miano’s works, including *La Saison de l’ombre*, which is partially analysed in this article. The oneiric thus emerges as an apposite concept for understanding Miano’s literary oeuvre, as well as other African novels addressing the slave trade.

In “Perceptions africaines du Brésil: le spectre du passé”, Adjai Paulin Oloukpona-Yinnon analyses Alem’s *Les Enfants du Brésil*, a sequel to his earlier novel *Esclaves*. In this article, Oloukpona-Yinnon argues that Alem employs the metaphor of the ship to immerse readers in overlooked aspects of the slave trade and the memories of slavery, thereby connecting Africa and Brazil. Through an archaeological approach, the article demonstrates Alem’s use of specific words and metaphors to probe the realities of Togolese history and society. Oloukpona-Yinnon positions this second novel on the slave trade as an innovative attempt to bridge history and literature, past and present, reconstructing the symbolic link between the two sides of the Atlantic. Regarding the memory of slavery, Oloukpona-Yinnon briefly highlights certain passages, noting “the art of literary pirouette” in

⁸³ Agamben, Giorgio. 1999. *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz*. Paris: Payot & Rivages.

⁸⁴ Trujic, Irena. 2015. “Faire parler les ombres: les victimes de la Traite négrière des guerres contemporaines chez Léonora Miano,” *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 30, no. 1: 89–101, 96.

Alem's writing.⁸⁵ This technique reflects the modesty and restraint the author exercises in narrating the dark and painful memories of a repressed past. These observations serve as preliminary elements for a deeper analysis of Alem's narrative approach, which seeks to render visible the suffering endured by slaves in both Brazil and Africa.

Charlotte Mackay examines the representation of trauma associated with the slave trade and its repercussions on postcolonial oppression in Miano's *Contours of the Coming Day* [*Contours du jour qui vient*].⁸⁶ She contends that, although classical trauma theory resonates within the text, it cannot serve as the sole framework for analysing Miano's literary portrayal of sub-Saharan trauma, which is deeply embedded in a postcolonial context. Mackay thus examines how both traditional and contemporary approaches to trauma address the traces of trauma evident in Miano's work. She argues that while classical trauma theory effectively elucidates the protagonists' individual traumatic experiences, recent developments in trauma studies offer a broader perspective, encompassing cultural and collective dimensions. Building on the works of Mbembe and Fanon, Mackay expands the scope of trauma theory to highlight sub-Saharan reluctance to engage in open and candid discussions about the memory of the slave trade and its enduring traumatic effects on Africans living on the continent, as well as their relationship with the descendants of deported Africans. Mackay's analysis provides a compelling entry point for investigating trauma in contemporary Francophone literary works centred on the legacy of the slave trade.

Another publication that examines the subject of slavery in French-speaking Africa both in art and literature is *Slavery in Art and Literature: Approaches to Trauma, Memory and Visuality*, edited by Haehnel Birgit and Melanie Ulz.⁸⁷ This volume brings together seventeen arti-

⁸⁵ Oloukpona-Yinnon, Adjai Paulin. 2018. "Perceptions africaines du Brésil : le spectre du passé." *Esboços: Histórias em Contextos Globais* 25, no. 39: 4–24, 6.

⁸⁶ Mackay, Charlotte. 2018. "(Post)colonial Trauma, Memory, and History in Léonora Miano's *Contours of the Coming Day* (*Contours du jour qui vient*).*" Limina: A Journal of Historical and Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2: 1–15.

⁸⁷ Haehnel, Birgit, and Melanie Ulz, eds. 2010. *Slavery in Art and Literature: Approaches to Trauma, Memory and Visuality*.

cles that examine different aspects of the traumatic memory of slavery in Africa, particularly in visual and literary representations. The publication highlights the growing interest in the subject of the slave trade and underscores its continued historical and contemporary relevance. The volume brings together intellectuals, artists and academics around this topic and particularly on aspects of trauma and memory. Its transcultural and interdisciplinary approach allows the authors to place the artworks under study in a wider context. The studies adopt visual, performative, and literary approaches to examine slavery in French West Africa, the Americas, and Europe.

At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World is the first collective study that focuses on how the memorialisation processes operate across multiple francophone contexts, within countries that share connections and historical entanglements with France, a “former” colonial power. This volume, edited by Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson, offers a detailed investigation of the multiplicity of memories in the francophone environment. It goes beyond slavery to address other forms of colonial labour exploitation observed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries following abolition. The diversity of contributions demonstrates how contentious memories of slavery and the slave trade are, and how these legacies manifest in the complex matrices displayed by the uncanny formations of national, regional and transnational identities. Divided into two parts, which group together Haiti and the Caribbean, North and West Africa, the Indian Ocean and the “Hexagon”, the volume looks back at the historical and discursive peculiarities related to French-led Slavery. The aim of the entire volume is to problematise the much-celebrated abolitionist moment and to highlight “the importance of transcending nation-centred perceptions of slavery and teleological historiographies that disconnected slavery from its pre- and post-abolitionist mutations”.⁸⁸ It must be noted that this study focused mainly on France and its territories, further research may be needed to examine the African slavery memory more specifically.

⁸⁸ Frith, Nicola, and Kate Hodgson, eds. 2015. *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World*, 4.

This compelling volume features Sotonye Omuku's article, "Speaking of Slavery: Representation of Domestic Slavery in the Oral Epics of Francophone West Africa". Omuku examines the portrayal of slavery in two renowned oral epics: the Bamana epic of Segou and the Songhai epic of Askia Mohammed. The study also explores how these epics' historical, cultural, and political significance is highlighted in novels such as Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de mémoire* and Aminata Sow Fall's *Le Jujubier du patriarce*. Omuku observes the sporadic nature of literary representations of slavery and the slave trade in Francophone Africa. She asserts that "the recurrence of the epic as a narrative of social memory within the West African historical novel on slavery raises questions, such as the relevance of that which is remembered and verbally recounted on the subject of slavery, as well as the significance of that which is omitted from the narration of the past"⁸⁹ Through a detailed analysis of the aesthetic techniques employed in these novels, which transform the genre into an anti-epic aimed at subverting the status of slaves, Omuku concludes that authors such as Ouologuem and Sow Fall utilise the epic aesthetic forms to "reconnect with the past as they challenge the ways in which remembering and forgetting are socialised through the adaptation and invention of this form within the social context".

In her PhD dissertation, Omuku incorporates corporeal and spatial narratives into her study of the representation of slavery and the slave trade in Francophone West African Literature.⁹⁰ In addition to the oral epic, she examines the postcolonial novel and addresses the paucity of literature on slavery and the slave trade from the perspective of cultural memory and trauma theory. Omuku analyses the corporeal narratives in the novels of Timité Bassori, Ibrahima Ly, Yambo Ouologuem and Ali Sada, examining both the sites and the memories of slavery. Her detailed textual analyses reveal that the body re-enacts slavery through repetitive corporeal wounds that symbolise both the

⁸⁹ Omuku, Sotonye. 2015. "Speaking of Slavery: Representation of Domestic Slavery in the Oral Epics of Francophone West Africa." In *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World*, 176.

⁹⁰ Omuku, Sotonye. 2012. *Representations of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Francophone West African Novel*. PhD diss., University College London.

physiological and psychological trauma of slavery, as well as through the transmission of memory by way of the reproductive capacity of the female body. Omuku also examines novels by M'Barek Ould Beyrouk and Ahmed Yedaly, which question the concept of ex-slavery in the Sahara, with reference to Mauritania. She equally examines how writers such as Kangni Alem and Tierno Monénembo negotiate transatlantic notions of departure and return within the context of Brazil, specifically Salvador de Bahia. Omuku asserts that by approaching slavery through a geographical lens, these authors emphasise the importance of spatial memory within both the trans-Saharan and transatlantic narratives of slavery and the slave trade.

In his three-fold analysis of the “constructed” centrality of Gorée in the memory of Slavery in Africa and the world, Charles Fordick questions Gorée’s status as an “*île de mémoire*” by examining a selected corpus of texts, films, and speeches delivered by world political leaders on the island.⁹¹ Exploring these multiple representational techniques aims at presenting the particularly complex multiple memorialisation processes, as well as giving a more general view of the representation of key sites of Atlantic slavery. The literary analysis in the chapter titled “Fictionalising Gorée: the fictional function of the Island” is based on three literary works: *Gorée: les esclaves y pleurent encore*, a short story by Franco-Togolese Georges Holassey; *Deux Gorée, une île* by Nigerian author Gideon Prinsley-Omolu; and lastly *Rendez-vous sur l'île de Gorée* by Congolese novelist Pie Tshibanda. According to Fordick, these three novels refer respectively to Gorée as a site of hope, a site of reconciliation and as a permanent reminder of the memory of slavery beyond being a tourist site.⁹²

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano presents a sustained exploration of Afropean identity, with language playing a central role in its construction and deconstruction. Emmanuel Ndour Mbégane, in his analysis, argues that Miano crafts an Afropean identity through a hybrid language that merges elements of African oral tradition with European

⁹¹ Forsdick, Charles. 2015. “Cette île n’est pas une île: Locating Gorée.” In *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World*, edited by Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson, 131–153. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

⁹² Forsdick, “Cette île n’est pas une île,” 132.

forms of expression, reflecting the characters' displacement and their efforts to reclaim a history often marked by pain and alienation.⁹³ He emphasises Miano's deconstruction of traditional linguistic norms by disrupting the classical structure of the French language, thereby producing an innovative textual aesthetic that transcends colonial boundaries and articulates the complexities of the post-slavery African experience. Ndour further discusses the ritualisation of language within the novel, where the incorporation of Douala expressions and references to animistic practices creates a "natural language" that resonates with African spiritual and cultural experiences, facilitating the reconciliation of the characters' fractured identities. He also highlights the performative and poetic dimensions of Miano's language, suggesting that the text serves as a medium to revisit the traumatic legacy of slavery and reclaim history, thus contributing to a broader discourse on memory and reconciliation. Overall, Ndour's analysis reveals how Miano employs language as a potent tool to subvert colonial structures while exploring the complexity of a mobile and hybrid Afropean identity, inviting readers to perceive language not merely as a means of communication but as a site of cultural and historical negotiation.

The Franco-Congolese writer, Wilfried N'Sondé, is a prominent contemporary figure in French-speaking migrant, Afro-diasporic, and African literature. He gained recognition with his debut novel, *Le Cœur des enfants léopards*, which achieved commercial success in both France and Germany. The novel also garnered critical acclaim, earning prestigious awards such as the Senghor Prize for Literary Creation and the Prix des cinq continents de la Francophonie in 2007. Passionate about art, music, and literature, N'Sondé began experimenting with songwriting at the age of 15. He developed a unique musical style he calls "Afropunk", blending punk and African rhythms with elements of jazz and blues. His discography includes several albums under the name Wilfried Serge N'Sondé, such as *Afro-Punk: Live at the Orange Club, London* (1999), *Afro-Punk: Mama's Blues 2000–2006* (2010), and *Amours et larmes d'exil* (2010). Despite publishing five novels – *Le Cœur des enfants léopards* (2007), *Le Silence des esprits* (2010), *Fleur*

⁹³ Ndour, El Hadji Malick. 2015. "La Saison de l'ombre de Léonora Miano: «récitation» d'une Afropéenne." *Études Littéraires* 46, no. 1: 95–104.

de béton (2012), *Berlinoise* (2015), and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) – N’Sondé’s literary work remains underexplored in academic research. Existing articles and interviews often focus on his musical style, which celebrates the joy of love and youth while critically examining social and political issues. Nevertheless, his work holds significant interest for scholars in intercultural studies, given his Afro-pean heritage and migratory journey.

Wilm examines the stylistic qualities of N’Sondé’s literary works, focusing on his first two novels, *Le Cœur des enfants léopards* (2007) and *Le Silence des esprits* (2010).⁹⁴ From the outset, Wilm portrays N’Sondé as both a musician and lyricist, emphasising the influence of his musical background on his literary creations. Wilm describes N’Sondé’s eclectic style as one in which language and musicality draw significant inspiration from French and German classical and romantic literature. He notes the frequent use of neologisms, colloquial expressions, and slang. In terms of syntax, Wilm characterises N’Sondé’s prose as complex and rhythmically structured, drawing parallels with jazz improvisation, particularly through call-and-response patterns. This technique, he argues, creates a liberating effect imbued with the energy of rap music. Wilm also highlights N’Sondé’s use of “riffs” in his prose, including repetitive chord progressions or refrains akin to musical motifs. These variations in discourse, combined with a flow of consciousness, evoke the free indirect style seen in the memory streams of writers such as Flaubert and Proust. Wilm’s analysis ultimately underscores the profound interconnection between N’Sondé’s musical impulses and his innovative literary expression.

Schüller examines the scenography of N’Sondé’s debut novel, *Le Cœur des enfants léopards* (2007), seeking to “localise” both the content and formal aspects of N’Sondé’s novel.⁹⁵ Among the underlying questions of Schüller’s study are the literary traditions that serve as

⁹⁴ Wilm, Jan. 2014. “Orte aus Sprache und Liebe: Der Schriftsteller Wilfried N’Sondé.” In *Die Kunst der Migration*, edited by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Sissy Helff, 231–234. Bielefeld: transcript.

⁹⁵ Schüller, Thorsten. 2011. “Ausbruch aus den Kerkern der Differenz: Wilfried N’Sondés Roman *Le Cœur des enfants léopards*.” In *Die Kunst der Migration: Aktuelle Positionen zum europäisch-afrikanischen Diskurs*, edited by Marie-Hélène Gutberlet and Sissy Helff, 215–227. Bielefeld: transcript.

models for literary history, the authors who shape N'Sondé's intertextuality, and the extra-literary references identifiable within the text. According to Schüller, answering these questions helps to clarify the literary reference systems engaged by N'Sondé and reveals that the aesthetic and content "localisations" in *Le Cœur des enfants léopards* are distinguished by their plurality and polyphony. To conduct this scenographic analysis, Schüller draws on Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), to examine the text's positioning within discursively constructed spaces, such as the colony and metropolis or the periphery and centre. He further incorporates Dominique Maingueneau's *Le Contexte de l'œuvre littéraire* (1993) and Jean-Marc Moura's concept of "postcolonial scenography", as articulated in *Littératures francophones et théorie postcoloniale* (1999), to investigate the staging of place within literary texts, particularly those rooted in migrant, Afrodiasporic, and postcolonial literature like N'Sondé's. Schüller's analysis, guided by themes of authenticity, Africa in the world, Africa in the novel, and love and interculturality, demonstrates that N'Sondé transcends the binary models traditionally applied to migrant literature. Both in his biography and in the aesthetics of his debut novel, N'Sondé creates two poles: the culture of origin and the culture of arrival. The scenography of the text reflects aspects of multiple origins. The first-person narrator, like N'Sondé himself, is of Congolese heritage, yet this origin is diffused within the multicultural frame of reference found in the suburbs.⁹⁶ Throughout the novel, this rejection of entrenched myths is evident in numerous passages. By signing the manifesto for a world literature in French, N'Sondé affirms his alignment with a literature that transcends labels such as "African" and "Francophone". Instead, he envisions a literary space that moves beyond the boundaries of the French-speaking world, extending into a global context.

Manolescu offers a thematic exploration of N'Sondé's debut novel, *Le Cœur des enfants léopards*.⁹⁷ She analyses the concepts of marginalisation, revolt, and the search for identity, as reimaged through

⁹⁶ Schüller, "Ausbruch aus den Kerkern der Differenz," 227.

⁹⁷ Manolescu, Cristina. 2012. "Wilfried N'Sondé entre révolte et marginalité." *Analele Universității din Craiova, Seria Științe Filologice, Limbi Străine Aplicate* VIII, no. 1: 183.

N'Sondé's vision and embodied by the young protagonist in the novel. Manolescu asserts that N'Sondé takes readers on "a journey in search of the narrator's past so that he can find his identity". She identifies two central challenges in N'Sondé's creative endeavour: "to speak of marginalisation from a society that does not understand the other and to speak of the revolt of this other, who has gone in search of himself". Manolescu highlights N'Sondé's innovative approach in addressing these themes, noting the half-fictional, half-real nature of his characters, which challenges societal norms and prejudices towards immigrants, conceived as the "other" from outside.⁹⁸ She further examines each of the themes, cross-referencing them with N'Sondé's life and worldview before providing an interpretative textual analysis. Regarding marginalisation, Manolescu describes the protagonist as "balanced between unanswered questions, irritated against everything and everyone, believing himself to have no chance of success as an immigrant who 'sees everywhere the white man's gaze that reminds him of his black origin.'" This character symbolises the struggles of suburban youth. The author conveys marginalisation through memories, dreams, and existential questions. Revolt, as expressed by the protagonist, arises from defiance against societal constraints, ancestral promises, and deeply ingrained principles corrupted by greed; against noble historical names that mimic colonial legacies; against forced marriages, violence, and the oppression of mothers; against unjust systems of justice; and, above all, "against racism, violence, prejudice, frustration, and marginalisation of all kinds".⁹⁹ In terms of the quest for identity, Manolescu argues that prison becomes the space where this journey begins. There, the protagonist reflects on his origins and embarks on an initiatory path from past to future. She also identifies love and the discovery of the other as part of this quest, marked by memories and monologues of self-doubt. On a hopeful note, the search for identity leads to a journey of redemption, a journey towards freedom, and a journey to find the lost path. This article emphasises the compatibility of N'Sondé's work with postcolonial studies. Themes such as the aesthetics of orality through the narrator-character, counter-heroes

⁹⁸ Manolescu, "Wilfried N'Sondé entre révolte et marginalité," 183.

⁹⁹ Manolescu, "Wilfried N'Sondé entre révolte et marginalité," 188.

representing marginalised groups, and the profound exploration of identity and self-discovery resonate within postcolonial literature, particularly in the context of the transatlantic slave trade.

Mole's article addresses the issue of hybridity in N'Sondé's first two novels, namely *Le Cœur des enfants léopards* and *Le Silence des esprits*. The analysis aligns with postcolonial writing, which is characterised by the writing of diversity that goes beyond linguistic and cultural barriers to explore transnational and cross-border experiences.¹⁰⁰ While hybridity is associated, in its postcolonial turn, with the anti-essentialist celebration of mixed identity (or culture), Mole argues that N'Sondé places emphasis not so much on identity-based hybridity but rather on textual hybridity.¹⁰¹ The latter is expressed in N'Sondé's "non-linear, even fragmented narration, backtracking, crossed narratives, a multiplicity of narrative voices and points of view".¹⁰² Thus, according to Mole, N'Sondé moves across narrative voices, interweaving a plurality of narratives inspired by two continents. Through the evocation of ancestors and spirits, leopard children, and the mother of earth betrayed by men, he revisits, in his own way the colonial traces left on Africa and its cultures. Immigration, integration and exclusion are presented as entry points for dealing with the issue of decolonisation in the French suburbs. Positioned at the intersection of the novel of migritude, the Franco-Maghrebian and urban novel, the novel of the suburbs, the novel of "Black France",¹⁰³ the war novel, and the postcolonial novel more generally, Mole concludes that N'Sondé has woven, in these two novels, a textual fabric of complex hybridity that positions his works on the margins of several fields of the novel as a genre. Mole identifies four defining aspects of N'Sondé's originality: his mastery of multiple narrative focalisations, interwoven stories, and intertwined

¹⁰⁰Mole, Gary D. 2012. "Voix des banlieues, voix africaines: Hybridité textuelle et polyphonie dans les romans de Wilfried N'Sondé." *Dalhousie French Studies* 99: 79–88, 81.

¹⁰¹Dumontet, Danielle, and Frank Zipfel, eds. 2008. *Écriture migrante / Migrant Writing*. Hildesheim: Olms.

¹⁰²Mole, "Voix des banlieues, voix africaines," 81.

¹⁰³Thomas, Dominic. 2007. *Black France: Colonialism, Immigration, and Transnationalism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

memories; his transgression of boundaries across various novelistic genres; and his skilful blending of registers. This blending creates novels that are simultaneously ballads of despair and shattered lives, as well as hymns of love and sensual passion. While N'Sondé focuses on the wounds of war or life, the social and cultural exile, the physical and internal wandering, and the haunting memory of painful pasts, he also highlights the redemptive power of love and dreams as forces capable of rescuing the soul from desolation and total collapse.¹⁰⁴

Exploring the German and French literary markets, Myriam Louviot examines the reception of N'Sondé's debut novel.¹⁰⁵ Her focus is not solely on the novel's success in Germany and France but, more importantly, on how the novel is classified within the literary landscapes of both countries. Louviot analyses how traditions of literary analysis and national specificities in literary recognition frame the novel's connection to French-speaking literature and migrant literature in France and Germany, respectively. This comparative approach allows her to highlight the complementarity of the two receptions, which, as she notes, "enables the translinguistic and cultural dimensions of postcolonial issues to be highlighted". She concludes that, in France, there is a tendency to contextualise the works of authors like N'Sondé alongside those of other European migrants, including non-French-speaking ones. In contrast, in Germany, the aesthetic and creative aspects of migrant literature garner greater attention. Together, these traditions of analysis contribute significantly to postcolonial criticism, broadening its scope.

Lindo addresses the ethnocentric assimilationist paradigm in a pluralist France composed of diverse peoples. She emphasises the significance of literature produced by French-speaking Afro-diasporic communities as a foundational presence and an anchor for these often-silenced communities, which nonetheless constitute a substantial part of the Republic's cultural landscape. Lindo references N'Sondé alongside authors such as Léonora Miano and Alain Mabanckou, whose

¹⁰⁴ Mole, "Voix des banlieues, voix africaines," 85.

¹⁰⁵ Louviot, Myriam. 2010. "Parcours d'un roman postcolonial francophone en France et en Allemagne: *Le Cœur des enfants léopards*, de Wilfried N'Sondé." *Trajectoires*, no. 4.

works explicitly incorporate Afropean ideologies and visions. According to Lindo, N'Sondé is one of the writers most deeply engaged with France's encounter with its Afro-diaspora communities. Through his writings, he dedicates his voice to fostering the convergence of people from diverse cultural and historical origins, illustrating the stakes of these encounters within French society. Lindo underscores N'Sondé's commitment to social realism in his literary representation, which exposes the divide between marginalised French ethnic groups and the inherent racism embedded within the democratic ideals of the Republic.¹⁰⁶ Beyond his numerous literary works and accolades across Europe and Africa, Lindo also highlights the musicality of N'Sondé's prose and his cultural imagination, which is deeply rooted in the African cosmology of his native Congo. She draws attention to the wide range of themes he addresses, including diasporisation, migration, exile, nomadism, and alienation, among others. These themes, combined with the pluricultural nature of his work and the relationship between the migrant experience in France and the terms used to describe migrant communities, align closely with what Abdourahmane Waberi terms the "children of the postcolony".¹⁰⁷ Lindo concludes that her article traces the interstitial and pluralistic qualities of N'Sondé's oeuvre, showcasing his versatility as an author.¹⁰⁸ His ability to move across the themes, tropes, and strategies of postcolonial literature is what sets his work apart and serves as the foundation of this study's examination of his contributions.

In various articles, N'Sondé's work has been examined from diverse perspectives, ranging from explorations of trauma to New Historicist approaches addressing issues faced by Francophone cultural minorities. For instance, Bragard and Lindo examine N'Sondé's second novel, *Le Silence des esprits*, focusing on the modalities that connect the

¹⁰⁶Thomas, Dominic. *Afro-European Cartographies*, 115.

¹⁰⁷Waberi, Abdourahmane. 1998. "Les enfants de la postcolonie: Esquisse d'une nouvelle génération d'écrivains francophones d'Afrique noire." *Notre Librairie*, no. 135: 8–15.

¹⁰⁸Lindo, Karen. 2014. "N'Sondé's Post-2005 Youth Mural: Exploring Afro-Europe in Wilfried N'Sondé's Literary Landscape." In *Afro-European Cartographies*, edited by Dominic Thomas, 112–131. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

perpetrator to trauma.¹⁰⁹ Their interpretation draws heavily on Morag's theoretical framework concerning the perpetrator and trauma.¹¹⁰ Congolese artists and writers have played a significant role in shaping the literary ecosystem of Afropolitanism. Ravi compares works by two Congolese authors, N'Sondé and Fiston Mwanza Mujila, to illustrate how Afro-political artists skilfully merge worlds, genres, and social categories through the aesthetics of hip-hop, which they adapted to their narratives.¹¹¹ In another study, Ravi investigates the relationships between cosmopolitanism, hospitality, and African immigrants in N'Sondé's *Le Silence des esprits*.¹¹² Employing a postcolonial critical lens, she elucidates how the impoverished Parisian suburb serves as the backdrop for narrating the experiences of immigrant children. Ravi introduces the concept of cosmopolitan engagement as a form of dialogue and uses it to expand upon N'Sondé's distinctive writing style.

N'Sondé's works examine the significance of frankness for Afro-diaspora communities in France. Lindo reflects on the classification of N'Sondé's writings as those of a foreign author, seeking to connect his visibility in the literary sphere with the lived experiences of young French individuals from Afro-diaspora communities. Lindo's analysis primarily engages with *Le Cœur des enfants léopards* and *Fleur de béton*, while also considering aspects of *Le Silence des esprits*. Her study focuses on the young protagonists in these novels, exploring their values, sufferings, and aspirations, while examining N'Sondé's unique perspective on suburban youth and their sense of belonging in

¹⁰⁹ Bragard, Véronique, and Karen Lindo. 2018. "The Sensorial Redemption of the Perpetrator's Tale: Confession and Social Reintegration in Wilfried N'Sondé's *Le Silence des esprits*." *Journal of Romance Studies* 18, no. 1: 15–30.

¹¹⁰ Morag, Raya. 2013. "Introduction: From Victim to Perpetrator Trauma." In *Waltzing with Bashir: Perpetrator Trauma and Cinema*, xii–32. I.B. Tauris.

¹¹¹ Ravi, Srilata. 2015. "Urban Musical Cultures and Postcolonial Mobilities in Fiston Mwanza Mujila's *Tram 83* and Wilfried N'Sondé's *Fleur de béton*." *Essays in French Literature and Culture* 52: 79–95.

¹¹² Ravi, Srilata. 2014. "Towards an Afropean Cosmopolitanism: Hospitality, Friendship and the African Immigrant." In *Francophone Afropean Literatures*, edited by Nicki Hitchcott and Dominic Thomas, 138–154. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

France. The analysis is structured around five thematic pillars: growing pains, love as human capital, filial love, learning prospects, and the constraints of the law. At the conclusion of her analysis, Lindo asserts that N'Sondé's novels resemble an amplified post-2005 mural painting, which ultimately fails to provide the much-sought alternative representation to affirm and celebrate French multiculturalism. Despite romantic interludes and hopeful moments, the reader is left with a fragmented portrayal of fractured lives. Lindo posits that France's challenge lies not in a simple binary of inclusion or exclusion, but rather in recognising that individuals of diverse ethno-cultural and religious backgrounds are relegated to the "penal colony" of the Republic.¹¹³ In an era in which France grapples with its heterogeneous and multicultural identity, N'Sondé, along with other writers, uses his literary craft to illustrate the colourful contours in hopes of fostering a postcolonial France.

Gehrmann examines the notion of intermediality in novels by Togolese authors, with a particular focus on *Cola Cola Jazz* by Kangni Alem. Gehrmann hypothesises that "novels that then make pronounced intermedial references tend to question established sub-genres of the novel, which are, as far as French-speaking African literature is concerned, the novel of dictatorship, the novel of the quest for identity, the sociocritical realist novel, and the self-ethnographic novel".¹¹⁴ As an introduction to her analysis, Gehrmann revisits the genesis and definitional attempts of intermediality and presents biographical details of the authors in her corpus. Alem, recipient of prestigious literary prizes for his debut novel, *Cola Cola Jazz*, lived between the United States and France before returning to Togo to teach after completing his doctoral dissertation in Bordeaux on the works of Rachid Boudjedra. In *Cola cola Jazz*, Gehrmann focuses on the theme of musical intermediality, which is signalled by the novel's title and further emphasised through its opening sentences. Throughout his work, Alem incorporates music, film, and photography to counterbalance the dull

¹¹³ Lindo, "N'Sondé's Post-2005 Youth Mural: Exploring Afro-Europe in Wilfried N'Sondé's Literary Landscape," 112–131.

¹¹⁴ Gehrmann, Susanne. 2017. "Le roman intermédiatique à la togolaise." In *Genre and Globalization*, ed. Miriam Lay Brander, Hildesheim: Olms, 137.

and overly moralising tone often associated with the portrayal of post-colonial Togolese realities. According to Gehrman, intermediality also enables Alem to create a sense of detachment between the story being narrated and its perception by the narrative voice. This narrative approach, infused with absurdity, irony, and incredible intrigue, acts as a veil through which the political history of Togo is recounted.

In an earlier analysis of *Cola cola Jazz* and *Canaille et charlatan*, Gehrman highlights that, alongside the derision and absurdity previously mentioned, discursive intermediality contributes to Alem's distinctive "sensual" and "sarcastic" style.¹¹⁵ Expanding beyond the musical genre of jazz, Gehrman broadens the scope of her analysis to include other media references, such as the telephone and photography. Using symbolic *mise en abyme* and metafictional reference as categories of analysis, she examines the narrative and communicative strategies employed by Alem. While the symbolic *mise en abyme* is conveyed through musical melisma and sensual movements, metafictional references strategically create a sense of detachment between the narrative and reality.

In her doctoral dissertation, Tanniou undertakes a cross-disciplinary postcolonial analysis comparing English and French-speaking African literature. Through a comparative and multi-directional reading of five contemporary novels contextualised within political, social, and historical frameworks, she investigates Dominic Thomas's concept of "intercultural dynamics", whereby colonialism becomes "de-localised as a mechanism resulting from globalisation" and integrates various spatial zones where intellectual thought is produced. Tanniou analyses works by African authors, including Léonora Miano, Fatou Diome, Sénouvo Agbota Sinsou, Boubacar Boris Diop, and Kangni Alem, to reinterpret them beyond the prevailing cosmopolitan narratives of decolonisation and cultural reconstruction, ultimately re-thinking local and global identities. In Chapter 6, "Diasporic identities in unison in Alem's *La Gazelle s'agenouille pour pleurer*: An alternative to cacophonic postcolonial discourses", Tanniou describes the work

¹¹⁵ Gehrman, Susanne. 2015. "Écritures intermédiatiques: *Cola Cola Jazz* et *Canaille et charlatan* de Kangni Alem." In *Créativité intermédiatique au Togo et dans la diaspora togolaise*, ed. by Susanne Gehrman and Dodji Yigbe, 85–102. Berlin: Lit.

as “a sometimes inaccessible eclectic mix of stories [that] reveals a complex multiple whole made out of different layers”.¹¹⁶ In this novel, characterised as “entangling and frustrating” yet “chaotically healing”, Tanniou proposes three axes of analysis. The first addresses Alem’s literary strategies to confront the stigma of colonial violence on the African subject. The second focuses on his work’s attempt to deconstruct cultural authenticity and re-evaluate the conception of space as a fixed entity. Finally, the third examines the international dimension of Alem’s literature and the extent to which diaspora networks contribute to postcolonial discourse. Tanniou concludes that Alem challenges the fixed Eurocentric gaze, inviting readers to reconsider the construction of cultural identity. Through his narrative, he calls upon the diaspora to participate actively in shaping Francophone African postcolonial identities.¹¹⁷

3.2. Theoretical Framework: Traumatomimesis and Historiopoiesis

This chapter examines the use of trauma theory as a framework for the analysis of slave trade novels by Francophone African authors. The focus is on understanding how literary representations of the trauma of the slave trade contribute to our understanding of the effects of slavery on African societies. The study also considers the ethical and aesthetic choices made by writers in selecting the appropriate language and narrative techniques to represent the unspeakable atrocities of the slave trade.

Through an analysis of the literary forms used to represent the trauma of the slave trade, this study examines how fiction can communicate values of humanity and provoke reflection on the moral implications of these events. The study also examines the specific strategies and techniques used by these authors to portray the memory and the trauma of the slave trade, and the ways in which they contribute to

¹¹⁶Tanniou, Salomé. N. I. 2015. *Decoding Identities in ‘Francophone’ African Postcolonial Spaces: Local Novels, Global Narratives*. PhD diss., University of Birmingham.

¹¹⁷Tanniou, *Decoding Identities in ‘Francophone’ African Postcolonial Spaces*, 202.

the literary memorialisation of this trauma. It also analyses the literary approaches and mechanisms used to revisit and (re)store the trajectories of African characters' specific historical experience before the "great rupture".

The theoretical framework for this study draws on different fields of study, including trauma/memory theory, and postcolonial studies. Trauma theory has been widely used in recent years to understand the impact of violence and trauma on individuals and communities; as such, it offers a useful lens through which to analyse how the trauma of the slave trade is represented in literature. Memory studies, which are closely related to trauma theory, provide a framework for understanding how memory is constructed and how it is used to make sense of the past. This field emphasises the importance of memory in shaping identity and understanding historical events, and it is a useful approach for analysing the ways in which the trauma of the slave trade is remembered and represented in literature. Postcolonial studies, on the other hand, provide a critical framework for understanding the ongoing effects of colonialism and imperialism on African societies. In summary, this chapter examines the ways in which trauma theory, postcolonial studies, and memory studies can be used to analyse the literary representation of the trauma of the slave trade in Francophone African literature.

The fact that mass violence and related traumas have a disruptive effect on the literary approach of writers is of great interest for this study. Therefore, one may ask what fiction that addresses the trauma of the slave trade contributes in terms of imaginative, linguistic, and narrative engagement, in complementarity with other approaches to analysing the effects of slavery. The interest in recounting the transatlantic slave trade lies less in the veracity of the facts than in the choice of words to express the event, a choice that reflects both an aesthetic and ethical intention. The question of the unspeakable is thus linked to that of the enunciative distance from the event: the ethical position towards the facts and the aesthetic approach in terms of the mediums that can be used to account for them.¹¹⁸ From this point of view, the writer seeks forms that can represent horror to provoke the reader's re-

¹¹⁸ Semujanga, Josias. 2008. *Le génocide, sujet de fiction?* Paris: L'Harmattan.

flection on the moral scope of fiction on trauma. Thus, what are these literary forms that translate trauma in literature? Several authors, since the emergence of trauma studies, have tackled this question.

3.2.1. Postcolonial Trauma Theory: The Promise and Potential of African Literature

Trauma theory emerged in the 1990s in response to the recognition of the long-lasting psychological effects of traumatic events on individuals and communities. Cathy Caruth's work, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, was instrumental in the development of the field. Caruth argued that traumatic experiences fundamentally alter an individual's sense of self and their relationship to the world, leaving them with a sense of disconnection and fragmentation. She also noted the role of social and cultural factors in shaping the experience of trauma, highlighting the importance of trauma as a collective experience. Trauma theory has become an interdisciplinary field, drawing on insights from psychology, neuroscience, sociology, and cultural studies, among other fields. In literary studies, trauma theory offers a way to reconcile textual analysis with ethical concerns.¹¹⁹ Trauma narratives can be analysed in terms of their representation and the ways in which they are processed and integrated into the narrative. Literary texts offer a way to make sense of the incomprehensibility of trauma and to bear witness to the ongoing effects of traumatic experiences. Overall, trauma theory offers a valuable framework for understanding the long-lasting effects of traumatic events on individuals and communities.

Trauma theory is shaped by three main discourses, each with its own set of protagonists and claims. The first discourse, Freudian psychoanalysis, emphasises the indirect and disguised nature of traumatic memory.¹²⁰ Sigmund Freud's vocabulary of repression and displacement has been applied to the dynamics of how texts represent reality,

¹¹⁹Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹²⁰Proponents include Sigmund Freud, Melanie Klein, Donald W. Winnicott, and Sandor Ferencsi.

offering a productive metaphor for the relationship between literature and trauma.¹²¹ The second discourse is deconstruction, drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida and Dominick LaCapra, which recognises that the textual representation of reality is never straightforward, always provisional, and perhaps even impossible. Deconstruction accounts for and emphasises representational gaps and disarticulations, making it a productive site of engagement for trauma theorists.¹²² The third discourse, the Holocaust experience, takes the experience of the Holocaust as the quintessential trauma of recent history, with prominent figures including Kai Erikson, Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, and Dominick LaCapra. The Holocaust is recognised as the watershed trauma of our times, making it a crucial point of reference for trauma theory.¹²³ Together, these three discourses offer critical perspectives on trauma, emphasising the importance of understanding the complex psychological and social factors involved in the traumatic experience. These discourses also highlight the importance of empathy, compassion, and recognition of broader cultural and societal factors involved in the experience of trauma.¹²⁴ By exploring the intersection of these discourses, trauma studies have been able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the long-lasting effects of traumatic events on individuals and communities.

Critiques of trauma theory have emerged in response to the enthusiasm surrounding it within literary studies. Fred Alford questions the basic premise of trauma theory, arguing that survivors are generally capable of telling coherent stories and that storytelling does little to heal trauma.¹²⁵ Ruth Leys questions how trauma theory engages with

¹²¹ Caruth, Cathy. 1995. "Trauma and Experience: Introduction." In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, 3–12. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹²² LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

¹²³ Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.

¹²⁴ Kansteiner, Wulf. 2002. "Finding meaning in memory: A methodological critique of collective memory studies." *History and Theory* 41, no. 2: 179–197.

¹²⁵ Alford, C. Fred. 2013. *Trauma and the Unmaking of the Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

affect, arguing that this approach takes the emotional impact on the reader to be the crucial feature of a literary work, rather than its meaning.¹²⁶ She also challenges the assumption that collective memory can be easily envisioned as an extension of individual memory.¹²⁷ Wulf Kansteiner argues that collective and individual memories operate in fundamentally different ways. Eaglestone cautions that trauma theory represents nothing new as it is described as a set of loosely related ideas.¹²⁸

Despite these critiques, many literary scholars remain convinced that trauma theory offers unique tools for analysing literary texts and their contexts. Trauma theory has allowed literary studies to revisit their own assumptions and approaches while connecting with some of the most pressing social issues of our time. Given the fundamental concept of resilience in trauma healing, it is ironic that trauma theory has proven to be resilient in the face of critiques. Nevertheless, ongoing critical engagement with trauma theory and its assumptions is essential to ensure that its insights remain productive and relevant.

The perspective of trauma has provided a valuable and unique lens through which to analyse literary texts and their contexts. Trauma theory has allowed literary scholars to examine the ways in which literature can represent and respond to traumatic experiences, and to engage with ethical and political concerns surrounding the representation of trauma. At the same time, the insights and approaches of literary studies can be useful in understanding the dynamics of trauma and its impact on individuals and communities. The interdisciplinary nature of trauma studies has allowed for a fruitful dialogue between disciplines that might not otherwise have intersected, and this has deepened the understanding of the complex phenomenon of trauma. Despite some critiques and concerns about the application of trauma theory in literary studies, it remains a valuable and resilient perspective that offers unique tools for analysing the ways in which literature

¹²⁶Leys, Ruth. 2012. "The Turn to Affect: A Critique." *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 3: 434–472.

¹²⁷Leys, Ruth. 2000. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 179.

¹²⁸Eaglestone, Robert. 2013. *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Reader*. London: Routledge.

represents and responds to trauma, and for understanding the broader cultural and social implications of traumatic experiences.¹²⁹

In his book, Kurtz addresses the gap in contemporary trauma studies by exploring the relevance of trauma to African literature. He argues that the application of trauma theory to African literary texts is a productive exercise that offers benefits not only to African literature but also to trauma studies. Kurtz emphasises the transformative potential of the African moral imagination, as reflected in the creative works of African writers, in understanding trauma healing within the larger project of peacebuilding. He provides case studies of selected works by Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chimamanda Adichie, and Nuruddin Farah, illustrating how African literature can influence our understanding of trauma and trauma healing. This book is a significant contribution to trauma studies, African literary studies, postcolonial studies, and memory studies. In his discussion of literary trauma studies, Kurtz identifies two promises of the field of study. The first is the inherent interconnection of literature and trauma. According to Kurtz, "literature serves as an effective vehicle to recount and explore the fact that trauma happens".¹³⁰ Literature, in other words, can help us better understand and come to terms with traumatic experiences. The second promise lies in the analogy between narrative processes and the processes of trauma. By examining this analogy, we can gain a deeper understanding of both literature and trauma. This suggests that literature can be a powerful tool for exploring and representing traumatic experiences.

In African literature, the essence of trauma is deeply rooted in various aspects, as suggested by Gikandi. To exemplify this, we can look at two significant works of African literature: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. *Things Fall Apart* (1958) tells the story of Okonkwo, a powerful Igbo man whose life is ultimately destroyed by the arrival of British colonialists in Nigeria. The novel showcases the trauma experienced by the Igbo people as they lose their traditional way of life, customs, and beliefs due to

¹²⁹Kurtz, J. Roger. 2018. *Literature and Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 62–63.

¹³⁰Kurtz, J. Roger. 2020. *Trauma and transformation in African literature*. Routledge.

the imposition of Western culture and religion. Achebe's narrative exemplifies the first promise of literary trauma studies as mentioned by Kurtz: literature as an effective vehicle to recount and explore trauma. Through the story of Okonkwo, readers can gain a better understanding of the traumatic effects of colonialism on African societies. *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) by Tayeb Salih traces the psychological trauma experienced by the protagonist, Mustafa Sa'eed, a Sudanese man who studies in England and later returns to his native village in Sudan. Mustafa's traumatic experiences in England, including failed relationships and eventual imprisonment, are mirrored by the novel's representation of the impact of postcolonialism on the Sudanese psyche. Here, the novel illustrates the second promise of literary trauma studies, namely, the analogy between narrative processes and the processes of trauma. By examining Mustafa's struggle to reconcile his conflicting identities, readers can engage more fully with the complex nature of trauma, particularly as it relates to the postcolonial experience. In both examples, African literature serves as a powerful tool for exploring and representing the traumatic experiences of individuals and communities affected by colonialism and postcolonialism.

When examining the slave trade narratives by Francophone African authors like Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N'Sondé, the exploration of trauma in African literature takes on an even more critical aspect. These authors address the historical trauma caused by the transatlantic slave trade, its long-lasting impact on African societies, and the resilience of enslaved people in the face of unimaginable suffering. Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* takes place in a precolonial African village, where the sudden disappearance of young men and women leaves the community in fear and mourning. The novel traces the psychological and emotional trauma experienced by the families left behind, who eventually come to terms with the fact that their loved ones were captured and sold into slavery. Miano's work exemplifies the first promise of literary trauma studies, as it utilises literature to recount and represent the trauma experienced by African communities during the slave trade. Alem's *Esclaves* tells the story of Miguel, an African master of rituals who is captured and sold into slavery. Throughout the novel, Miguel grapples with his new reality as a slave and the loss of his status, family, and cultural identity. Alem portrays

the traumatic experiences of Miguel, highlighting the psychological and emotional challenges faced by those who were enslaved. Through this narrative, Alem investigates the complex nature of trauma and its effects on individuals subjected to the horrors of the slave trade. Through the character of Miguel and others, the novel allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological toll of the slave trade on those who were stripped of their freedom and dignity. N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018) follows the life of a Congolese nobleman, Nsaku né Vunda, who is sent on a diplomatic mission to Europe. During his journey, he experiences the horrors of the slave trade first-hand and is confronted with the reality of human suffering. N'Sondé's novel illustrates the complexities of trauma in the context of the slave trade, as it addresses not only the experiences of enslaved people but also the moral dilemmas faced by those who witness or participate in the trade. The narrative reveals the interconnections between different historical experiences of trauma and demonstrates how literature can be a powerful tool for understanding and representing these experiences. These three novels together illustrate the role of African literature in exploring trauma associated with the slave trade and its long-lasting impact on African societies.

Kurtz also notes, however, the limitations of literary trauma studies. For example, he acknowledges that literary trauma studies often focus on the experiences of individuals rather than the larger societal and political contexts in which trauma occurs. He also notes that trauma studies often privilege certain forms of trauma over others, such as the experiences of Holocaust survivors, at the expense of other forms of trauma. Finally, he suggests that literary trauma studies often remain too focused on individual healing and recovery and do not sufficiently engage with the larger social and political factors that contribute to the experience of trauma. As such, while Kurtz acknowledges the promises of literary trauma studies, he also highlights the need for a more socially engaged and contextually sensitive approach to the study of trauma in literature.¹³¹ Such an approach would recognise the larger cultural and political contexts in which trauma occurs and would work

¹³¹ Kurtz, *Trauma and transformation in African literature*.

to challenge the privileging of certain forms of trauma over others. By doing so, literary trauma studies could make an important contribution to the broader field of trauma studies while also establishing the unique ways in which literature can help us understand and represent traumatic experiences.

This critique echoes the postcolonial discussion initiated in the 2000s. The postcolonial critique of trauma studies aims to emphasise traumatic experiences in non-Western contexts and consider the cultural differences in addressing trauma. Postcolonial trauma primarily focuses on understanding colonial trauma, such as dispossession, forced migration, diaspora, slavery, segregation, racism, political violence, and genocide. Postcolonial trauma studies critique the imposition of Western theoretical and diagnostic models in non-Western contexts, advocating for modifications to achieve broader applicability.¹³² Michael Rothberg criticises the binary concept of Western and non-Western trauma contexts, arguing that it leads to the homogenisation of the so-called “Western” context.¹³³ In Europe itself, diverse traumatic experiences exist, making it unwise to endorse such a binary position. Understanding the West and the Rest requires attending to specific contexts. Craps & Buelens provide an example of a unified theory for postcolonial trauma contexts: insidious trauma.¹³⁴ This theory, proposed by feminist psychotherapist Laura S. Brown, suggests that trauma from oppression may not necessarily impact the body but can inflict violence on the soul and spirit. Frantz Fanon, a leading psycho-postcolonial theorist, experienced this type of trauma when subjected to the portrayal of a demonic black figure in the eyes of a white child, causing feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred.

Postcolonial trauma theory critiques traditional trauma frameworks that focus on individual psychology, arguing instead that postcolonial trauma is a collective experience. Translating individual trauma frameworks into collective conditions can have damaging ef-

¹³²Craps, Stef, and Gert Buelens. 2008. “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels.” *Studies in the Novel* 40, no. 1–2: 1–12.

¹³³Rothberg, Michael. 2008. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

¹³⁴Craps and Buelens, “Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels.”

fects. Craps and Buelens argue that a narrow focus on individual psychology ignores and leaves unquestioned the conditions that enabled traumatic abuse.¹³⁵ By offering a collective and political perspective on trauma, postcolonial trauma studies provide a corrective for the individualising, psychologising, and depoliticising tendencies characteristic of Western trauma treatment models. The postcolonial critique also examines the relationship between trauma victims and the experts investigating traumatised moments. Within psychoanalytic frameworks, the trauma victim is seen as a truth-holder who is not fully conscious and can only be conscious of the truth indirectly. This perspective prevents the victim from transforming testimony into political intervention and the expert from understanding the testimony beyond sympathy, removing the need to identify political influences on the victim and eliminating self-critical reflection on the process.¹³⁶ Rothberg counters this argument, stating that the traumatised person is not necessarily a victim and that the categories between traumatised individuals and victims should be clearly defined.¹³⁷

Focusing on the communal condition of the postcolonial world, postcolonial trauma studies develop alternative theoretical frameworks based on realism and indigenous literary practices. Indigenous realism is closely related to local cosmologies, systems of knowledge, and cultural practices, many of which have been marginalised or suppressed through colonial processes. By upholding the role of local stories and indigenous practices for traumatised individuals, postcolonial trauma studies challenge the centrality of Western knowledge and practice.¹³⁸ The decolonisation of trauma studies has gained widespread attention. Irene Visser identifies postcolonial critiques of trauma studies, detecting potential themes based on postcolonial countries' theoretical frameworks.¹³⁹ She highlights resilience, noting

¹³⁵ Craps and Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels."

¹³⁶ Craps and Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels."

¹³⁷ Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*.

¹³⁸ Craps and Buelens, "Introduction: Postcolonial Trauma Novels."

¹³⁹ Visser, Irene. 2011. "Trauma Theory and Postcolonial Literary Studies." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 47 (3): 270–82. doi:10.1080/17449855.2011.569378.

that postcolonial countries experience ongoing trauma within political oppression, making trauma and resilience inherently linked.¹⁴⁰

Traumatomimesis is a term used to describe the unique capacity of literature to represent and convey the experience of trauma. It suggests that literature is able to mirror the experience of trauma in a way that other forms of discourse cannot. “The claim for literature is that it shares a language with trauma that legal, medical, sociological, or even historical discourse do not. In short, that it manifests a unique capacity for what we might term traumatomimesis.”¹⁴¹ In other words, literature has a special connection with trauma that allows it to represent traumatic experiences in a way that is distinct from other forms of discourse. This connection is often described as a “special connection between words and wounds,”¹⁴² highlighting the unique power of literature to convey the experience of trauma.

Kurtz argues that literary language possesses a unique structure that makes it particularly effective for representing the experience of trauma in ways that ordinary language cannot. He notes that Caruth emphasises the periphrastic nature of trauma, that is, the way that it resists open or direct representation, and how it instead requires an indirect or circumlocutory approach. This approach is easily accommodated by our understanding of the workings of literary language, thus permitting us to “explore the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it.”¹⁴³ Luckhurst’s rhetoric of aporia, which is another form of representation commonly employed in literary language, highlights how trauma involves a failure of integration, disintegrating our sense of reality, and creating gaps and breakdowns. These gaps mean that “traumatic subjectivity and representation are consistently invoked through a rhetoric of aporia.”¹⁴⁴

In a related vein, Kurtz posits that figurative language and metaphors are used to express the paradox, excess, and indirectness – a

¹⁴⁰Cyrulnik, Boris. 2002. *Un merveilleux malheur*. Paris: Odile Jacob.

¹⁴¹Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*.

¹⁴²Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 64.

¹⁴³Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 64.

¹⁴⁴Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 65.

kind of uncanniness – of trauma. Kurtz also invokes Bakhtine's chronotope, which describes the way that a given literary genre configures the categories of space and time. Trauma results in what Arva calls a "shock chronotope", characterised by a resistance to traditional representations of these basic categories. Literature's analeptic techniques, ambiguity, and uncertainty, chronic repetition or reenactment, and the polyvalency of the trope of haunting offer insight into traumatic experiences. As a means of representing this spectral presence, the anachronistic potential of narrative is productive, facilitating the simultaneous exploration of the past, the present, and the future. This allows the exploration of the past, revealing the voices of those who have been violently repressed, imagining alternative futures, and expressing yearnings for what could be or for what could have been. Literature offers a vocabulary and a set of concepts that can effectively represent the experience of trauma, not just on a descriptive level but through narrative strategies, images, and language that replicate the nature of that experience.¹⁴⁵

Literary genres and modes of narrative play a significant role in the representation of trauma in literature. For instance, modernist literature often portrays the failure of narrative, reflecting the sense of fragmentation and disintegration that characterises trauma. On the other hand, postmodernist literature often employs techniques such as temporal distortion, competing narrative voices, and resistance to closure and resolution, which mimic traumatic symptoms. However, trauma takes many forms, and the trauma narrative is not fixed in terms of form. Thus, there is a danger in prescribing a fixed aesthetic for trauma literature, as the meaning and effectiveness of a narrative are highly dependent on the context in which it is created and received. As LaCapra asks, "what modes of narrative are most suited for rendering traumatic events, especially in ways that do not harmonise, stylise, or even airbrush them and thus border on repression or denial?"¹⁴⁶ Ultimately, the most effective representation of trauma may come from departing from conventional literary sequences and em-

¹⁴⁵Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 66.

¹⁴⁶LaCapra, Dominick. 2001. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 205.

ploying mechanisms that mimic the symptomatology of trauma at a formal level, such as repetition, indirection, undecidability, multiple narrative voices, or a departure from standard conventions of temporality and chronology. As Kurtz notes, these genres and modes of narrative offer a way to convey the experience of trauma that is not limited to conventional literary sequences. In addition to these literary genres, there are specific forms that are often used to convey trauma. These include the sublime, the apocalyptic, surrealism, magical realism, the Gothic, traumatic realism, feminist novels, and life memoirs. However, Kurtz cautions against limiting the representation of trauma to a particular genre or form. Instead, he argues that “what a narrative means and how a narrative means are highly dependent on the role of art and representation in a particular place and time”.¹⁴⁷ Given that trauma itself appears in multiple guises, it would seem strange to stick to a monolithic aesthetic form as normative. If there is a norm, it is likely to be transgeneric, reflecting the diverse ways in which trauma manifests itself in literature.

Kurtz’s perspective on the relationship between trauma and literary genres resonates with Semujanga’s view of trauma as a transgeneric phenomenon. In his characterisation of the African novel, Semujanga highlights the transcultural nature of the novel and its place in the contemporary literary landscape. He asserts that the novel:

... est un genre phare qui permet d’apprécier le caractère transculturel de l’écriture contemporaine où toutes les formes hybrides se rencontrent dans une même œuvre sans que l’on puisse établir avec certitude la question de l’origine de la forme primordiale. [... is a flagship genre that allows us to appreciate the transcultural nature of contemporary writing, where all hybrid forms meet in the same work, without it being possible to establish with any certainty the question of the origin of the primordial form.]¹⁴⁸

This illustrates the transgeneric nature of trauma writing by emphasising the transcultural nature of novel writing and the resulting hybrid forms. In the case of trauma writing, this translates into the way au-

¹⁴⁷ Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 67.

¹⁴⁸ Semujanga, Josias. 1999. *Dynamique des genres dans le roman africain*. Paris: L’Harmattan, 147.

thors use various narrative techniques, styles, genres, and languages to express and represent traumatic experiences.

Related to the idea of the rhetoric of aporia, Semujanga asserts that, “La notion de genre fonctionne comme une aporie. C’est un noeud gordien de contradictions. Il n’existe, en effet, que dans la relativité~ de l’idéal visé et de sa réalisation”.¹⁴⁹ This formulation underscores the complexities and challenges inherent in defining and categorising literary genres. While the concept of genre serves as a useful tool for understanding and analysing literature, it is not without its limitations and contradictions. The idea of an ideal form or standard for a particular genre is subjective and dependent on individual interpretation, leading to the relativity mentioned in the statement. The boundaries between genres can be blurred, and works of literature often defy categorisation or blend multiple genres together. These contradictions highlight the fluidity and dynamic nature of literary genres, and the challenges of attempting to define them with precision.

The transgeneric nature of trauma writing manifests through the use of different forms and structures to explore and express traumatic experiences. For example, some authors may resort to non-linear techniques, such as flashbacks, fragmented narratives, or multiple voices, to reflect the fragmented and disorganised nature of traumatic memory. The transgeneric nature of trauma writing manifests itself in the way authors combine different literary genres to create hybrid works. For example, the historical novel can be mixed with the coming-of-age novel, the epistolary novel, or the fantastical narrative to address issues such as violence, loss, resilience, and healing. Trauma writing is also transcultural, as it allows for the linking of specific traumatic experiences to cultural, social, and political contexts while highlighting the universal aspects of human suffering. Through this lens, authors can examine individual and collective traumas related to events such as colonisation, war, genocide, or apartheid, while building bridges between different cultures and emphasising the shared experiences of humanity. Thus, the idea that trauma can take multiple forms and can be expressed in different literary genres suggests that trauma is an inherently literary phenomenon. This understanding of trauma as a

¹⁴⁹ Semujanga, *Dynamique des genres dans le roman africain*, 146.

literary phenomenon highlights the importance of literature in representing and addressing traumatic experiences and emphasises the need to approach trauma in a socially engaged manner.

Trauma theory is applicable to various theoretical approaches, such as feminism, postcolonial theory, disability studies, eco-criticism, and queer studies. Each perspective examines how literary language offers a means to address and respond to social harm in ways that conventional social institutions cannot. As Kurtz explains, trauma, essentially, is a phenomenon that defies simple classification and necessitates responses that are just as varied and wide-ranging.¹⁵⁰ In response to trauma, other critical approaches have emerged alongside psychoanalytic criticism, including feminism, disability studies, eco-criticism, and queer studies. These perspectives emphasise the unique ways in which trauma is experienced by distinct groups and how it is portrayed in literature. Postcolonial theory, specifically, has underscored the connection between trauma and colonial and postcolonial histories, as well as its impact on identity formation and healing. In his work on postcolonial trauma studies, Craps argues that “colonial trauma is central to the literary output of postcolonial societies.”¹⁵¹ He observes that postcolonial literature often utilises techniques like fragmentation, nonlinear narratives, and a focus on personal experiences rather than broader historical events to depict trauma. By examining these literary techniques, postcolonial trauma studies can reveal the enduring effects of colonialism on individuals and communities and contribute to the development of new forms of healing and resistance. The study of trauma in literature is a complex and demanding task that demands openness to a wide array of critical approaches and perspectives. Kurtz asserts that “the meaning of a narrative and its mode of expression are highly dependent on the role of art and representation in a specific place and time. Considering the diverse manifestations of trauma, insisting on a uniform aesthetic form as the norm would be odd.”¹⁵² By embracing a variety of approaches and perspectives, schol-

¹⁵⁰Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 71.

¹⁵¹Craps, Stef. 2010. *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1.

¹⁵²Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 67.

ars can gain a deeper understanding of the intricate and diverse ways trauma is represented in literature and culture.

3.2.2. The Transformative Power of Literature in Mourning, Healing, and Trauma Recovery

The healing power of storytelling has been explored by many scholars in the field of trauma studies. According to Andermahr and Pellicer-Orrin, narrative and storytelling can contribute to the healing of a traumatised individual or group.¹⁵³ Similarly, Herman believes that the psychoneurosis induced by terror can be reversed using words. This suggests that literature not only has the potential to represent trauma but, under certain conditions, can also offer the potential for healing.¹⁵⁴ As Luckhurst explains, Paul Ricœur's notion of "discordant concordance" suggests that narrative, despite its inherent gaps and contradictions, can drive the human urge to make meaning. This notion that narrative heals aporia is an apt summary of Ricœur's overall model for the function of narrative.¹⁵⁵ The disintegration of trauma can be mended through the integrative power of story, and, what is more, the fragmenting effects of trauma are precisely what drive the desire for wholeness.¹⁵⁶ Trauma highlights the inadequacies of language, including its inability to fully represent what it is trying to express, and the fact that it is always a second-hand translation of experience.¹⁵⁷ Yet, as Levine argues, literary language, like translation of any sort, is motivated by the attempt to transcend linguistic shortcomings.¹⁵⁸ Narrative offers the possibility of creating a safe space through the representation of trauma, corresponding to the first stage of trauma healing. However, it is in the second stage of healing, the stage of acknowledging and

¹⁵³ Andermahr, Sonya, and Silvia Pellicer-Ortín. 2013. "Introduction." In *The Trauma of Translation*, ed. by A. A. Apter and R. J. Smith, 1–11. London: Routledge.

¹⁵⁴ Herman, Judith. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books.

¹⁵⁵ Luckhurst, Roger. 2008. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge.

¹⁵⁶ Levine, Stephen K. 1997. *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

remembering trauma, where narrative offers even more resources.¹⁵⁹ This stage facilitates moving from meaninglessness to purpose, from nescience to knowledge, and permits the trauma survivor to sense that “Time starts to move again.”¹⁶⁰

Appropriate mourning and grieving are essential for finding healing and breaking the cycles of trauma.¹⁶¹ However, mourning can be difficult, and resistance to mourning is the most common cause of stagnation in the second stage of recovery. Freud distinguishes between mourning and melancholy, with mourning being a normal and healthy response to loss, and melancholia being a pathological condition.¹⁶² Literature can offer resources for expressing proper grieving, and as Herman suggests, “Writing wrongs” necessarily embraces the complexity of seeking restoration in the state of being wounded.¹⁶³ Literature has the potential to represent trauma, offer a safe space for healing, and transform trauma under certain conditions. Through narrative, literature can create a discordant concordance or a concordant discord that articulates both the harm of trauma and its healing. Narrative offers resources for the second stage of healing, namely, acknowledging and remembering trauma, and proper grieving. Despite the limitations of language and the dilemmas of trauma, literary language carries within it the seeds of both traumatic fragmentation and restoration.

Narrative plays a crucial role in trauma healing, offering a safe space for individuals to process and reframe their experiences. The first stage of healing involves providing a context of safety for the individual to share their trauma story. This is followed by the second stage of healing, which involves acknowledging and remembering the trauma, assimilating facts and feelings, and reframing events toward reconciliation. Proper mourning and grieving are essential in this stage, and literature provides ample resources for positive grief-work, as elegies

¹⁵⁹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁶¹ Yoder, Carolyn. J. 2005. *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

¹⁶² Freud, Sigmund. 1917. “Mourning and Melancholia.”

¹⁶³ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 76.

and lamentations allow for the expression of trauma in a healing way. Testimony and witness are also important components of the second stage, as the act of giving voice to traumatic experiences can be cathartic for both the speaker and the listener alike. Reframing is another crucial aspect of the second stage, as it involves adopting new perspectives and admitting complexities, thus allowing for moral repair. The act of reframing, while risky, offers a sense of hope and allows individuals to envision themselves and their problems in new ways, ultimately facilitating the third and final stage of healing.

Literature can play a vital role in the healing process of trauma, particularly in the final stages of reconnection and restoration. Trauma freezes the mind in an isolated past, and the act of coherent narration promotes flexible integration and complexity, repairing what has been ruptured. Literature can also present the possibility of a new future, envisioning alternative realities beyond the trauma. This imaginative potential is what we might call the moral imagination, a concept that evokes the healing capacity of literary language.

The moral imagination is not simply a conservative call for a return to a previous social order but rather a capacity for envisioning a completely new mode of existence following serious social harm. Toni Morrison describes this vision of the relation of literature to trauma as the only way to turn sorrow into meaning, therefore sharpening the moral imagination. This version of the moral imagination is also relevant in peacebuilding, as it is a creative act that imagines something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist. Narrative plays a crucial role in relation to trauma, as it has the capacity to bring unspeakable events into human experience. In *Things Fall Apart*, for example, a traumatised community finds a way to tell its own story, but the devastating effects of colonial rule result in trauma that overwhelms language, leading to the disintegration of the community. The importance of involving the narrative imagination in trauma work is thus evident, as it has the capacity to heal and restore what has been destroyed by trauma.

In his essay collection *Something Torn and New*, Ngũgĩ points out that the fundamental experience of colonialism in Africa is dismemberment, which refers to the physical and cultural fragmentation

caused by colonial violence.¹⁶⁴ Ngũgĩ evokes the stories of Hintska ka Khawuta and Waiyaki wa Hinga, two African leaders who were killed during battles for control over their regions, as examples of this dismemberment. While their bodies were physically disfigured, their memory was also disconnected from their individual and collective bodies, symbolising the cultural effects of colonial trauma in Africa.¹⁶⁵ African writers, scholars, politicians, journalists, and intellectuals have been united in identifying the traumatic effects of colonialism on their communities, even before the emergence of postcolonial studies and trauma theory.¹⁶⁶ Kwame Nkrumah's response to Oliver Stanley's suggestion that the British presence prevented disastrous disintegration in the African colonies reveals the harm caused by colonialism. Nkrumah highlights the brutal exploitation, persecution, and mass illiteracy that resulted from colonialism, which prevented Africans from organising labour and perpetuated poverty and disease.¹⁶⁷ African writers, intellectuals, and leaders have long recognised the traumatic effects of colonialism on their communities and have used their own vocabulary to describe the dismemberment and fragmentation caused by colonial violence. The cultural effects of colonialism have severed Africans from their history and culture, perpetuated mass illiteracy, and prevented labour organisation, among other harms caused by the British presence.

African trauma narratives, as reflected in the literature and social criticism of the continent, have long recognised the splintering effects of colonialism and the dismemberment of African societies. The titles of landmark African texts, including *Weep Not Child*, *Fragments*, and *Nervous Conditions*, demonstrate an awareness of the traumatic impact of colonial rule. The psychological effects of colonialism are further reflected in the work of social critics, such as Amílcar Cabral, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi, who argue that co-

¹⁶⁴ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2009. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. New York: Basic Civitas, 5–6.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 6.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 6–7.

¹⁶⁷ Nkrumah, Kwame. 1962. *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology*. London: Mercury Books., 35.

lonialism has created an inherently traumatogenic environment for African people. Despite the challenges posed by this history of trauma, African literature and other arts offer potential healing resources. African literature has the capacity to facilitate what Hartman calls “a pausal and self-reflective capability”, offering a unique palliative or therapeutic resource.¹⁶⁸ However, it is important to avoid essentialising formulations when positing the notion of a specifically African moral imagination. African literature, in its capacity to bear witness to the collective traumas of the continent, provides a means for addressing the wounds of history. Through literature, African writers and cultural critics can offer insights into breaking out of cycles of violence and harm. The healing potential of African literature lies in its ability to foster self-reflection, dialogue, and to create a space for the expression of the collective pain of the African experience.

African writers and intellectuals can adopt a “middle voice” that articulates from a stance of “empathic unsettlement”. This type of middle voice is the most obvious and useful to adopt because of their in-between position, negotiating multiple languages, juxtaposing indigenous tradition with imported modernity, and living within the balancing act that Ali Iliasrui has called Africa’s “triple heritage”. This perspective places old stories in new frames and offers a perspective from which to witness and testify to trauma, as well as a perspective that envisions a new mode of existence that transforms or transcends the traumatic present.

The African context holds significant importance in the study of trauma and the embodiment of the African moral imagination in the continent’s writers. One key aspect is the strong cultural currency of words and stories in Africa, which carries a tangible power due to their utilitarian nature. African writers often come from settings where poetry and aesthetics serve a functional purpose and are indispensable for healing and peacemaking. This elevated appreciation for the power of language in Africa means that notions of what constitutes a “trauma aesthetic” can be broadened, with an emphasis on engaging the power of language rather than the insufficiency of language for representing

¹⁶⁸Hartman, Geoffrey H. 1995. “On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies.” *New Literary History* 26, no. 3: 537–563.

trauma. Critics such as Luckhurst argue that trauma narratives should not solely focus on narrative rupture, but also on narrative possibility and the potential for the configuration and refiguration of trauma in narrative.¹⁶⁹ The African context offers writers a wealth of older narrative forms to engage with and illuminate trauma, which is not to say that problems of representation disappear, but that they are approached differently. While African writers are influenced by African oral traditions, contemporary African writers' trajectories are often shaped more by Western literary and musical classics than by African oral traditions. Nonetheless, the power of words and the utilitarian nature of literature in Africa continue to shape the continent's literary production and offer a unique perspective on trauma.

In African literature, trauma cannot be addressed without engaging the power of language and involving the collective. An understanding of systemic and ongoing trauma needs to be added to Western trauma theory, which favours an individualistic approach. African writers have been exploring this idea as colonialism has inflicted a collective trauma on the continent. This type of trauma, which characterises colonialism, is structural and continuous, and healing requires acknowledging the duration of the experience as much as the experience itself. This attention to the systemic and enduring nature of trauma offers a counterpoint to the depoliticising and dehistoricising tendencies of trauma theory. African literature provides a fresh perspective on examining historical harms and possibilities for healing from a new angle, which allows for new ways of perceiving, responding, adapting or doing. The African writer plays a critical role in addressing dismembered and fragmented aspects of African history, providing a resource for transforming traumatic history by re-membering practices that help restore a broken African society. For instance, Ayi Kwei Armah's later works, such as *Two Thousand Seasons* and *The Healers*, promote a restorative vision made possible by Africa's cultural resources and efforts. Similarly, broad social visions such as pan-Africanism, Negritude, ubuntu, and African humanism draw on African cultural resources to promote social healing. Therefore, the African moral imagination has the power to provide a valuable contribution to trauma

¹⁶⁹ Luckhurst, Roger. 2008. *The Trauma Question*. London: Routledge.

theory by offering fresh perspectives on historical harm and healing possibilities that are rooted in African cultural resources.¹⁷⁰

In literature, traditional notions of memory as a linear and unidirectional process are limiting our understanding. Instead, we must consider the interplay of multiple memories, perspectives, and voices, and recognise the interconnectedness of different historical events and experiences. This dynamic and fluid notion of memory has important implications for the study of literature and culture, and the concept of multidirectional memory therefore emerges as a powerful tool for understanding the complexities of memory and representation in contemporary literature. Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory emphasises the interaction of multiple memories, perspectives, and voices, and challenges the traditional notion of memory as a linear and unidirectional process.¹⁷¹ This approach is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary slave trade novels in Francophone African literature, which often draw on diverse and transnational memories of slavery, colonialism, and resistance. This reading requires multiple, transgeneric, and transcultural approaches that acknowledge the complexity and interconnectedness of different histories and memories. Multidirectional memory emphasises the interconnectedness of different historical events and experiences, thus recognising the importance of engaging with a diverse range of texts and cultural productions.

To Rothberg, multidirectional memory refers to “the way in which cultural memory operates in a field of competing, intersecting, and overlapping memories that can be shaped by ongoing struggles for power and representation”.¹⁷² In other words, memory is not a static or fixed entity, but rather a dynamic and fluid process that is constantly shaped and reshaped by various actors and forces in society.

¹⁷⁰ Soyinka, Wole. 2012. *Of Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Gikandi, Simon. 2012. *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2012. *Globalectics: Theory and the Politics of Knowing*. New York: Columbia University Press.; Irele, Abiola. 2001. *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*. New York: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷¹ Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹⁷² Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 6.

This concept challenges the traditional notion of memory as a linear and unidirectional process, and instead emphasises the interaction of multiple memories, perspectives, and voices. Rothberg argues that multidirectional memory is a response to the increasing diversity and globalisation of contemporary societies, as well as the growing awareness of historical injustices and atrocities committed by various actors. He notes that the emergence of multidirectional memory has been facilitated by various cultural and political movements, such as the civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the movement for indigenous rights. These movements have challenged dominant narratives of history and memory and opened new spaces for marginalised and oppressed groups to voice their experiences and memories.

One of the key aspects of multidirectional memory is its emphasis on the interconnectedness of different historical events and experiences. Rothberg notes that “multiple pasts interact with each other in complex and often unpredictable ways, generating new meanings and understandings of the past”.¹⁷³ For example, the memory of the Holocaust has influenced the memory of other genocides and atrocities, such as the Armenian genocide, the Rwandan genocide, and the Cambodian genocide. Similarly, the memory of slavery and colonialism has influenced the memory of other forms of oppression and resistance. This approach to memory is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary slave trade novels in Francophone African literature, as these texts often draw on diverse and transnational memories of slavery, colonialism, and resistance. The reading of these texts, therefore, requires a multiple, transgeneric, and transcultural approach that acknowledges the complexity and interconnectedness of different histories and memories. In this study, we aim to show how this multidirectional approach plays out in the corpus, highlighting the ways in which these texts challenge and advance our understanding of the past and present. Contemporary slave trade novels in Francophone African literature offer a prime example of the relevance of the multidirectional memory approach. These novels often draw on a variety of memories and experiences that span different cultural, linguistic, and geographic contexts. To fully understand and appreciate these texts,

¹⁷³ Ibid.

it is necessary to adopt a multiple, transgeneric, and transcultural approach that recognises the multiplicity of memories and experiences at play.

3.2.3. Historiopoesis and the Art of Reimagining History in Transatlantic Literature

Historiopoesis is a term that refers to the creation of history through the art of narrative. It is a process through which writers use their literary skills to recreate past events and bring them to life. According to Hutcheon, historiopoesis is “a mode of writing that works to transform historical events into imaginative literature”. Several scholars have written about historiopoesis and its significance in literary studies. Hutcheon argues that historiopoesis is a key feature of postmodern literature. She writes: “Historiopoesis is a mode of writing that works to transform historical events into imaginative literature.”¹⁷⁴ Hutcheon sees historiopoesis as a way of using literary techniques to “rewrite” history, creating new narratives that challenge traditional historical accounts. White examines the relationship between history and narrative. He argues that all historical writing involves the use of narrative structure, and that this structure is inherently fictional. White sees historiopoesis as a way of embracing this fictional element of historical writing, stating: “The ‘historical novel’ and the ‘historical poem’ are the legitimate offspring of historiography.”¹⁷⁵ He sees historiopoesis as a way of using narrative to create new interpretations of historical events.

Peter Hawkins, in his book *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*, examines the role of historiopoesis in Dante's work. He argues that Dante uses poetic language and imagery to address political and social issues of his time, therefore creating a new kind of historical narrative. Hawkins writes: “Dante's vision of the past is not the sort of dry recounting of facts that we might associate with modern histo-

¹⁷⁴ Hutcheon, Linda. 1988. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. New York: Routledge.

¹⁷⁵ White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

riography, but rather an imaginative interpretation that seeks to give meaning and purpose to historical events.”¹⁷⁶ Simon Gikandi, in his book *Maps of Englishness*, examines the relationship between historiopoesis and colonialism. He argues that writers in colonial contexts often used historiopoesis to challenge dominant colonial narratives and create new perspectives on history. Gikandi writes: “Historiopoesis is a literary response to the violence of colonialism and the epistemological violence of colonial knowledge.”¹⁷⁷ He conceptualises historiopoesis as a way of using literary techniques to create new narratives that resist colonialism.

Historiopoesis is a powerful mode of writing in literary studies that combines elements of history and literature to create a new kind of text that is both imaginative and historically informed. Its key features include the use of poetic language and literary techniques, the creation of new and imaginative narratives, the ability to challenge dominant narratives, the inclusion of diverse perspectives and narratives, and the emphasis on the creative and imaginative possibilities of literature. These features have been used in different cultures and time periods, demonstrating the enduring relevance of historiopoesis in literary studies.

Historiopoesis enables writers to bring historical events and figures to life through poetic language and literary techniques. This approach allows for vivid and imaginative portrayals that capture the complexity of historical events and figures. Another important feature of historiopoesis is its ability to challenge dominant historical accounts and create alternative perspectives on the past. This approach is particularly relevant in postcolonial literature, where it can be used to question the assumptions and biases that underlie traditional historical writing. By emphasising the agency and resilience of marginalised groups in historical events, historiopoesis offers a more inclusive perspective on the past. Also, historiopoesis recognises that there are often multiple perspectives on historical events, and that these perspectives may be

¹⁷⁶ Hawkins, Peter. 2011. *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

¹⁷⁷ Gikandi, Simon. 1996. *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Culture of Colonialism*. New York: Columbia University Press.

shaped by social, political, and cultural factors. Historiopoesis challenges the notion that history is a fixed and objective record of the past, and instead emphasises the role of imagination and creativity in shaping our understanding of history. By using literary techniques such as metaphor and symbolism, historiopoesis allows writers to create new and imaginative narratives that offer fresh perspectives on the past.

One of the key characteristics of historiopoesis is its ability to convey complex historical themes and events in a way that is both aesthetically compelling and intellectually rigorous. By using poetic language and imagery, historiopoetic works capture the emotions and experiences of historical figures, as well as the significance of their actions and decisions. The functions of historiopoesis are varied, but one of the most important is its ability to express cultural identity and interrogate the relationship between the present and the past. By creating works that blend history and literary imagination, writers can connect with their cultural heritage and examine the ways in which the past continues to influence the present.

Scholars have taken a range of approaches to the interpretation of historiopoesis. Some have focused on the ways in which historiopoetic works can be used to challenge dominant discourse, while others have examined the relationship between historiopoesis and other literary genres, such as the novel or the memoir. Key scholars in the field of historiopoesis include Hayden White, who argued that historiopoesis should be seen as a form of literary criticism that challenges the dominant historical narrative; Dominick LaCapra, who emphasised the importance of considering the emotional and affective dimensions of historiopoetic works; and Hutcheon, who examined the relationship between historiopoesis and postmodernism.

White argues that historiopoesis should be viewed as a form of literary criticism that challenges the dominant historical narrative.¹⁷⁸ LaCapra emphasises the importance of considering the emotional and affective dimensions of historiopoetic works and argues that they have the potential to provide a deeper understanding of historical events.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ White, *The Content of the Form*.

¹⁷⁹ LaCapra, Dominick. 1998. *History and Memory after Auschwitz*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Hutcheon examines the relationship between historiopoesis and post-modernism highlighting how the genre can be used to challenge dominant historical narratives and question the objectivity of historical truth. Linda Hutcheon also examined how historiopoesis can be used to express cultural identity and the ways in which the past continues to influence the present.¹⁸⁰

An important work that adapts this concept to postcolonial literatures is Gröning's *Historiopoeten*. Gröning examines the literature of the French Caribbean, using historiopoesis to understand novels as "traités d'histoire (treatises on history)" rather than competing with institutionalised historiography.¹⁸¹ "Traité d'histoire" takes on a more specific and complex meaning, tied to Glissant's philosophical and literary framework. When Glissant speaks of "history", he is often exploring the interconnections between different histories, cultures, and peoples. His concept of "Relation" highlights how histories and identities are not static or isolated, but rather constantly shaped by encounters, exchanges, and influences across time and space. The term "traité d'histoire" could be understood as a theoretical and poetic examination of history. History is not a linear or singular narrative, but a web of multiple stories, perspectives, and relationships that are intertwined. These histories are marked by the trauma of colonialism, the forces of migration, and the complexity of cultural intermingling. Rather than offering a simple historical account, Glissant's "treatise on history" could be seen as a call for a more relational, and interconnected understanding of history that acknowledges the multiplicity of experiences and stories, especially from marginalised or colonised peoples.¹⁸² This aligns with his broader philosophy of "creolisation", where cultures and identities blend and transform through contact and exchange, creating new forms of relational knowledge. Gröning examined 29 novels, all of which emerged after the publication of *Le Discours antillais* by Édouard Glissant. Gröning's analysis is divided into three sections: narrator, narration, and narrated. Gröning finds that the concept of

¹⁸⁰ Hutcheon, Linda. 1989. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge.

¹⁸¹ Glissant, Édouard. 1997a. *Le Discours antillais*. Gallimard. Originally published 1981., 174.

¹⁸² Ibid.

historiopoesis allowed her to define a “historical sense” for each novel, and that this concept can be applied to other literary contexts where the divide between historiography and literature is visible.¹⁸³

Etymologically, the term *historio* should not be misinterpreted as historiography. It is rather seen as an individual and variable vision of the collective past. Historiopoesis recognises the subjectivity and contextual nature of any written fixation of history. *Poesis* does not refer to lyrical poetry, but rather to a project that is a- or anti-mimetic of a (historical) world, in which prose adopts the referential action modes of poetry. In Gröning’s research, the literary production of the French-Caribbean overseas departments is examined and evaluated with a quasi-empirical precision. The 29 novels selected for analysis were all published after 1981 and their plots are set during the era of the prosperity of the plantation economy based on slave labour, from the 17th to the 19th century, until the abolition of slavery by the Second French Republic in 1848. This episode represents by far the most significant moment in Caribbean history and is at the root of the tension between European historiography, the regionally deficient and Eurocentric historiography, and Caribbean-Creole memory culture. The research is divided into three sections that express the meta-historical and meta-historiographical questions outlined above. The first section – narrator – deals with the ambivalence and (un)reliability of the narrator, which is also a central theme in historiographical criticism. Due to the staged overlap between the roles of historian and writer in the French overseas department novel, the narrator appears here in a particularly complex and ambivalent role. The repeated changes of narrative perspective, the oscillation of the narrative instance between the level of action and the level of narration, as well as its constant references beyond the novel to historical or current reality, are characteristic examples. It is not always possible to clearly distinguish the real author from the fictional narrator, therefore allowing uncertainties related to historical facts to be taken into account. The second section – narration – focuses on the technical components of the narrative. On the one hand, it studies the aspects of structuring, transtextuality, and metanarrativity, which emphasise the discursiv-

¹⁸³ Ibid.

ity of historical sources and historiographical texts, thus highlighting their questionable universal relevance for historiography. On the other hand, it analyses syntactic, lexical, and other linguistic aspects, which testify to an increased awareness of the writing processes of history. The third section – the narrated (plot) – deals with the scenic space, the temporal structure, and the constellations of characters in the novels. It examines to what extent thematic overlaps and accumulations can be attributed to an increased awareness of the processes of creating historical meaning, and whether space-time-figure condensations should be understood as almost archetypal ideas guiding action. The explicitation and highly differentiated depiction of existing narrative forms in French Caribbean novels contradict the complexity reduction that hides behind the generalities formulated at the beginning. It becomes clear that the conception of history in a novel is revealed at all narrative levels, but not always in the same way. The research yields two key findings from the development of historiopoesis. Firstly, the large number of novels in which colonial historical themes dominate proves the increased attention paid to history.

Gröning's historiopoetic approach highlights the significance of acknowledging the subjectivity and contextual nature of history, while emphasising the role of narrative in shaping our comprehension of the past. This approach not only provides a new perspective on French Caribbean literature but also possesses the potential to be applied to other postcolonial contexts where the distinction between historiography and literature is evident. As this discussion progresses, the analysis examines how the contributions of Ricoeur, Glissant, and Ankersmit facilitate the development of historiopoesis, concentrating on their mutual concern for the plurality of narrative representations of the past and the deconstruction of the dialectic between true and false history.

Gröning lays the groundwork for a historiopoetic approach to transatlantic literatures. In her article, she examines the similarities between Ricoeur's philosophy of history, Glissant's meta-historical and historico-literary thought, and Frank Ankersmit's historiographical narrativism. These three approaches share a concern for the multiplicity of narrative representations of the past and seek to deconstruct the dialectic of true and false history. Gröning begins by presenting

Ricœur's argument, which maintains that history is a form of narration that must be understood as an interpretation rather than a simple description of past events. Ricœur emphasises the importance of narratives in giving meaning to the past and enabling individuals to situate themselves in time. However, he also recognises that narratives are always incomplete and that there are multiple ways of interpreting the past. Ricœur's concept of *futur remémoré*, or "future remembered", emphasises the idea that the present and the future are intimately connected to our understanding of the past. He argues that we cannot fully comprehend the meaning of past events without also considering how they shape our present and future. In this sense, the past is not just a collection of facts and events, but a resource for imagining and creating new possibilities for the future. Ricœur thus positions narrative as a central mechanism through which historical meaning is continuously produced and reinterpreted.

Gröning then turns to Glissant's thought, which proposes a meta-historical approach that seeks to transcend the limits imposed by dominant historiographies. Glissant argues that history should be understood as a continuous process rather than a set of isolated events. He also emphasises the importance of marginal and subaltern stories to fully understand the past. Édouard Glissant's concept of *Vision prophétique du passé*, or "prophetic vision of the past", underscores the idea that the past is not a fixed and unchanging reality, but rather a dynamic and evolving process that is constantly reshaped by our present and future perspectives. Glissant argues that our understanding of the past is not limited to what has already happened, but also includes our hopes and visions for the future. By reimagining our relationship to the past in a way that is not limited by traditional historical narratives, we can create new possibilities for the future. By recognising the ways in which the past continues to shape our present and future, we can develop a more complex and understanding of our shared history. Glissant's concept of *Vision prophétique du passé* is thus closely linked to his broader meta-historical approach, which emphasises the importance of acknowledging and embracing the diversity of cultural and historical perspectives that make up our global community.

Finally, Gröning examines Ankersmit's historiographical narrativism, which seeks to deconstruct the distinction between true and false

history by highlighting that all histories are narrative constructions. Ankersmit maintains that historical narratives can never be entirely objective and that it is therefore important to recognise their subjective nature. Frank Ankersmit's concept of "historical representation" emphasises the idea that historical narratives are not simply objective accounts of past events, but rather constructions that reflect the values, beliefs, and biases of the society that produces them. Ankersmit argues that historical narratives are always subject to interpretation and that our understanding of the past is shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which they are produced. In his view, the notion of "trace" is a key element in understanding how historical narratives are constructed. He suggests that traces are fragments of the past used to construct historical narratives, and that these traces are always incomplete and subject to interpretation. Traces can include things like documents, artefacts, and other material objects, as well as memories and other intangible elements of the past. According to Ankersmit, historical narratives are constructed by assembling and interpreting traces that are themselves shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which they are produced. As a result, historical narratives are never fully objective, but rather reflect the values, beliefs, and biases of the society that produces them.¹⁸⁴

A concept that aligns with Glissant's *prophetic vision of the past* and addresses the same epistemological challenge from the other shore of the Atlantic is Saidiya Hartman's *idea of critical fabulation*. Hartman defines critical fabulation as a practice that "plays with and rearranges the basic elements of story"¹⁸⁵ to narrate lives the archive renders invisible, while foregrounding the impossibility of full reconstruction. She developed this approach to address the limitations of archival records. The lives of enslaved women are preserved in plantation documents and ship logs only as names, numbers, and descriptions, never as active, speaking subjects or as individuals with inner lives. Confronted with this structural absence, she suggests imaginatively filling those silences while remaining deeply committed to what the archive withholds and to the violence that caused this silence. This method does

¹⁸⁴Gröning, "Philosophies historiopoétiques transatlantiques."

¹⁸⁵Saidiya Hartman. 2008. "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2: 11.

not claim to recover a true past but emphasises the ethical importance of engaging with a past made inaccessible by historical records. When read alongside Glissant's framework – offering a temporal and philosophical orientation towards a backwards-reaching imagination aimed at future cultural projects – *critical fabulation* provides the methodological discipline that guides this imagination. Both concepts illuminate the double movement that this study understands as central to historiopoesis in Francophone African slave trade literature: an imaginative reconstruction of what the archive has erased, conducted with full awareness of why that erasure occurred and what it cost.

Gröning concludes by emphasising that these three approaches share a concern for the multiplicity of narrative representations of the past and seek to deconstruct the dialectic of true and false history. She argues that this historiopoetic approach can help us better understand how the past is represented and interpreted. Gröning's concept of historiopoesis provides a useful lens for analysing slave trade trauma novels in several ways. First, the concept recognises the subjectivity and contextuality of historical representations, thereby enabling an understanding of how historical trauma is portrayed in literature. This is particularly relevant in the context of slave trade trauma novels, which often depict the experiences of individuals and communities who have been marginalised and silenced in official histories. Second, the concept of historiopoesis highlights the importance of narrative structure and technique in historical representation. This is especially relevant in the context of slave trade trauma novels, which often use fragmented narratives, multiple perspectives, and other literary devices to convey the complexity and depth of historical trauma. Third, the concept of historiopoesis allows for a critical examination of the relationship between history and memory, and how these concepts are represented in literature. This is particularly relevant in the context of slave trade trauma novels, which often trace the intergenerational impact of historical trauma on memory and identity. Gröning's concept of historiopoesis therefore provides a productive framework for analysing the representation of historical trauma in literature and is particularly relevant in the context of slave trade trauma novels. By emphasising the importance of narrative structure and technique, and recognising the subjectivity and contextuality of historical rep-

resentation, this concept allows for a critical examination of the relationship between history, memory, and literature. Gröning's concept of historiopoesis thus appears to be a relevant and pertinent lens to analyse Francophone African slave trade trauma novels such as the ones under study. In these novels, the authors grapple with the traumatic history of the slave trade and its lasting impact on the continent and its people. Through the lens of historiopoesis, these novels can be understood as *traités d'histoire*, completing, complementing, and competing with institutionalised historiography. The subjectivity and context-dependent nature of written history are recognised, and the novels' narratives reflect this understanding. The novels' narrators are complex and ambivalent, as they simultaneously act as both historians and storytellers. The authors use various narrative techniques, such as changes in perspective and references to historical and current events, to reflect the uncertainties and complexities of the past. The novels also reflect an awareness of the processes of creating historical meaning. The structure, language, and narrative themes are used to convey different perspectives and interpretations of the past. For instance, *La Saison de l'ombre* explores the trauma of losing loved ones to the slave trade, while *Esclaves* narrates the experience of a man who was enslaved and eventually returns to his homeland. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* tells the story of a young man who becomes an ambassador for his people, only to be caught up in the slave trade. Gröning's historiopoesis therefore provides a valuable framework for understanding the ways in which these novels approach the traumatic history of the African slave trade. Through this lens, the subjectivity and context-dependent nature of written history are recognised, and the novels' complex narratives and varied perspectives are foregrounded. These novels offer a powerful critique of institutionalised historiography and provide alternative ways of understanding the past that are grounded in the experiences of the people who lived it. The historiopoetic approach is rooted in a "transatlantic poesis" that challenges spatial, axiological, historical, or generic centralities on all narrative levels of the text.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶Ibid., 75.

4. Revisiting the Slave Trade in Francophone Africa: A Historiopoetic Approach

4.1. Alem's *Esclaves*: Re-narrating the Past to Re-member the Present

Narratives of the transatlantic slave trade, while essential for documenting the atrocities of slavery, often reduce the historical experience to a linear succession of tragic events, therefore obscuring the complexity of responsibility, complicity, resistance, survival strategies, and the multiplicity of voices that shaped this episode in history. How then can this history be rewritten to restore its plurality, re-centre the silenced, and interrogate the very mechanisms of silence? By merging historical fiction, theatre, oral traditions, and collective memory, Alem provides a more complete and inclusive representation of this historical moment, demonstrating how literature can reshape historical understanding and restore silenced voices. More than a historical chronicle, *Esclaves* crafts a multi-layered narrative that interrogates collective memory and rehabilitates forgotten historical figures.

This chapter posits that Alem's approach, which combines diverse genres and narrative techniques, deconstructs traditional representations of the transatlantic slave trade while incorporating marginalised voices. The aim is to demonstrate how the fusion of the author's transgeneric approach results in a more inclusive retelling of history, while rehabilitating silenced memories. By blending historical fiction, theatrical techniques, oral traditions, and memory, Alem revisits the history of the slave trade from a new angle, transcending conventional narrative forms to reflect on the processes of forgetting, remembering, and historiography. This chapter examines key aspects of Alem's historiopoetic strategy, beginning with the role of the omniscient narrator, who shifts between objectivity and subjectivity to engage the reader in an active process of historical reflection. Through theatrical techniques such as interior monologues, impactful dialogues, and vivid descriptions, Alem transforms the narrative into an immersive experience that blends history with performance. The analysis also examines how Alem grounds his work in a dense historical documentation, reinterpreting events and figures to critique omissions in official

historical accounts. By using citations, allusions, and reimagined figures, Alem creates a dialogue between past and present that deepens the representation of the transatlantic slave trade. The inclusion of African oral traditions – songs, proverbs, and panegyrics – gives voice to forgotten peoples, asserting a living history passed down through generations. This oral dimension is central to the novel's structure, underscoring the role of memory in resisting historical erasure. The chapter further examines how Alem subverts dominant narratives by redefining space and time, reimagining symbolic sites of memory such as Ouidah, Bahia, and the slave ship. The novel also highlights the role of spiritualities – Vodun and Islam – as forms of spiritual and cultural resistance, particularly through the portrayal of Vodun rituals and Miguel's conversion to Islam, both of which serve as means of resistance and empowerment. Alem challenges the politics of historical representation, inviting readers to reflect on memory, justice, and the power of literature in reconstructing history.

Alem has established himself as a pioneering voice in historical fiction within Francophone literature. His work interweaves historical narratives with elements of fiction, creating works that illuminate crucial moments in African history. Alem's exploration of the memory of slavery extends beyond *Esclaves*. In his *Les Enfants du Brésil*, published in 2012, he engages with similar themes with a renewed and innovative literary style. Through his writings, Alem brings a fresh perspective to the facets of the transatlantic slave trade, challenging conventional narratives and inviting readers to question assumptions and preconceived truths. *Esclaves* stands as a testament to Alem's talent as both a storyteller and playwright, as well as his commitment to recovering the untold stories of Africa's past. It not only serves as a vehicle for historical representation but also challenges readers to confront the moral complexities of an era marked by the dehumanising slave trade. Alem's prose, characterised by a precise orchestration of syntax and affective expressions, draws readers to engage with the characters' struggles and dilemmas.

Esclaves presents a historical fresco that portrays political intrigue in a theatrical fashion through a third-person account of slave experiences. The narrative takes place in the nineteenth century, a period characterised by the tumultuous violence of the transatlantic slave

trade, which eats away at the West African coasts and extends into the interior lands. The novel begins with one main event: the plot devised by the future Ghezo to overthrow King Adandozan, whose name has been erased from the list of Abomey's monarchs. Following a brief foreword, the narrative unfolds in 1818 when Adandozan is deposed, allowing his rival Gankpé to ascend to the throne. Adandozan's attempts to resist the slave trade starkly contrast with Guéso's alliance with the Portuguese slave trader Francisco Felix de Souza. While the initial focus seems to be on the political intrigue surrounding the conspiracy against King Adandozan, the narrative gradually shifts its emphasis to the life journey of a slave, as suggested by the title.

Weaving through multiple narratives, the novel follows the character of a master of rituals serving King Adandozan. Portrayed as both unconventional and occasionally timid, he endures the unfolding events of his life, traversing different countries and causes before ultimately returning to Africa to face the encroaching shadow of colonisation. Initially aligned with King Adandozan, he is forced to aid in the overthrow of the king. He then strives to avoid the vengeance of who views him as an impediment and a witness to his failed assassination plot. Pursued by Ghezo's female militia, he finds himself enslaved after being sold to a trader in Porto Seguro, where he adopts the name Miguel and serves under a lord with a vast number of slaves in Brazil. Among them is Sule, an erudite Hausa who educates him in Portuguese, Arabic, and, crucially, anti-slavery ideologies, instigating thoughts of rebellion. As a participant in the brewing uprising in Salvador de Bahia, Miguel becomes a central figure, but the revolt is swiftly crushed, leading to his return to Africa. Settling in Agoué, he confronts the tragic fate of his former master's wife and learns of his own offspring, born from an assault by Ghezo's militia leader. Amidst the demise of slavery, he senses the impending onset of colonisation, marking a fundamental shift in African history.

Esclaves indeed exhibits elements of historiopoetic methodology. Right at the outset of the text, Alem, in what serves as a preface, initiates a reflection on his approach to writing and its engagement with historical elements. He explains his artistic approach in utilising historical settings in his work, underscoring his prioritisation of aesthetics and creative freedom, as well as his willingness to remodel historical truth to serve his artistic purpose.

L'impulsion qui est à l'origine [de ce livre] étant de nature esthétique plutôt qu'érudite, j'ai exploité les décors de l'Histoire non tant avec l'arrière-pensée de mettre en scène plus ou moins fidèlement des événements qui se trouvent consignés dans les livres que mû par ce qu'ils m'apportent de plaisir et d'émerveillement. C'est de propos délibéré que j'ai joué de l'anachronisme, que j'ai inventé une langue, des mots, bref, que j'ai laissé mon inspiration divaguer bien au-delà de mes sources premières. Chaque fois que la vérité historique allait à l'encontre de l'invention créatrice, je l'ai remodelée, en pleine et lucide connaissance de cause, afin de satisfaire les exigences de mon propos. [The impulse behind [this book] was aesthetic rather than scholarly. I have drawn on the settings of History not with the intent of faithfully staging events recorded in books, but rather driven by the pleasure and wonder they bring me. Deliberately, I have embraced anachronism, invented a language, created words. In short, I have allowed my inspiration to wander far beyond my primary sources. Whenever historical truth clashed with creative invention, I reshaped it, with full and lucid awareness, to meet the demands of my intent.]¹⁸⁷

In this preface, Alem articulates the aesthetic nature of his approach to the utilisation of historical settings in his work. He acknowledges that his inspiration for his book is more aesthetic than scholarly. This implies that he is primarily motivated by the desire to create an aesthetically compelling experience for the reader rather than to provide a historically accurate analysis. This aesthetic approach emphasises the use of history as a backdrop for his narrative rather than as a subject for rigorous study. The author asserts his creative freedom by employing anachronism, inventing language and words, and allowing his inspiration to roam beyond his historical sources. This creative freedom enables him to address ideas, themes, and events in ways that transcend the constraints of strict historical accuracy.

Alem's approach to historical fiction challenges readers to engage critically with the relationship between history, fiction, and truth, inviting them to consider the complex ways in which narratives about the past are constructed, interpreted, and understood. In doing so, Alem contributes to a broader conversation about the nature of historical storytelling and its role in shaping our understanding. His historiopoetic innovation lies in the integration of historical evidence with poetic language and fictional elements, thus crafting a portrayal of the past. Even though he acknowledges in the epigraph that he is composing a purely fictional novel, he nonetheless demonstrates a multidimen-

¹⁸⁷ Alem, Kangni. 2009. *Esclaves*. Paris: JC Lattès, 9.

sional approach in his writing. Alongside his role as a novelist, he assumes the role of a historian, presenting a multidirectional perspective on the slave trade, moving between aesthetic quest and social critique.

The narrator plays a crucial role in presenting the historically significant events that unfold throughout the story. Primarily situated in the third person, the narrator remains omniscient, possessing knowledge of various characters' thoughts, emotions, and actions. This narrative position enables them to offer a comprehensive and complex perspective characterised by a plurality of voices and viewpoints. The narrator presents the facts in a distant manner – seemingly objective but also certainly subjective. This subversion of the narrator gives the novel a particular quality, as it destabilises the reader and encourages the latter to question their understanding of history and their own memory awareness. Despite this loss of objectivity, the narrator retains elements of historiography and adheres to the structures and conventions of the genre, while simultaneously being carried away by the fiction that unfolds throughout the text.

Genette's theories on narrative discourse, particularly his concepts of focalization and narrative levels, provide a useful framework for understanding this subversion. Genette distinguishes zero focalization (omniscient narrator), internal focalization (narrator's perspective limited to a character's thoughts and feelings), and external focalization (narrator only describes observable actions). The passage exemplifies zero focalization, where the narrator has unrestricted access to the characters' inner thoughts and emotions.¹⁸⁸ This unrestricted access allows the narrator to present a complex perspective, weaving together various narrative threads and providing a comprehensive view of the story. Moreover, Genette's idea of narrative levels, whereby the narrator can shift between different layers of narration, helps explain how the narrator can blend historiography and fiction, creating a complex and layered narrative that challenges the reader's perception of reality and fiction.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁸ Genette, Gérard. 1980. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. (Orig. pub. as *Figures III*. Paris: Seuil, 1972.)

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

In *Esclaves*, the narrator possesses an overall knowledge of the story and the characters. He moves freely across time and space, accesses the thoughts of the characters, and reveals information unknown to them. However, he does not intervene directly in the story to comment on events or judge the characters. His omniscience serves to reveal the motivations of the actors and to highlight the complexity of the situations, as shown in the following passage:

Sophia!? se souvint brusquement le roi, dont la mémoire avait fini de faire le lent apprentissage des choses. Où était-elle en ce moment? Que le prince ne puisse la ravir! Oui, il le savait, son neveu éprouvait pour Sophia plus que de l'admiration. Quel sort Chacha et son acolyte lui avaient-ils réservé? Peut-être que Joshua Snoep avait réussi à intercéder en faveur de sa compatriote! Protéger Sophia, l'étrangère fragile pour laquelle il savait qu'il n'était pas le seul à éprouver une affection tendre. [Sophia!? the king suddenly remembered; his memory having finally completed the slow learning of things. Where was she at this moment? That the prince could not take her away! Yes, he knew, his nephew felt more than admiration for Sophia. What fate had Chacha and his accomplice reserved for her? Perhaps Joshua Snoep had managed to intercede on behalf of his compatriot! Protect Sophia, the fragile foreigner for whom he knew he was not the only one to feel a tender affection.]¹⁹⁰

The narrator's omniscience allows them to weave together the different narrative threads. The narrator presents the king's concern for Sophia in a relatively detached manner. However, the last phrase betrays a certain subjectivity. This passage immerses the reader in the king's thoughts, revealing his anxieties about Sophia, his awareness of his nephew Gankpè's emotions, and his speculations regarding the actions of other figures, such as Chacha and Joshua Snoep. While predominantly focused on the king, the excerpt subtly introduces a plurality of perspectives, suggesting a broader narrative scope that remains underdeveloped here. The omniscient narrator's access to multiple characters' minds allows for the integration of these disparate narrative threads. The king's concern for Sophia is conveyed with a degree of emotional detachment, yet the final phrase subtly intrudes a form of judgment, thereby disrupting the apparent objectivity of the historical narrative. This shift exposes a tension between the neutrality associated with historical recounting and the subjective nature of lived experience, a hallmark of the subverted omniscient narrator. Al-

¹⁹⁰ Alem, *Esclaves*, 75.

though set in a historical context with references to actual figures and events, the passage's portrayal through the king's personal lens imbues these elements with a fictional quality, inviting the reader to question both the veracity of the events and the reliability of the king's memory. In this way, the passage enacts the very subversion described in Alem's analysis: a blending of objectivity and subjectivity, historiography and fiction, which complicates the reader's engagement with the text and the construction of historical truth.

The subversion of the omniscient narrator challenges the conventional binary of objectivity and subjectivity,¹⁹¹ compelling readers to question both the narrator's reliability and the historical authenticity of the events portrayed. By intertwining fiction and historiography, the text exposes the biases that shape historical narratives¹⁹² and encourages readers to interrogate the mechanisms of historical recording and remembrance. The deployment of multiple perspectives not only deepens the narrative but also reflects the complexity of lived experience, positioning the reader as an active participant in meaning-making. In this way, the subversion deepens the text, offering a more immersive and intellectually engaging experience.

This narrative duality, characteristic of the double enunciation inherent in theatrical form, manifests in the way the narrator oscillates between a describable objectivity and subjective commentary, reminiscent of the subtle tension between fact and fiction inherent in the theatrical stage. Just as actors can directly address the audience to forge an intimate connection, our narrator traverses between the backstage of reality and the characters' intrigues, thus inviting the reader into a total immersion in the world of the narrative. This narrative duality echoes the role of a transhistoric narrator, who constantly oscillates between two distinct narrative modes. Analogous to theatrical staging, where a narrator can provide contextual elements about the represented period, our narrator assumes a similar role in contextualising the history and its background for the reader.

¹⁹¹ Nünning, Ansgar. 2003. *Unreliable Narration and the Historical Novel*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.

¹⁹² White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 189.

The “hidden narrator” adopts a stance akin to a historian’s, aiming to convey historical knowledge with apparent objectivity.¹⁹³ By receding behind the discourse, the narrator allows events to unfold without personal judgment, presenting the facts in a seemingly neutral manner. In contrast, the “open narrator”¹⁹⁴ asserts subjectivity, offering access to the characters’ inner thoughts and emotions, thereby introducing an emotional dimension to the narrative. This shift disrupts the illusion of objectivity crafted by the hidden narrator, revealing the inherently constructed nature of any narrative, even when recounting historical events. The dynamic between these two narrative voices underscores the permeability of historical narratives, which resist being wholly objective or entirely subjective. This duality highlights the complexity of representing the past, where the recounting of facts must inevitably intersect with interpreting and attributing meaning. The effect of this transhistorical narration on the reader is to prompt a critical interrogation of the very nature of history, urging recognition of the central role that subjectivity plays in its construction. In this way, the narrative duality, much like the transhistorical narrator, allows for a more engagement with history, acknowledging both the necessity of subjectivity and the constructed nature of historical representation.¹⁹⁵

The narrative voices adopt a variety of tones, transitioning from an external narration observing the characters’ actions to an internal focus examining the thoughts and emotions driving these same protagonists. This alternation between external and internal perspectives allows for a profound exploration of the main characters’ motivations, adding psychological depth to the entire narrative. In this narrative depiction, we witness a fusion between historical realism and more fantastical and mysterious elements,¹⁹⁶ such as the legends surrounding the ship and the inexplicable phenomena occurring therein in the prologue for instance.

¹⁹³ Benveniste, Émile. 1966. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. Paris: Gallimard, 241.

¹⁹⁴ Chatman, Seymour. 1980. *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 219.

¹⁹⁵ Gröning, Sarah. 2016. *Historiopoeten: Formen literarischer Geschichtsschreibung im französischen Roman der Karibik*. Peter Lang. 102.

¹⁹⁶ Gröning, *Historiopoeten*, 148, 215.

The narrator details Captain Shephard's actions while granting us insight into his thoughts and motivations, particularly his scepticism about the stories of James Matthew and his determination to secure a contract. The precise depiction of the historical context – 1841, the Cape Agulhas, and a 107-ton brig – grounds the narrative firmly in reality. At the same time, the ship's eerie lore and the inexplicable events tied to it (the curse, complaints, and near disappearance in 1818)¹⁹⁷ introduce an element of the fantastical. This combination of historical and supernatural elements creates an atmosphere that is both mysterious and arresting. By blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, the narrator crafts a universe where the past and the otherworldly intertwine, drawing the reader into an immersive and imaginative experience.

In “Temps anciens V”, the narrator traces the thoughts and memories of the poisoned king, intertwining the physical and metaphysical dimensions of his ordeal. The vivid depiction of his symptoms, “his body was covered in redness, pustules, and he suffered from intense headaches”, grounds the narrative in a precise historical context, reflecting the medical practices and beliefs of the time. The healers' attribution of his condition to Sakpatê,¹⁹⁸ the god of smallpox, introduces a supernatural layer, thereby blending historical realism with spiritual symbolism. The narrator further traces the king's interiority, revealing his fears and remorse, particularly regarding Sophia: “oh! that the vodun of her clan might forbid it, the humiliation of the one he had inwardly sworn to protect.” This focus on the king's inner turmoil deepens the reader's understanding of his motivations and humanises his dilemma, balancing historical specificity with emotional resonance.

The narrator intervenes at multiple levels, fulfilling various functions ranging from exposition of the plot to the development of characters and their context, while also offering historical and cultural references as well as critical commentary on events. These interventions guide the reader through the intricacies of the story while providing interpretative keys to its underlying themes and motifs. Through these interventions, the narrator illuminates certain aspects of the plot and

¹⁹⁷ Alem, *Esclaves*, 12.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 73.

historical context, while inviting the audience to engage more fully with the characters' motivations and the story's stakes. Like a historian analysing and interpreting historical sources, these explanations contribute to a better understanding of the narrative and its implications. By leveraging theatrical techniques such as asides, voice-offs, sets, monologues, dialogues, and more, Alem manages to immerse readers in a reconfigured historical atmosphere for a lively and engaging experience. This simulation of the conditions of expression of a historiographic narrator serves to breathe new life into the story, inviting the reader to engage with the past in a uniquely engaging manner.

In *Esclaves*, the narrator transcends the traditional storytelling role and acts as a historiographical guide to both narrate and critically analyse events while anchoring them in a dense socio-historical and cultural context. The narrator elucidates complex developments, such as the cursed voyage of the James Matthew introduced in the prologue, while also humanising characters by tracing their interiorities, as exemplified by the master of rituals' reflections on Francisco Félix de Souza in "Temps anciens I".¹⁹⁹ Historical and cultural references further deepen the narrative, such as the invocation of Sakpatê, the god of smallpox, in "Temps anciens V", or the rose-gold coin linking the story to England's Wars of the Roses.²⁰⁰ The narrator critiques the moral and logical contradictions of slavery, as highlighted by the king's dismissal of claims that enslaved Africans were necessary for economic growth.²⁰¹

Le roi dit avoir vu, tout petit, les sujets les plus humains de son peuple se transformer en gredins, en bêtes sauvages capables de parcourir des kilomètres dans la brousse pour razzier hommes et femmes dans les tribus voisines [...] Et tout cela contre quoi? Contre les artifices et les colifichets de la civilisation des Blancs [...] Mais le pire dans les arguments des marchands d'esclaves, ce qu'il ne comprend pas, c'est quand ils prétendent qu'ils ont besoin de la main-d'oeuvre noire pour développer leurs pays. À croire que le destin des Noirs est de construire la prospérité des autres, tandis que chez eux s'installent le chaos. [The king recalls witnessing, as a child, the most humane of his people transform into scoundrels, into savage beasts capable of traversing miles of bush to raid men and women from neighbouring tribes [...]] And

¹⁹⁹Ibid., 28.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 17.

²⁰¹Ibid., 54.

all for what? For the trinkets and baubles of White civilisation [...] But what he finds most incomprehensible in the arguments of the slave traders is their claim that they need Black labour to develop their countries. It is as if the destiny of Black people is to build the prosperity of others, while chaos takes root in their own lands.]²⁰²

What makes this passage analytically significant is not its thematic content alone – the denunciation of the slave trade’s moral costs is present throughout the novel – but its narrative function as a form of historiographic counter-testimony. Alem here deploys the king not as a passive witness to historical events but as a narrator who imposes his own analytical grid onto the trade’s logic. The shift from reported speech to free indirect discourse produces an effect that LaCapra would recognise as *empathic unsettlement*. The reader is drawn into the king’s indignation without the narrative’s own voice claiming authority over it. The rhetorical question embedded in the passage performs the double function of exposing the absurdity of the exchange value underpinning the trade and implicating the reader in the judgment. What Alem achieves through this omniscient narrator who refuses to comment directly is a form of traumatomimesis: the moral fracture of the slave trade is not described but enacted in the text’s own refusal to resolve the king’s anguish into conclusion.

The narrator employs various theatrical techniques to deepen the novel’s texture and engage the reader. Interior monologue provides insight into characters’ thoughts, while dialogue advances relationships and the plot. Expository monologue delivers essential historical context, and live narration animates unfolding events. Retrospective narration builds suspense by foreshadowing future events. This mix of forms creates a dynamic reading experience, setting the stage for *Esclaves’* epic narrative. The narrator directly addresses the reader, sharing reflections and information as if in an aside. Voiceovers are used to convey inner thoughts or dialogues, creating intimacy with characters. Descriptions of settings, such as McDonagh’s tavern,²⁰³ or Chacha’s banquet hall,²⁰⁴ immerse the reader in the narrative environment. Through monologues and dialogues, characters express their thoughts

²⁰²Ibid., 55.

²⁰³Ibid., 13.

²⁰⁴Ibid., 48.

and emotions, granting readers privileged access. A key example is the dialogue between the king and Sophia during their first meeting.²⁰⁵

In “Les Sandales de Huégbadja”, Alem masterfully uses a theatrical voice to create a historiographical narrator. The ceremonial dethronement of Adandozan is presented with vivid imagery and dramatic tension, exploring power dynamics, betrayal, and political intrigue. The narrator does more than recount events; they interpret and contextualise them within a broader historical framework, deepening the narrative. The ceremonial language, such as “Chausse les sandales de Huégbadja ... Tu es désormais le maître du monde”,²⁰⁶ elevates the moment, evoking the solemnity of a historical epic.

The narrator functions as both observer and interpreter, blending historiography with storytelling. Reflecting on King Adandozan’s situation, the narrator observes: “Il se souvenait aussi des cris qui avaient accompagné la fin de la litanie ... Lui enlever les sandales de Huégbadja ne résoudra pas les problèmes auxquels ils étaient tous confrontés.”²⁰⁷ This interpretative style, along with reflections on the kingdom’s future, encourages readers to consider the broader consequences of the dethronement: “Déjà, il le voyait, les peuples autochtones d’Agbomé [...] avaient commencé à faire secrètement allégeance à Josu.”²⁰⁸ This passage signals the inevitable shift in power and allegiances. This foresight creates a tension between the present political spectacle and the looming, unspoken realities of change. The narrator’s role as historian thus extends beyond recounting of events to interpreting their significance and anticipating their long-term impact on both individuals and the collective. The narrator’s use of these techniques creates a historiographical atmosphere, simulating the conditions of a historian’s expression. Readers are invited to follow the narrator’s analysis of events, the search for meaning, and reflections on the past. This narrative approach breathes life into history, encouraging the reader to actively engage in reconstructing it.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 75–77.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 105.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 106.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 107.

Another chapter provides insight into a further dimension of the narrator's role. These characteristics can be observed across four main levels: the description of scenes and gestures, the use of protocol and politeness formulas, the dialogue between characters, and the incorporation of internal reflections and comments. The chapter entitled "Temps anciens III: Juin 1818, le dernier banquet du roi"²⁰⁹ sees the narrator describing interactions between characters and introducing dialogues that could be interpreted as meeting the conditions of expression of a historiographical narrator. The narrator describes scenes with visual details, such as the movements of characters, their facial expressions, and gestures. For example, the king's gestures, the reactions of the guests, and Gankpé's expressions contribute to creating a theatrical atmosphere and immersing the reader in the scene. The narrator uses politeness formulas and social conventions, such as the protocol of addressing the king in the third person, reinforcing the historical and protocol aspects of the narration. The text is replete with dialogues between different protagonists, such as Chacha, Gankpé, the king, and guests such as Joshua Snoep and Buchanan Murphy. These dialogues breathe life into the characters and allow the reader to grasp different perspectives and opinions on subjects such as slavery, trade, and politics. In addition to dialogue, the narrator also inserts internal reflections of characters, such as Gankpé's thoughts on his interactions with the king and Chacha. This enables the reader to better understand the motivations and emotions of the characters. Dialogues between various protagonists, including Chacha, Gankpé, the king, and guests such as Joshua Snoep and Buchanan Murphy, play a crucial role in plot development, characterisation, and the conveyance of themes and ideas. By carefully analysing dialogues between different protagonists, one can grasp nuances of characterisation and explored themes, narrative tensions, and interpersonal dynamics that deepen the story and engage the reader.

In *Esclaves*, the dialogues between characters and the omniscient narrator's commentary merge to create a narrative voice that reflects the style of the slave trade historian, as envisioned by Édouard Glissant. In the novel, the dialogues between characters, such as Chacha,

²⁰⁹Ibid., 41.

Gankpé, King Adandozan, and guests like Joshua Snoep and Buchanan Murphy, reveal multiple perspectives on the slave trade. These exchanges bring to life the different actors involved in the slave trade and allow for examination of motivations, conflicts, and ideologies at play. The omniscient narrator's comments provide analysis and reflections on events and characters, thereby illuminating the historical and social issues of the slave trade. For instance, the narrator may offer contextual information on trade practices, power relations, or the social consequences of slavery. By combining character dialogues with the narrator's comments, the novel *Esclaves* adopts an approach that simulates the historiographical discourse on the slave trade. This approach contextualises events in a historical perspective while addressing the human and emotional dimensions of this dark period in history. Alem's novel *Esclaves* transcends mere fiction; it becomes a sort of *traité d'histoire*.

The historiopoesis of *Esclaves* is characterised by a fragmented and non-linear narrative, manipulating temporalities and viewpoints to offer a complex vision of the slave trade. Several narrative strategies compose its architecture, contributing to a critical reflection on slavery.

The transgeneric nature of *Esclaves* is one of its notable features. This approach allows the novel to aptly memorialise the slave trade by weaving different narrative forms and genres, creating a layered account of the slave trade. By employing historical fiction, theatricality, memoir, and oral storytelling techniques, Alem acknowledges that he has only written a novel, hence a work of fiction – a fact he emphasises with a well-chosen epigraph from T.C. Boyle – however, he emerges as more than a novelist. He also acts as a historian, in the sense that his predominant style is that of chronicle and historical fresco. Indeed, Alem tackles the issue of slavery within the broader canvas of an era and the events that marked it. In this regard, he somewhat recalls *Ségou* – albeit on a larger scale – by Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé. In literary genre studies, the term historical fresco appears rather sporadically. However, other terms that encompass similar descriptions do exist. Phrases like epic novels or worldly works are often used. Nonetheless, they all refer to a singular concept: a work of fiction that faithfully represents the reality of an era. *Esclaves* presents itself as a vast

literary composition depicting the entire era of the slave trade. As a novel of destiny that questions the comings and goings between Africa and Brazil, *Esclaves* draws upon History as its foundation, combining precise temporal markers and a succession of historically grounded events with strategic fictional elaboration.

Alem accomplishes this through the narrative of King Adandozan and the conspiracy against him, which ultimately leads to his royal downfall. He also achieves this through the character of the ritual master, whose journey epitomises the arduous path of slaves from the hinterland via the sacred forests and African coasts to the plantations of Brazil across the Atlantic middle passage. In a manner akin to a historical fresco, *Esclaves* delivers a comprehensive analysis of the era, presenting a vivid depiction of historical events and societal conditions. In a detailed historical exploration and character development, Alem captures the intricacies of power dynamics, economic interests, and societal norms of the time. Through this storytelling, Alem provides readers with a deeper understanding of the historical context in which significant events unfolded, thereby deepening our perception of this tumultuous period in history.

Exploring the political dynamics of historical periods, such as the slave trade era, through literature serves as a fundamental endeavour within academic discourse. By examining the complexities of power structures, economic interests, and societal configurations of the time, literature provides invaluable insights into the historical context in which significant events unfolded. *Esclaves* immerses the reader in political intrigue, centred around the conspiracy orchestrated by the king's nephew and leader of the army, and his accomplice Chacha, Francesco Felix de Souza, against King Adandozan. Narrating the story of King Adandozan and particularly the episode of a conspiracy plotted against him is emblematic in several regards. This spotlight serves as a powerful act of restoring a historical figure of African resistance against the slave trade. Much like how prominent figures of anti-colonial struggles have been narrativised in literature, such as King Béhansin, whose heroic trajectory during colonisation is celebrated in Francophone imagination and various literary and cinematic works, King Adandozan equally deserves attention for his era due to similar reasons. Bringing awareness to Adandozan among the figures

who precipitated the abolition of slavery to save his kingdom from the shameful trade is crucial.

The narrative surrounding the conspiracy that sustained the slave trade uncovers a confluence of factors that facilitated centuries of human enslavement. Internal rivalries among elites, the relentless pursuit of power, the thirst for vengeance, and active collusion with oppressive forces of the dehumanising capital system emerge as key elements contributing to the perpetuation of the slave trade. Confronting this taboo history and revisiting the forbidden memory of King Adandozan serves as a crucial act of remembrance, intended to challenge the “selective amnesia” often inherent in the collective memory of the slave trade across West Africa and the African continent at large. *Esclaves* is a critical analysis that responds to the need for a comprehensive recontextualisation of historical narratives but also aims to foster a deeper understanding of the systemic factors that allowed the slave trade to endure for generations.

Exploring the legacy of King Adandozan reveals suppressed chapters of history and liberates suppressed memories. In the oral traditions of Dahomey, this ruler’s twenty-year reign is conspicuously absent, with only passing references to his nickname, Daa Gbolometon, meaning “the unknown king.” The Dahomey tradition often portrays Adandozan as a cruel ruler, yet this characterisation largely arose after his half-brother Ghezo, with the support of the Brazilian slave trader Francisco Félix de Souza, orchestrated a coup against him. Scholars such as Pierre Verger and, more recently, historian Ana Lucia Araujo, have examined the correspondence between Adandozan, his father Agonglo, and Portuguese kings and other European authorities from the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries. Their research suggests that Adandozan’s reign marked a turbulent era in Dahomey, especially in terms of the slave trade. Discussing Adandozan is a taboo-breaking endeavour that reintroduces an overlooked segment of Dahomey’s history, particularly its involvement in the transatlantic slave trade. The intricate power struggles embedded within this political intrigue are critical for understanding the complex dynamics that shaped this period. By focusing on the political sequence surrounding Adandozan, one gains a perspective on the complex relationships among African rulers, European traders, and local elites. This, in turn, exposes the vulnerabilities

and fractures that precipitated political crises, resulting in countless individuals being caught in a web of enslavement, violence, and death. To appreciate the significance of Alem's choice to address the story of King Adandozan, it is imperative to immerse oneself in this broader historical context. This approach not only underscores the importance of revisiting neglected parts of African history but also highlights the consequences of power struggles that reverberated throughout Dahomey and beyond.

The chapter titled "Temps anciens III: Juin 1818, le dernier banquet du roi" stands out as a prime example of this political tension, offering a vivid portrayal of the tensions simmering beneath the surface of a seemingly festive occasion: the birthday of King Adandozan. The interactions between key characters such as Felix de Souza, and King Adandozan are laden with cryptic undertones, hinting at underlying agendas and clandestine alliances. The text contrasts opposing viewpoints on slavery, exemplified by the characters of Buchanan Murphy and Joshua Snoop. This ideological divide not only adds depth to the narrative but also underscores the socio-political complexities at play. By intertwining historical events with fictional narrative, Alem traces the intricacies of political manoeuvring, providing readers with a narrative of rich intrigue and suspense. From the deliberate cultivation of suspense to the vivid depiction of settings and characters, every element of the novel serves to immerse the reader in the tumultuous world of Dahomey's court politics. Through dialogue and internal monologues, Alem offers insights into the motivations and machinations of key players, inviting readers to unravel the mysteries lurking beneath the surface.

Alem demonstrates a profound engagement with a rigorous thematic. With exceptional literary skill, he situates his characters within a historical milieu that is often overlooked or misunderstood by the public. Through this immersive theatrical setting, the reader is prompted to contemplate the relentless pressure exerted by slave trading systems upon the African elite, a facet of history often overshadowed yet profoundly significant. This well-documented investigation into historical complexities not only deepens the narrative composition but also serves as a testament to the author's erudition and intellectual seriousness, fostering a deep and enduring engagement with the text.

The novel embraces a structure and narrative style reminiscent of classical theatre, employing a three-act division, scene breaks, a prologue and epilogue, and incorporation of theatrical elements. This deliberate choice pays homage to theatrical traditions and suggests the possibility that the work may have been originally conceived for performance on stage. The three acts mirror the three major stages of the slave trade, offering an African narrative perspective that emphasises key episodes on the continent and reveals the underlying factors driving the trade. The chapter titles, numbered like scenes, further enhance the theatrical atmosphere, guiding the reader through the unfolding drama. The theatrical nature of the text allows for the coexistence of two narrative voices: that of the characters engaging in dialogue, and that of the author, who, through stage directions, determines the characters' lines, shapes the structure of the play, and guides the staging. The reader, akin to a spectator, becomes the primary recipient of the information exchanged on stage. The use of theatrical titling and dialogue opening nearly every chapter scene plays a significant role in setting the tone and advancing the plot. Each act of the novel unfolds like a performance, with the characters taking on their roles and carrying out their actions within the historical context of the slave trade.

The prologue scene is set in 1841 and features a ship named *James Matthew*, en route to Australia. It introduces key characters, including Captain Lewitt Shephard and wealthy passengers such as Sir Stephan Brickshaw, Font Deere, and Fortulesa Barbarossa. This lays the groundwork for the plot, including the ship's ominous reputation and surrounding superstitions, as well as the characters' motivations for embarking on the voyage. The text exhibits several characteristics of theatre: dramatic dialogue and narration are prominent, bringing interactions between characters to life; detailed descriptions of settings and actions resemble theatrical staging, immersing the reader in the environment; the use of physical space on the ship's deck accentuates interactions; and the evocation of the absurd and mysterious creates an atmosphere typical of absurdist theatre. The use of double enunciation between dialogue and omniscient narration adds dramatic tension and psychological depth to the narrative. The historiographical potential of theatre lies in its ability to represent and interrogate historical events artistically, offering unique perspectives on the era's

realities. By invoking theatre in this passage of the novel, the author adds literary value by highlighting theatrical aspects of the plot and using dramatic techniques to deepen the narrative, while providing profound reflections on universal themes of oppression and resistance characteristic of absurdist theatre.

A further illustration of this theatricality appears in a scene set during a banquet in honour of King Adandozan, which focuses on discussions surrounding slavery and features a central speech by the king. "What they said in the kingdom was true then; the king indeed had a white wife!" Prior to this, there is an aside between Chacha, and the master of rituals, engaging the reader as a complicit audience. "se ba de fia bubuto gbo be, ne nya de le esia!" This aside highlights the contrast between characters' spoken words and their inner thoughts. The theatrical elements in the text include dialogue-driven narrative, vivid descriptions of settings and actions, and the use of physical space to enhance interactions. "ON BEHALF OF THE KING OF ENGLAND, SHALL WE FIGHT TOGETHER AGAINST SLAVERY FOR HUMAN DIGNITY. GOD BLESS THE KING." The double enunciation technique allows readers to grasp both spoken words and characters' internal reflections, adding dramatic tension and psychological depth. "Nà mé kpa wé gbo bubu, mi fia wé wé se!" The historiographical potential of the theatrical genre lies in its ability to represent and interrogate historical events artistically, providing a unique perspective on the realities of the time. By invoking theatre in this passage of the slave trade novel, the author adds literary value by emphasising the theatrical aspects of the plot and using dramatic techniques to deepen the narrative. "The clandestine trade has not only disadvantages, I know what I'm talking about." This also offers profound reflection on universal themes of oppression and resistance, typical of absurdist theatre.

Alem's novel aligns with the Theatre of the Absurd, echoing the styles of Ionesco and Beckett, by effectively portraying the absurdity of the human condition. Rather than directly challenging conventional elements like character and plot, the novel employs dialogue and characters' internal monologues to highlight the inherent absurdity of existence. This technique serves to reveal the nonsensical aspects of life, the contradictions in human behaviour, and the futile search for meaning in an irrational world. By adopting this approach, Alem in-

vites readers to confront the existential dilemmas and absurdities that permeate both the narrative and the human experience, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of the absurdity inherent in the human condition. Alem achieves the feat of moving his characters into an extremely delicate and relatively underexplored historical and political context. He reconstructs the situation of African elites confronted with the pressure of slave traders, thus shedding light on the collaboration of certain African elites with slave traders during the transatlantic slave trade.

Traditional historical narratives often simplify the story of the slave trade into a binary opposition between African victims and European oppressors. By incorporating elements from various literary genres, Alem complicates this view. For instance, the use of dark humour and irony, as seen in the resurrection of Francisco Félix de Souza after his poisoning,²¹⁰ highlights the absurdity of the situation, the cruelty of the slave system, and the complicity of certain African actors.²¹¹ Similarly, the inclusion of fantastical and symbolic elements, such as the intervention of the gods Hêviesso and Sakpatê,²¹² invites an allegorical reading of history, prompting reflections on human nature, power, and destiny. The blending of genres destabilizes the reader, preventing passive consumption of the historical narrative. The transition from a tragic scene, such as the murder of the ritual master's wife by the Amazons, to a burlesque episode, creates a striking contrast that engages and provokes thought. *Esclaves* does not merely condemn the barbarity of the slave trade; it also examines its social, economic, and cultural dimensions. This comprehensive examination deepens the reader's understanding of the complexities and far-reaching impacts of the slave trade.

Alem employs irony and parody to offer a fresh perspective on historical figures in *Esclaves*. The use of parody is evident in the portrayal of characters such as Francisco Félix de Souza, also known as Chacha, and Buchanan Murphy. Chacha, a Portuguese slave trader, embodies the exaggerated stereotype of a ruthless and exploitative merchant,

²¹⁰Ibid., 34.

²¹¹Ibid., 53.

²¹²Ibid., 82.

whose ownership of the slave ship, Don Francisco, reflects the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade. Buchanan Murphy, on the other hand, represents the caricature of the arrogant and unapologetic slave trader defending the economic necessity of slavery. This parodic depiction of historical figures serves to satirise the moral bankruptcy and hypocrisy of those involved in the slave trade. Irony permeates the narrative, particularly in the portrayal of John Quincy Adams and Abraham Lincoln. Adams, depicted as advocating for the rights of enslaved individuals before the Supreme Court, embodies the ironic contrast between noble intentions and political expediency, highlighting the complexities of abolitionist movements. Similarly, Lincoln's portrayal as a "naive patriarch" underscores the irony of his eventual role in abolishing slavery, despite initial scepticism and opposition. Through the strategic use of irony and parody, Alem critiques the moral ambiguity and contradictions inherent in historical narratives surrounding slavery and colonialism, offering readers a nuanced re-evaluation of the period.

Alem further follows this parodic style when introducing the character of Francisco Felix de Souza, also known as Chacha. In the first chapter, Alem employs parody to depict Chacha as a caricature of the ambitious adventurer seeking fortune in Africa. The parody is evident in the exaggerated description of Chacha's arrival at Gléhué in 1788, which contrasts sharply with his grandiose self-image. For instance, Chacha's arrival is marked by his pitiful state, as he is described as "*en piteux état et affamé* [in poor condition and hungry]", highlighting the disparity between his imagined grandeur and his actual condition. The scene of his revival, characterised by bodily functions and nonsensical utterances, such as his cryptic phrase "*quero desse na praca Joao Batista* [I want one of those at João Batista Square]", serves to deflate any heroic aspirations associated with his character. The parody extends to Chacha's delusions of grandeur and his fantastical ambitions. Despite his humble origins and numerous failures in Brazil, Chacha envisions himself as a conquering hero destined for wealth and glory in Africa. This is evident in his internal monologue, where he fantasises about becoming "*richissime en Afrique* [very rich in Africa]", and envisages a life of luxury and indulgence. However, the absurdity of his aspirations is highlighted by the contrast with his impoverished past and the

comical circumstances of his arrival in Gléhué. Chacha's rapid rise to power and wealth in Gléhué, facilitated by his cunning and opportunism, further underscores the satirical portrayal of his character. His transformation from a destitute adventurer to a powerful figure commanding respect and influence is portrayed in a manner that highlights the ludicrousness of his ascent. This is exemplified by his swift promotion to the position of fort director and his accumulation of wealth and women, symbolising his absurdly rapid climb up the social ladder. By parody, Alem critiques the hubris and folly of characters like Chacha, whose inflated sense of self-importance blinds them to their own limitations and flaws. By juxtaposing Chacha's grandiose ambitions with his absurd reality, such as his ignominious arrival and comical rise to power, Alem invites readers to reflect on the nature of ambition, power, and delusion in the context of colonial exploitation and greed.

Through a narrative technique that alternates between character dialogues and the omniscient narrator's commentary, Alem reveals the characters' hypocrisy, pettiness, and bravery. This aesthetic is particularly evident in the evening event hosted by Chacha, which culminates in the poisoning of King Adandozan and features heated debates among guests expressing divergent views on the slave trade. Buchanan Murphy represents the arrogance of slave traders who defend the economic necessity of slavery, while Francisco Félix de Souza advocates for abolition and the use of contract slaves. Contradictions emerge when King Adandozan, who opposes slavery, has a white wife, seemingly contradicting his beliefs. The irony highlights the absurdity of pro-slavery arguments and the complexities of colonial ideologies. The parodic elements in character interactions expose the emptiness of pro-slavery justifications, critiquing the oppression and exploitation of African peoples by European colonisers. Alem's clever use of irony and parody creates a sharp and profoundly critical portrayal of colonial ideology and slavery in this episode of *Esclaves*.

Fragmented temporality is a key element of the historiopoetic approach in *Esclaves*. The novel avoids a linear narrative, instead constructing a constant oscillation between past and present, across different locations, and multiple perspectives. The story, focused on the tragic fate of the master of rituals, is interrupted by flashbacks,

embedded stories, and digressions. This temporal fragmentation is reflected in the table of contents (pp. 2–59), alternating between “Old Times”, “New Worlds”, and “Mixed Times”. This structure mirrors the complexity of the slave trade, a system with long-lasting consequences felt across generations. By disrupting linear time, Alem emphasizes the far-reaching effects of slavery and colonialism, highlighting their continued impact over time.

The prologue opens in 1841 aboard the *James Matthew*, a ship en route to Australia. While this episode appears disconnected from the central storyline, it introduces key motifs – greed, violence, superstition, and the allure of the “New World”²¹³ – which permeate the entire narrative. This anachronistic opening establishes a thematic bridge that both foreshadows future developments and creates a stark contrast with the main story, which takes place in 1818, the year of the abolition of slavery in the French colonies. This temporal choice of 1818 is highly symbolic, not only marking a moment of historical change but also connecting the narrative to significant events such as the deposition of the King of Dahomey and the rise of historical figures and main characters in the novel, such as Chacha²¹⁴ and Gankpé.²¹⁵ Through these temporal displacements, Alem sets the stage for a careful exploration of slavery’s complexity.

The central narrative unfolds primarily in 1818, a year loaded with both symbolic and political significance. However, Alem’s treatment of temporality is far from linear. The story is punctuated by flashbacks to earlier events, such as Francisco Félix de Souza’s arrival in Gléhué in 1788, the reign of Agonglo, and the Portuguese conquest of Porto Seguro,²¹⁶ each of which extends the temporal scope of the narrative and provides crucial context for the unfolding drama. These temporal shifts are not merely for background information; they highlight the deep-rooted connections between past and present, illustrating how the system of the slave trade permeates and shapes the history of Dahomey, the Atlantic world, and the characters themselves.

²¹³ Ibid., 11.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 69.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

Alem's manipulation of time, moving freely between different historical moments, reflects his historiopoetic method, which complicates simplistic historical narratives. The narrative structure, fragmented by these time shifts, reveals the interconnectedness of historical events and underscores the persistent impact of slavery on both individual lives and larger social structures. Alem's use of flashbacks forces the reader to reconsider the linear progression of history, revealing that the past is never truly past, but continually influences the present. For instance, the sequence in which King Ghezo learns Portuguese from Sophia in 1818 is juxtaposed with reflections on Francisco Félix de Souza's earlier arrival on the Slave Coast in 1788.²¹⁷ By creating such connections between different historical moments, Alem shows how colonial and slave-trading systems shape the dynamics between individuals, cultures, and societies, with repercussions extending far beyond their immediate historical contexts.

The episodic nature of the narrative, characterised by shifts across different temporal layers, also invites a more complex understanding of historical memory. Alem's inclusion of the 1836 return of Sule to Agoué further disrupts the main narrative of 1818, introducing a significant temporal break.²¹⁸ This disruption serves a dual purpose: it allows for the exploration of the evolution of characters and political contexts, while deepening the thematic exploration of slavery's continuing scars. By positioning this event between the main narrative and the 1888 epilogue, Alem creates a cyclical structure that echoes the broader historical cycle of slavery and its aftermath. The return to Dahomey in 1836 reinforces the novel's temporal loops, forcing readers to confront the persistent, unresolved traumas that characterise the legacy of slavery.

In this context, the confrontation between Sule and the son of Nansica, the Amazon who raped him, serves as a potent symbol of the clash between the past and the present.²¹⁹ The silence between them reflects a generational inheritance of violence and trauma, making clear that the trauma of slavery is passed down through successive genera-

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34–35.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

tions. Similarly, the indirect confrontation between Sule and Francisco Olympio, who is involved in the clandestine slave trade, recalls the original conflict between King Gezo and Chacha.²²⁰ This continuity in the novel underscores how the systems of violence, exploitation, and subjugation persist long after the formal abolition of slavery. Alem's use of these confrontations highlights the cyclical nature of the system, showing how characters, despite attempts to move forward, remain trapped in a web of historical repetition.

Sule's emotional and physical journey also illustrates the enduring consequences of slavery, even after its formal abolition. His desire to visit the grave of the king, whose downfall he unwittingly contributed to, becomes a powerful metaphor for the complexity of individual responsibility and the inescapability of the past.²²¹ This moment reflects the broader theme of the novel: that the trauma of slavery is not confined to a single historical moment but rather endures through generations, affecting relationships, identities, and individual psyches.

Alem also highlights how the system of slavery continues to renew itself in various forms. The involvement of Francisco Olympio, the son of Félix Santana, in the clandestine slave trade at Porto Seguro,²²² points to the reproduction of slavery's structures, even after its legal abolition. This reinforces the idea that slavery is not simply a historical event but a system that perpetuates itself through different actors and methods. Similarly, the actions of Gankpé/Guézo, who betrays his uncle to consolidate power through alliance with Chacha, perpetuate the cycle of exploitation and violence.²²³ These examples demonstrate how the novel critiques the notion of a clean break from slavery, suggesting that its legacies persist in subtle and insidious ways.

Finally, Sule's refusal to integrate into the Brazilian community of Agoué, despite his marriage to Musibath, a woman from Bahia,²²⁴ embodies the theme of displacement and cultural hybridity. His struggle to find a sense of belonging in a world shaped by forced migrations

²²⁰Ibid., 247.

²²¹Ibid., 232.

²²²Ibid., 253–254.

²²³Ibid., 69.

²²⁴Ibid., 251.

and cultural mixing emphasises the novel's exploration of identity and belonging in a post-slavery context. Alem's fragmented temporality enhances this theme, as the characters' complex relationship with time mirrors their own struggles with identity and memory in a world defined by the long shadow of slavery.

Alem's manipulation of temporality in *Esclaves* serves as a crucial component of his historiopoetic approach. By disrupting linear historical narratives and employing temporal shifts, flashbacks, and cyclical structures, Alem not only deepens the thematic exploration of slavery's legacy but also invites readers to reconsider how history is remembered, experienced, and passed down through generations. Through his use of time, Alem remarks that the consequences of the slave trade are not confined to a specific historical moment but are woven into the very fabric of the characters' lives and identities.

Beyond fragmented timelines, Alem also deploys anachronism, a narrative technique that further complicates the relationship between past and present. The prologue, set in 1841 aboard the *James Matthew*, exemplifies this anachronistic approach. Although the year 1841 is far removed from the main narrative of 1818, Alem's choice to introduce anachronistic elements such as references to figures like Abraham Lincoln and the Ku Klux Klan serves to highlight the ongoing relevance of the themes of slavery, racial violence, and social injustice. These temporal dislocations are not merely discrepancies but intentional interventions that prompt the reader to draw connections between historical periods, underscoring how the legacies of the slave trade persist into the modern era.

The deliberate breaking of historical chronology in *Esclaves* creates a layered narrative that resists traditional historical linearity. Alem uses anachronism not only to evoke contemporary issues but also to reflect on the nature of historical interpretation itself. Just as the fragmented temporal structure of the novel challenges simplistic historical narratives, the anachronisms in the prologue raise questions about the fluidity of historical truth. Alem acknowledges this manipulation of historical fact, stating that he has "remodelled" history to serve the needs of his narrative. This act of "remodelling" invites readers to consider how history is constructed and to reflect on the subjectivity of historical narratives.

In *Esclaves*, anachronism is not used for mere novelty but as a tool to deepen the thematic exploration of the novel. The references to figures and events from different time periods, such as the mention of Texas and the tensions between Northern and Southern states in the U.S., create a dialogue between the past and present. These references to more modern political conflicts amid a historical narrative set in 1818 provide a perspective that connects the struggles of the past with ongoing societal issues. By placing contemporary themes within a historical setting, Alem reinforces the continuity of these struggles across time, inviting readers to reflect on the persistence of racism, exploitation, and the quest for freedom.

The inclusion of such anachronistic references also serves a narrative purpose. By evoking the broader context of slavery, abolitionism, and racial conflict, Alem's anachronisms draw attention to the broader historical currents that shaped the world of *Esclaves*. In doing so, Alem transforms the historical setting of the novel into a space where past and present collide, creating a dynamic narrative that transcends temporal boundaries. This temporal blending encourages readers to think about the way history informs contemporary struggles, fostering a critical awareness of how legacies of the past continue to shape the present.

The presence of anachronism in the prologue introduces an additional element of mystery and intrigue, much like the larger narrative. The supernatural atmosphere combined with references to the James Matthew's journey, evoke the eerie and often unsettling nature of the transatlantic slave trade, while simultaneously inviting the reader to question the accuracy of historical representations. In the same way that fragmented temporality creates a sense of historical disruption, the anachronisms serve to challenge the reader's assumptions about time, causality, and historical progression.

In this way, the use of anachronism complements Alem's historiopoetic approach, which blends historical events with fictional elements. The strategic insertion of historical events that seem "out of place" creates a reflective space where the boundaries between history and fiction are blurred. Alem uses this technique to address universal themes such as power, inequality, and the struggle for freedom, making the story not only a reflection on the past but a commentary on

the present as well. The deliberate mixing of time periods is thus more than a stylistic choice – it is an integral aspect of the novel's critique of historical narratives and its exploration of the continuing impact of the slave trade on contemporary society.

In *Esclaves*, Alem's historiopoetic endeavour draws deeply from the power of narrative polyphony, offering a complex exploration of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring impacts. The text gives voice to a diverse array of characters, each contributing a unique perspective that builds a multivocal view of history. This narrative strategy allows the reader to appreciate the complexities of slavery and its profound effects on individuals, while resisting the temptation of reductive, one-dimensional portrayals of the past. Through this polyphonic structure, Alem does not simply recount a series of events; rather, he weaves a network of competing voices, each laden with its own motivations, struggles, and moral dilemmas.

The characters in *Esclaves* exemplify the polyphonic structure that Alem uses to provide a complex perspective on the institution of slavery and its far-reaching consequences. The master of rituals, for example, serves as a central figure who offers insight into the cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs of the Kingdom of Dahomey. His internal conflict – torn between duty to the king and pressure from influential figures like Gankpé and Chacha – embodies the moral quandaries of participating in systems of power and violence. This struggle underscores the complexities of resistance and complicity within the broader context of slavery.²²⁵ Miguel, a former master of rituals turned enslaved man, offers one of the most poignant reflections on the dehumanising effects of slavery. His personal transformation from a figure of respect to a commodity illustrates the deep, personal and cultural disintegration slavery causes, providing a compelling exploration of identity and memory.²²⁶ Chacha, the Portuguese slave trader, personifies the greed and opportunism that defined European involvement in the slave trade. Alem uses his character to expose not only the economic motivations behind slavery but also the brutal human reality of the trade

²²⁵Ibid., 29–30, 45, 91, 118–122.

²²⁶Ibid., 29–30, 91, 233.

itself, forcing readers to confront its moral implications.²²⁷ Gankpé, who rises to power as King Guézo, embodies the political turbulence within Dahomey, where loyalty and ambition collide, and power is often used to perpetuate violence and oppression. Alem's portrayal of Gankpé's ascent illuminates the darker side of political manoeuvring and the internal strife that fuels the slave trade.²²⁸ Félix Santana, a mulatto from Bahia, navigates the tensions of post-slavery identity and resistance. Torn between his African heritage and European education, Santana's involvement in a Muslim slave revolt serves as a stark contrast to Chacha's embodiment of the "banality of evil", offering a deeper look at identity and the legacies of slavery.²²⁹ Nansica, the Amazon warrior, is presented as both a figure of violence and a deeply human character. Through her relationship with Sikadjin and the birth of her son, Alem adds complexity to her portrayal, showing the emotional and personal dimensions behind her fierce role in the state's repressive actions.²³⁰ Sule, the freed Hausa slave, plays a central role in Miguel's intellectual and political awakening. His perspective on the resistance of the enslaved and the transformative power of knowledge provides an essential counterpoint to the entrenched violence and exploitation of the system. Through this varied array of voices, Alem crafts a narrative that deepens our understanding of the complexities of slavery while also humanising its many victims and perpetrators, offering an examination of its historical, social, and emotional dimensions that captures the complex impact of slavery and the human responses to it.

The author utilises vivid characterisation techniques to animate historical figures, depicting them as complex individuals with their own motivations, beliefs, and contradictions. For instance, Francisco Félix de Souza is portrayed as a flawed protagonist grappling with personal ambitions and moral dilemmas, adding depth to the historical narrative. Throughout the novel, various historical figures are referenced, illuminating their roles and actions in relation to slavery and maritime exploration. Francisco Félix de Souza, also known as Chacha, emerges

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 40, 48, 51, 56, 66, 98–99, 222–223.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 44–48, 60, 69–70, 98–99, 165–166, 233.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 172–176, 188, 212, 232–233.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 119, 121–122, 169, 247.

as a central figure, symbolising the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade through his ownership of the slave ship *Don Francisco*. The prologue mentions John Quincy Adams, highlighting his advocacy for enslaved individuals' rights before the Supreme Court, revealing the complex political and moral landscape surrounding abolitionist movements. Abraham Lincoln is alluded to, offering contrasting perspectives on abolitionism and racial equality. The narrative addresses historical events like the presence of the Ku Klux Klan in the Northern states, reflecting widespread resistance to racial integration and emancipation efforts. The novel also examines maritime exploration and the challenges faced by sailors, exemplified by the perils encountered by the crew of the *James Matthew* in the Southern Hemisphere.

In the prologue, Alem employs the anecdote as a sub-genre of historiographic narration to initiate his novel. This choice is significant as it contributes to imbuing the novel with a historical flair through a commonly utilised generic style in historical accounts. It is not coincidental that this anecdote appears in the form of a prologue in the novel. Bratu argues that chroniclers and historians have historically perceived and used the prologue as the *locus auctoris* – a place where they could write about their methods, opinions, preferences, and, finally, themselves.²³¹

The prologue functions as a historical anecdote, contextualising the action in 1841 during a sea voyage to Australia aboard the *James Matthew* ship. It introduces historical characters like Captain Lewitt Shephard and the passengers aboard the *James Matthew*, describing the circumstances of the voyage, and employing evocative elements to create an immersive atmosphere. Historical references, such as the existence of the ship and its stopovers in Cape Town, add an authentic dimension to the anecdote. This approach sets the tone for what awaits the reader in the rest of the novel, providing historical depth that engages readers from the outset with evocative details and intriguing characters. In essence, the prologue presents a historical anecdote by providing insight into the temporal, spatial, and social context in which the action unfolds. It employs evocative elements and historical

²³¹ Bratu, Cristian. 2015. "Prologues as Locus Auctoris in Historical Narratives: An Overview from Antiquity to the Middle Ages." *Mediaevistik* 28, no. 1, 47–65.

references to immerse the reader in the time and place of the story, thus contextualising the narrative within a specific historical framework.

Alem's novel is thoroughly researched and serves as a text that offers a critical analysis of the role of literature in recounting events predating the colonial era. Central to this examination is not just the accuracy of the narrative but also the way stories are told. It is imperative to present a narrative perspective distinct from that of colonial historians, especially when addressing the central theme of the slave trade. This is the task that African writers have recently undertaken. Murphy²³² anticipated the rise of a notable trend in twenty-first-century literature, as articulated in his assertion, "The epilogue, then, illuminates 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 historicised literature of the slave trade." Alem's *Esclaves* aligns precisely with this prediction, embodying the shift towards a narrative approach that is more politically charged and firmly grounded in history.

In crafting the novel *Esclaves*, the writer engages with a variety of sources, including documents, archives, research, literary texts, and oral narratives. These highly documented passages establish a literary realism essential for portraying the serious subject matter of the slave trade. Alem's thorough research, complemented by his firsthand experience visiting Brazil, deepens his understanding of the thematic backdrop. The novel unveils a complex collection of documents interpreted and imbued with artistic finesse. The prologue adopts a fantastical and anachronistic narrative approach, revisiting archival materials relevant to the historical context of the slave trade. Similarly, episodes such as "Les sandales de Huégbadja" bear resemblance to fictionalised adaptations of scholarly work. The portrayal of the Bahia revolt demonstrates adept utilisation of revisited police archives, effectively documenting the insurgency of the Malès. Dialogues feature excerpts from speeches and correspondences, echoing rhetorical conventions found in colonial epistolary exchanges and songs. The narrative also exam-

²³²Murphy, Laura. T. 2012. *Metaphors of the Slave Trade in West African Literature*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 6.

ines Afro-Brazilian involvement in clandestine slave trading activities, augmenting the storyline with references to consulted documents. Seamlessly interweaving historical accuracy with fictive narrative, the novel serves as a gateway to major historiographical works, providing an informed perspective on the complexities of the slave trade.

The prologue, which adopts a fantastical and anachronistic approach, revisits archival records related to the slave trade, thus ultimately pushing the reader to recall seminal works relating to the slave trade intertext. Alem brings together socio-historical nuances, intertextual references, and literary motifs, prompting readers to engage critically with the complex dynamics of power, economic interests, and moral dilemmas inherent in the historical context of the slave trade in the nineteenth century. Set in 1841, a significant era marked by the persistence of the transatlantic slave trade despite international abolition efforts, the depiction of the vessel *James Matthew*, once a slave ship, underscores the enduring legacy of maritime commerce and exploitation. The mention of McDonagh's tavern in Galway, apart from being reminiscent of literary works by authors like James Joyce or William Butler Yeats, grounds events in *Esclaves* geographically and evokes the bustling maritime hubs of the time. The prologue seamlessly integrates intertextual references, evoking tales of sailors and the perils of tumultuous oceanic zones with the mention of the "Quarantièmes Rugissants", reminiscent of works like Herman Melville's *"Moby Dick"*. The reference to the sinking of the schooner *Amistad* and the subsequent trial of African slaves recalls real historical events that have inspired works such as Steven Spielberg's film "Amistad" and Barry Unsworth's novel "Cinque". Furthermore, the description of the curse seemingly looming over the ship *James Matthew* invokes fantastical and supernatural elements reminiscent of gothic genre works such as Bram Stoker's "Dracula" or Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein". The passage alludes to more contemporary literary references through the descriptions of characters and their motivations, echoing themes explored in works such as Toni Morrison's "Beloved", which also address the slave trade and its societal consequences. The inclusion of historical accounts such as Alex Haley's "Roots", which traces the history of slavery through generations of an African-American family, further deepens the narrative.

Alem's commitment to historical accuracy is evident in his attention to detail, from the portrayal of ceremonial rituals to the depiction of political tensions within the kingdom of Dahomey. The chapter entitled "Les sandales de Huégbadja" is a fictionalised interpretation of the scholarly work of Beninese constitutionalist Maurice Glèlè-Ahanhanzo.²³³ Alem's narrative artistry transforms Glèlè-Ahanhanzo's scholarly discourse into a vibrant fiction, wherein the protagonist Adandozan undergoes a spectacular deposition, an event shrouded in secrecy and rendered taboo in the kingdom of Dahomey to date. This analysis captures the essence of Glèlè-Ahanhanzo's original essay, detailing the procedural complexities of the deposition process. Alem's narrative fabric, deeply rooted in the traditions and customs of the Dahomey kingdom, demonstrates an unwavering dedication to authenticity. Every narrative element, from the historical backdrop to symbolic representations and ceremonial enactments, exudes a tangible realism reflective of both Alem's creative ingenuity and Glèlè-Ahanhanzo's scholarly observations. Through this realism, Alem elucidates the circumstances surrounding Adandozan's deposition, offering a tableau of historical and cultural complexity.

The passage merges elements of historical research with fictional storytelling, employing realism to create a vivid and immersive narrative that resonates with historical and cultural authenticity. In the opening lines, the omniscient narrator precisely describes the deposition of King Adandozan by detailing the ritual steps and political circumstances surrounding this event. It begins with a historical reference to Huégbadja, the third monarch of Dahomey, emphasising his significance in founding the city of Agbomé: "Quand l'ancêtre Huégbadja, troisième monarque du Danhomé, fonda la ville d'Agbomé"²³⁴ This historical anchor grounds the narrative in verifiable historical events, and the reference to tradition and ancestral rituals adds a layer of cultural realism. The ceremonial language used by the consecrator during the deposition ceremony further enhances this realism: "Chausse les sandales de Huégbadja. Mets tes pas dans ses héroïques empreintes

²³³ Glèlè-Ahanhanzo, Maurice. 1974. *Le Danxome: Du pouvoir Aja à la nation fon*. Nubia, 115–126.

²³⁴ Alem, *Esclaves*. 105.

pour protéger la terre du Danhomé et toutes ses coutumes. [Put on Huégbadja's sandals. Follow in his heroic footsteps to protect the land of Danhomé and all its traditions.]"²³⁵ These ritualistic phrases mirror historical accounts of royal ceremonies and emphasise the cultural significance of the event. The portrayal of political intrigue and familial alliances within the court is also depicted with realism: "Ils étaient là, ses ennemis, parentèle hypocrite et bonasse... [They were there, his enemies, a hypocritical and good-natured kinship.]"²³⁶ This highlights the complex power dynamics and internal rivalries prevalent in Dahomean society, reflecting historical realities of dynastic struggles. The reference to the fetish of Sakpatê, the god of smallpox, highlights the religious beliefs and practices prevalent in the kingdom, underscoring the significance of spiritual traditions in shaping societal norms and governance. The assertion that "toutes les nations ainsi que leurs femmes t'appartiennent [All nations, along with their women, belong to you]" reflects the perceived authority and dominion of the king, emphasising the hierarchical structure of power within the kingdom. This assertion of sovereignty is further reinforced by the ceremonial act of donning the sacred sandals, symbolising the king's connection to tradition and divine legitimacy. The cries of "Vive le Roi! Vive le jour nouveau! [Long live the King! Long live the new day!]" signify the ceremonial affirmation of the king's rule and the ushering in of a new era, suggesting a collective acceptance and celebration of the political order.

Through realist writing, Alem combines elements of myth, ritual, and political intrigue, therefore painting a vivid tableau of the destitution of King Adandozan. The use of an omniscient narrator provides a panoramic view of the events, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and political significance surrounding the deposition. The incorporation of symbolic imagery, such as the sacred sandals of Huégbadja, imbues the narrative with layers of meaning, connecting the present to the mythical origins of the Dahomey kingdom. Blending historical accuracy with imaginative storytelling, Alem crafts a compelling narrative that not only transports readers to

²³⁵Ibid.

²³⁶Ibid., 106.

a bygone era but also offers profound insights into the complexities of power, tradition, and identity in precolonial Africa. Scholars and literary specialists are thus afforded the opportunity to engage in a comparative analysis, juxtaposing Glèlè-Ahanhanzo's original scholarly discourse with Alem's fictional reinterpretation. Such comparative scrutiny illuminates the transformative potential of fiction, elucidating the creative processes through which historical events are reimagined and imbued with new narrative dimensions. Thus, the chapter "Les sandales de Huegbadja" stands as a testament to the symbiotic relationship between scholarly inquiry and creative expression, wherein the boundaries between fact and fiction converge to yield new avenues of literary inquiry.

The incorporation of oral storytelling traditions in Alem's novel further enriches the narrative with cultural depth and authenticity. Throughout the text, references to oral traditions, songs, and proverbs highlight the importance of these cultural elements in preserving collective memory and transmitting cultural heritage across generations. For instance, the epilogue's opening quote, "Satanas ga le modji/El 'a fima san kple keli",²³⁷ draws upon a popular Mina song, showcasing the significance of oral traditions in shaping the characters' identities and experiences. By integrating these oral elements, the novel not only immerses readers in the cultural milieu of the characters but also underscores the enduring power of oral storytelling in conveying and building the African memory of the slave trade.

Alem's novel *Esclaves* employs panegyrics to blend oral narrative traditions with the written text. An illustrative example of this technique can be found in the title of a chapter: "e ple vi ple no", which translates to "when he takes the mother, he also takes the child". This phrase serves as a homage to Chacha, a figure still celebrated in oral traditions in Ouidah, where descendants of slave traders continue to honour his memory. Incorporating panegyrics serves as a tribute to the oral traditions surrounding figures like Francisco de Souza while also functioning as a poignant allusion to the controversial legacy of slave traders like him. However, these praises, deeply rooted in oral tradition, also indirectly acknowledge the darker aspects of Chacha's

²³⁷Ibid., 249.

legacy as a slave trader. By weaving these panegyrics into the narrative, the text not only acknowledges the complexities of historical figures like Francisco de Souza but also prompts readers to critically examine the ongoing repercussions of their actions, highlighting the enduring impact of the slave trade on both personal and collective memory.

Ago e e, doblayi, doblayi; Vovo wè koliko non kpon Adjinakou klaklan ... La voix, celle d'une femme, couverte par des rires d'autres femmes, faisait l'éloge litanique de Francisco Félix de Souza au détriment du roi, comparant le premier à l'éléphant adji-nakou, et le second à la biche koliko. [The voice, that of a woman, covered by the laughter of other women, delivered a litany of praise for Francisco Félix de Souza at the expense of the king, comparing the former to the elephant adjinakou and the latter to the doe koliko.]²³⁸

The use of rhythmic repetition and lyrical language in “Ago e e, doblayi, doblayi” creates a captivating oral quality, drawing attention to the performance aspect of the panegyric and its role as a communal expression. The juxtaposition of Francisco Félix de Souza with the majestic elephant adjinakou and the delicate biche koliko underscores contrasting attributes of strength and vulnerability, therefore elevating Souza's stature while diminishing the king's authority. The involvement of women's voices, accompanied by laughter, adds a layer of complexity, suggesting a subversion of traditional power structures and highlighting the agency of marginalised voices in shaping narratives.

Houékin ma hou lo; Bo nan m'bo hoto Sansoukpè dokpo hodo lankan wouto, e ple vi ple no, é é chiyin! Les paroles de la chanson enlevèrent ses derniers doutes au maître des rituels. L'avant-dernière phrase, forte et implacable, se ficha dans sa tête, violentant tout son être: *e ple vi ple no*, il achète les mères et leurs fils! Il, Chacha bien sûr, ou peut-être Gankpé, victorieux lui aussi de la biche, et vendeur d'esclaves impitoyable. [The words of the song dispelled the last of the ritual master's doubts. The penultimate phrase, strong and relentless, lodged itself in his mind, tormenting his entire being: *e ple vi ple no*, he buys the mothers and their sons! He, Chacha of course, or perhaps Gankpé, also victorious over the doe, and a ruthless slave trader.]²³⁹

²³⁸Ibid., 88.

²³⁹Ibid., 90.

The repetition of the phrase “e ple vi ple no”, meaning “he buys the mothers and their sons”, underscores the brutality and inhumanity of the transatlantic slave trade, encapsulating the essence of the historical atrocities committed against enslaved individuals and their families. This repetition not only emphasises the pervasive nature of slavery but also reinforces its intergenerational impact, highlighting how successive generations were affected by the trauma of enslavement. The naming of individuals such as Chacha and Gankpé within the panegyric connects these figures to the broader historical narrative, anchoring the collective memory of specific actors involved in perpetuating this system of exploitation. By associating these names with the dehumanising act of buying and selling human beings, the panegyric serves as a mechanism for preserving and transmitting the memory of those who profited from the trade in human lives.

The chant “e ple vi ple no” encapsulates the enduring impact of figures like Chacha, embodying both their economic power and moral culpability in perpetuating the slave trade. Through these chants, passed down through generations, the memory of historical figures and their deeds, both heroic and villainous, is etched into the collective consciousness of the community, shaping perceptions of identity and history. The panegyrics also serve as a means of social control and indoctrination, as seen in the recruitment ritual for new Amazon warriors. The chant becomes a tool for manipulation, reinforcing narratives of loyalty, vengeance, and justice while justifying acts of violence and subjugation. Thus, the memory potential of these panegyrics extends beyond mere historical commemoration to actively shaping beliefs, values, and behaviours within the society. In essence, the panegyrics sung in the text serve as reminders of the complex legacy of the slave trade era, encapsulating both its triumphs and atrocities within the oral traditions of the community. As the narrative unfolds, these chants continue to reverberate, weaving memory, identity, and morality that transcends time and space.

The integration of panegyrics within the text serves as a complex narrative device with several distinct functions. Primarily, these panegyrics imbue the narrative with historical and cultural context, extolling figures such as Francisco Félix de Souza and illuminating prevailing values and power dynamics of the era, particularly con-

cerning the slave trade. They play a central role in the preservation of collective memory, acting as conduits for oral history and legends that would otherwise risk fading into obscurity, thus ensuring that vital aspects of the past are not lost to time. The use of panegyrics also contributes significantly to character development and narrative tension, as they are often employed in conjunction with dramatic scenes to heighten emotional impact and deepen the reader's engagement with the story. Whether praising a revered figure or commemorating a significant event, these panegyrics evoke a sense of reverence, awe, or controversy, thereby adding layers of complexity to both the characters and the overarching narrative. In summary, the incorporation of panegyrics within the text serves as a narrative tool that fulfils various roles, from providing historical and cultural context to preserving collective memory and enhancing characterisation and tension, thus underscoring their indispensable role in shaping the overall narrative landscape.

The portrayal of the Bahia revolt draws astutely from revisited police archives, documenting the uprising of the Malès. This episode runs through chapters 16, 17 and 18, and offers a portrayal of the historical events surrounding the Malê uprising in Bahia in 1835, revealing the complex dynamics between slave owners and their enslaved individuals. Through the examination of court records and police archives, the author unveils the severity of the reprisals against participants in the revolt, including harsh sentences such as death penalties,²⁴⁰ public floggings, forced labor, and deportations to Africa.²⁴¹ By referencing the names of the accused, detailing their convictions, and recounting interrogations conducted by authorities, the narrative evokes a sense of authenticity derived from primary sources. The text examines the identities of key figures involved, notably highlighting the involvement of individuals like Francisco Olympio da Silva, the son of Félix Santana, whose roles in the uprising are documented in historical records. This attention to detail not only deepens our understanding of the historical context but also underscores the author's reliance on archival sources to reconstruct the events of the Malê revolt. As such,

²⁴⁰Ibid., 223.

²⁴¹Ibid., 226.

this passage serves as a testament to the invaluable insights gleaned from archival research, offering a compelling narrative that contributes to the broader historiographical discourse on slave resistance and abolition in Brazil.

By drawing extensively from archival sources, court records, and oral histories, both passages provide an understanding of the complexities surrounding slave rebellion and its suppression by colonial authorities. In “Nouveaux mondes X: Jugements et sentences”, the author reconstructs the punitive measures imposed on the participants of the Malês uprising, highlighting the severity of the sentences handed down by the tribunal of Bahia. Through detailed descriptions of court proceedings and interrogation transcripts, the passage offers a chilling portrayal of the judicial brutality inflicted upon the accused. By examining the interrogation techniques employed by authorities, such as questioning Miguel about Félix Santana’s potential involvement, the passage reveals the power dynamics and coercive tactics utilised by the colonial administration to extract information from the accused. Similarly, “Nouveaux mondes VIII: Incidents éparés” examines the clandestine world of slave resistance, offering a vivid depiction of the communication networks and clandestine meetings that underpinned the rebellion. Through the clandestine communication between Miguel and Félix Santana, the passage traces themes of trust, betrayal, and identity within the covert world of slave insurgency. The passage vividly portrays the violent repercussions of slave rebellion, capturing the visceral horror of both rebellion and its brutal suppression by colonial authorities. This chapter provides a vivid depiction of the violent repercussions of slave insurgency, as exemplified by the brutal suppression of the rebellion in Itaparica and Cachoeiras. Through harrowing accounts of violence and bloodshed, the author captures the visceral horror of slave rebellion and its suppression, underscoring the high stakes and dire consequences of resistance. This is epitomised in the chilling aftermath of the rebellion in Cachoeiras, where the bodies of slain rebels are callously disposed of and forgotten, emblematic of the dehumanising brutality of the slave system.

The above-mentioned chapters provide a comprehensive understanding of the historical realities of resisting slavery and its aftermath in Bahia. Drawing on archival sources and oral histories, the author

brings to life the untold stories of resistance and rebellion that have shaped the course of history. In essence, these chapters serve as a testament to the transformative power of archival research in uncovering marginalised voices and experiences, thus deepening our understanding of the past and its lasting impact on the present. By adopting a personal and reflective tone, reminiscent of a memoir, the novel allows readers to engage with Sule's thoughts, emotions, and memories, creating a profound connection with the historical events depicted. This memoir-like approach not only provides insight into Sule's individual journey but also contextualises the broader historical context of slavery and Afro-Brazilian involvement. Through Sule's perspective, readers are invited to engage with the complexities of identity, agency, and resilience in the face of adversity, therefore deepening their understanding of the human experience within the context of historical trauma and societal dynamics.

Alem's narrative captivates readers while also stimulating scholarly curiosity, prompting further exploration of the historical context. Through a selective list of consulted documents, the novel serves as a gateway to significant historical studies, offering valuable insights into the complexities of the slave trade and Afro-Brazilian involvement. This approach highlights the interdisciplinary nature of the novel, demonstrating its potential to enrich academic discourse on historical subjects. For instance, the novel's reference to "Afro-Brazilian in Togo: The Case of the Olympio Family" by Alcione M. Amos²⁴² provides readers with a starting point for further research. This scholarly work corroborates certain aspects of Alem's portrayal of Afro-Brazilians, enhancing the novel's credibility and prompting readers to delve deeper into the historical realities it depicts. In essence, Alem's novel entertains and educates, thus highlighting the value of literature as a tool for historical inquiry. By encouraging readers to explore archival sources and scholarly works, the novel contributes to a broader understanding of the complexities of the slave trade and its enduring impact on society.

²⁴²Amos, Alcione M. 2001. "Afro-Brazilians in Togo: The case of the Olympio family." *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 41, no. 162: 293–314.

In “Temps mêlés I: 1836, l’affaire Nimrod et le retour à Agoué de l’esclave Sule”, the text presents Afro-Brazilians as resilient individuals who negotiate identity, heritage, and historical traumas with introspection and agency. Through Sule’s journey, the narrative offers insights into the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism on Afro-Brazilian communities, highlighting their ability to assert agency and resilience in the face of adversity. The text portrays Afro-Brazilians with a sense of resilience and introspection as they reckon with their identity and heritage. Sule Djibril embarks on a journey back to his homeland after twenty-four years of enslavement in Brazil. Despite experiencing separation from his family due to the court’s refusal to extend their banishment, Sule reflects on his transformative experiences and the individuals who shaped his worldview. He reminisces about Sule the Hausa, an older slave who mentored him in Recife, attributing his newfound sense of agency and defiance against his masters to their encounters. Sule’s introspective journey highlights the resilience of Afro-Brazilians in the face of adversity and their ability to assert their agency despite the confines of slavery. The narrative further highlights the Afro-Brazilian involvement in the slave trade along the West African coast. It depicts the intricate dynamics of power and exploitation within the slave trade, as exemplified by the clandestine meetings between Sule and Félix Santana. Despite the coercive tactics employed by colonial authorities to suppress slave resistance, individuals like Sule operate within clandestine networks of rebellion, demonstrating their agency and resilience in the face of oppression. The text also traces the enduring legacy of colonialism and slavery on Afro-Brazilian identity and heritage. Sule’s return to Agoué prompts reflections on his ancestral roots and the impact of historical traumas on contemporary realities. His interactions with the local community evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing for connection, highlighting the complexities of identity and belonging faced by Afro-Brazilians in the diaspora.

Within the text, there exists a precise depiction of the Afro-Brazilian community, employing sophisticated narrative techniques to illuminate their identity and interactions within the societal framework. The narrative strategically employs the term “Afro-Brazilians” to denote a distinct group returning to Benin after enduring slavery in Brazil. This deliberate choice not only underscores their historical ori-

gins but also emphasises their unique cultural identity forged by their experiences in Brazil. By utilising this specific appellation, the narrative underscores the importance of recognising the Afro-Brazilian community as a distinct entity within the social fabric. Vivid descriptions in the novel examine the cultural practices and social dynamics prevalent within the Afro-Brazilian community. Depictions of their regular gatherings and self-proclaimed superiority over others reveal their efforts to uphold a cohesive identity rooted in shared experiences and values. Interactions with other inhabitants of the region reveal the intricate dynamics between identity, social hierarchy, and community cohesion. Central to the narrative is the character of Djibril Sule, who staunchly refuses to assimilate into the Afro-Brazilian community despite his own experiences in Brazil. His rejection of invitations and insistence on maintaining his individual identity serve as commentary on the complexities of identity formation and the tensions between communal belonging and personal autonomy. Through Sule's character arc, the narrative highlights the enduring struggle to reconcile personal agency with societal expectations. The narrative also traces internal conflicts within the Afro-Brazilian community, exemplified by the character of Francisco Olympio da Silva. Despite his past involvement in the fight against slavery, Olympio's engagement in the slave trade underscores the complex nature of identity and the moral ambiguities inherent in societal dynamics. His story thus serves as a compelling exploration of the tensions between cultural heritage, economic necessity, and personal integrity within the Afro-Brazilian community.

The exploration of slave trade narratives, as exemplified in Alem's novel *Esclaves*, demonstrates a profound engagement with various forms of historical documentation. By weaving together archival records, research works, literary texts, oral narratives, and panegyrics, the novel transcends mere storytelling to offer a rich portrayal of historical realism and cultural authenticity. Alem's adept utilisation of these diverse sources not only deepens the narrative with intricate details and precise perspectives but also invites readers to critically engage with the complexities of the slave trade era. Through the integration of historical documents, the novel presents a sustained examination of power dynamics, economic interests, and moral dilemmas inherent in

the slave trade. By revisiting archival records and oral traditions, Alem breathes life into forgotten voices and marginalised experiences, revealing the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism. The incorporation of panegyrics adds layers of cultural significance and collective memory, serving as reminders of the human cost of exploitation and resistance. *Esclaves* stands as a testament to the transformative potential of historical documentation in shaping narratives and fostering deeper understanding of the past. Through its attention to detail and careful reconstruction of historical events, the novel not only educates but also inspires further exploration and inquiry into the complexities of the slave trade and its effects on society. In essence, Alem's work exemplifies the enduring relevance of literature as a means of reckoning with history and grappling with the complexities of the human experience.

Through the narrator's voice, one of the novel's key strategies for challenging historical narratives lies in its portrayal of moments of collaboration between Africans and Europeans, characterised not by domination but by complicity. This illuminates a lesser-explored facet of colonial history often overlooked in conventional discourses. Notably, the complicity between characters like Chacha de Souza and Gankpé in the novel *Esclaves* exemplifies the involvement of Africans in the slave trade. The fate of King Adandozan is revealed to be influenced by the alliance between his nephew Gankpé and the Portuguese fort's director, Felix de Souza. While Gankpé seeks revenge and the throne, Felix de Souza sees an opportunity to advance his slave trading activities through collaboration. Together, they plot to dethrone the king, leading to unforeseen consequences involving the master of rituals. The novel depicts the intricate relationship between Africa and Europe, and between white and black, through the alliance between the king and his female white interpreter, Señorita Sophia. The idea of such a relationship leading to progeny is perceived as a transgression and becomes a motive for the king's deposition. *Esclaves* thus disrupts conventional historical narratives by presenting a precise portrayal of collaboration and complicity between Africans and Europeans, offering a fresh perspective on the Africa-Europe encounter during the era of the slave trade. In *Esclaves*, Alem challenges traditional historical narratives by exploring the complex, often uncomfortable dynamics of

complicity between Africans and Europeans during the transatlantic slave trade. Rather than presenting a simplistic dichotomy of European perpetrators and African victims, the novel examines the more unsettling dimensions of colonial history, highlighting how individuals from both sides collaborated for various reasons in perpetuating this brutal system of exploitation.

Alem's historiopoetic approach in *Esclaves* reframes the transatlantic slave trade by foregrounding the complicity that existed at political, economic, and even personal levels within African societies and their interactions with European traders. By doing so, the novel not only critiques the idea of one-sided historical victimhood but also creates space for understanding the complex motives and systemic forces that shaped the colonial experience. Perhaps the most striking example of complicity in *Esclaves* is the alliance between Gankpé, the nephew of the King of Dahomey, and Francisco Félix de Souza, known as Chacha, a Portuguese slave trader. Motivated by personal ambition and a desire for power, Gankpé forms a strategic partnership with Chacha, viewing the Portuguese trader as a key ally in his quest for the throne. Chacha, for his part, seeks to strengthen his control over the slave trade and eliminate rival European traders. This collaboration results in the downfall of King Adandozan and the ascension of Gankpé, now known as Guézo, who continues the brutal practice of slave trading.²⁴³ Through this narrative, Alem shows how political ambitions and rivalries on both African and European sides became deeply entangled, illustrating how complicity was driven not only by greed but also by the brutal realities of power struggles.

Alem also examines the ambiguous relationship between King Adandozan and his white interpreter, Señorita Sophia, a relationship that transcends racial boundaries and causes tensions within the kingdom. The possibility of Sophia bearing the king's child, a métis child, is seen as a threat to the "purity" of the royal bloodline and becomes a factor contributing to the king's downfall. This personal and intimate complicity adds a layer of complexity to the political and economic dimensions of collaboration, showing that alliances between Africans and Europeans were not solely motivated by material or strategic con-

²⁴³ Alem, *Esclaves*. 45, 62–63, 94–95, 232–233.

cerns, but also by deeply personal and emotional dynamics. The involvement of Europeans in intimate relationships further complicates the racial and social structures that underpinned the colonial system, showing that complicity was not limited to transactional exchanges but also seeped into the fabric of personal and social lives.²⁴⁴

Through these examples, *Esclaves* deconstructs traditional historical narratives that present the transatlantic slave trade as a simplistic tale of European oppressors and African victims. Instead, Alem's narrative emphasizes the roles played by certain African leaders, traders, and intermediaries in maintaining and expanding the system of slavery. By drawing attention to figures such as Gankpé, who aligns himself with European interests, and others who collaborated with Europeans for reasons ranging from personal vengeance to political ambition, the novel presents a far more complex and unsettling view of history. The inclusion of African intermediaries such as the Egba and Mahi traders, who played a central role in capturing and selling slaves, further challenges the idea of African innocence in the face of European exploitation. These figures, depicted as active facilitators of the trade, show how internal divisions, rivalries, and ambitions led to complicity within African societies themselves.²⁴⁵ This complicity was not only economic but was also deeply ingrained in social dynamics, such as tribal rivalries and power struggles, which intersected with the European slave trade.

Alem also examines the varied motivations behind African collaboration with Europeans, complicating the simplistic notion of voluntary betrayal. For some African leaders and intermediaries, collaboration was driven by personal ambition, a desire for wealth, or the need to secure political power in a fragmented and unstable world. Others, such as the King of Dahomey, sought military alliances with European traders in the face of intertribal warfare and the need for resources to sustain power.²⁴⁶ Alem's careful portrayal of these motivations highlights the complexity of historical agency, emphasising that complicity

²⁴⁴Ibid., 48, 75.

²⁴⁵Ibid., 27–28.

²⁴⁶Ibid., 28, 66.

ity in the slave trade was often motivated by pragmatic considerations rather than an outright embrace of exploitation.

Esclaves also sparks reflection on the long-term consequences of this complicity on African societies. The internal divisions and power struggles exacerbated by the slave trade weakened traditional structures, sowing discord and long-lasting damage within communities. The alliances formed between African leaders and European traders often undermined social cohesion, as rivalries were played out through the violent practice of capturing and selling people. These actions not only decimated communities but also contributed to the destabilisation of African political systems, leaving lasting scars on the continent's social fabric.²⁴⁷ Alem's portrayal of the characters and their interactions demonstrates how complicity manifests in various forms. The dialogue between African and European characters, their motivations, and their decisions all serve to illustrate the systemic entanglements that sustained the slave trade. Alem's use of historical figures, such as Gankpé and Chacha, alongside fictionalised elements, allows him to critique the historical narrative while offering new perspectives on a deeply entrenched system of exploitation. By exposing the complex web of complicity between both sides, Alem challenges readers to reconsider the dynamics of power, betrayal, and survival in colonial history. Through this searching portrayal, *Esclaves* offers a complex, and at times uncomfortable, view on the past; one that refuses to simplify the interactions between coloniser and colonised, instead highlighting the ways in which complicity shaped the course of history and its aftermath.

Adandozan occupies a central place in Alem's narrative, serving as one of the key historical figures around whom the plot revolves. As the ninth king of Dahomey (1797–1818), he faced widespread historical condemnation, primarily due to his perceived cruelty, which is particularly marked by his alleged involvement in the sale of his rival and brother Gankpé's family members into slavery. As a result, official representations of the Dahomean royal lineage often omit both his name and his emblem. This deliberate erasure is likely the product of propagandistic efforts orchestrated by his successor, Gankpé. In con-

²⁴⁷Ibid., 66.

trast, Alem's novel aims to subvert this historical omission, actively contesting and attempting to reverse the erasure of Adandozan from the collective memory of Benin.

In "Temps Anciens", the narrative unfolds within the kingdom of Dahomey, chronicling the overthrow and subsequent imprisonment of King Adandozan, a plot orchestrated by his rival Gankpé, later known as Guézo, and his ally, the Portuguese slave trader Francisco de Souza, with the reluctant involvement of the protagonist, the master of rituals. A crucial moment in the novel occurs during a lavish banquet held in Gléhué, a coastal enclave of Dahomey, in honour of King Adandozan. This scene juxtaposes European opulence with African royal dignity, subtly veiling the dark alliances between local leaders and human traffickers. The poisoning of the king, taking place amid the grandeur of the court in Abomey, marks the beginning of the slave's journey, setting in motion a chain of events that irrevocably shape his fate. Driven by compulsion, the master of rituals betrays the king, culminating in a ritualistic ceremony where Adandozan's name, and by extension his legacy, is forcibly erased from Dahomean history. In a moment, the king is referred to by his birth name rather than his royal title, symbolising his tragic fall from power and the erasure of his reign from the collective memory of the kingdom.

Avisu, Avisu, Avisu! Je t'appelle trois fois, Avisu Madogugu, que ton véritable nom de règne à jamais disparaisse! Tu n'es plus, tu n'es plus, tu n'es plus! Que même ton souvenir fasse mal au palais de celui qui osera prononcer ton nom banni. Va, va, va dans le néant, pour toujours [...] [Avisu, Avisu, Avisu! I call you three times, Avisu Madogugu, may your true name of reign forever disappear! You are no more, you are no more, you are no more! May even the memory of you hurt the palace of him who dares to speak your banished name. Go, go, go into the void, forever.]²⁴⁸

In addition to the accusation that Adandozan sold his rival Gankpé's mother into slavery, Alem frames the king's deposition as driven by both political and economic motives. Politically, Gankpé's ambition to seize power in Dahomey is a central factor, while economically, Adandozan's resistance to the activities of slave traders, particularly the influential Francisco de Souza, plays a central role. This resistance is said to stem from Adandozan's belief in the potential for the planta-

²⁴⁸Ibid., 167.

tion system to be established on Dahomean soil, a vision that directly conflicted with the interests of the European traders. In reflecting on the controversy his portrayal of the “forgotten” king Adandozan has stirred, Alem observes:

Pour les Béninois je comprends, parce que j’ai parlé quand même d’un roi dont ils n’aiment pas parler, à savoir le roi Adandozan, et donc toucher la mémoire de ce roi dont le nom est interdit dans la tradition [...] C’est pour ça que dans le livre je ne l’appelle jamais par son nom. Il s’appelle le roi. Il s’appelle toujours le roi, et c’est seulement à la fin que son nom est prononcé, une seule fois dans le roman. [For Beninese, I understand, because I spoke about a king they prefer not to mention, namely King Adandozan, thereby touching upon the memory of this king whose name is forbidden in tradition. [...] That is why, in the book, I never call him by his name. He is referred to as ‘the king.’ He is always ‘the king,’ and it is only at the very end that his name is mentioned, just once, in the novel.]²⁴⁹

By bringing back the name and reign of Adandozan from obscurity, effectively rescuing him from the forgotten annals of history, Alem challenges the act of forgetting within the broader context of Francophone West African literature. In doing so, he draws attention to the often-overlooked topics of the transatlantic slave trade and slavery within his novel. Alem boldly challenges the kingdom of Abomey’s strict prohibition on discussing the ousted monarch, King Adandozan. Despite being erased from the royal lineage, Adandozan’s legacy persists in the collective memory. Alem’s narrative thus serves as a reminder of the forgotten king’s reign, illuminating the complexities of power struggles and political machinations within the kingdom. Through his portrayal of Adandozan, Alem maintains a careful balance between historical accuracy and cultural sensitivity, breathing new life into Adandozan’s story and ensuring that it will not be consigned to oblivion.

In the discourse surrounding the historical narrative of the transatlantic slave trade, Ouidah, Benin, emerges as a focal point where spatial markers intertwine with collective memory. The Portuguese fort of São João Baptista, now a museum, epitomises this convergence, preserving a tangible link to the era of enslavement. Nearby, the Place des Enchères bears witness to the dehumanisation of enslaved indi-

²⁴⁹Omuku, 2012. *Representations of slavery and the slave trade in the Francophone West African novel* (Doctoral dissertation, University College London).

viduals, while the residence of Francisco de Souza serves as a haunting reminder of the economic motives behind the trade. Further into Ouidah's alleys, Somaï echoes with the suffering of those awaiting enslavement, culminating at the Door of No Return, symbolising the irrevocable rupture inflicted upon countless lives. These sites, preserved and commemorated, ensure the enduring resonance of slavery's legacy, therefore amplifying the voices of the past in the present.

The protagonist, embodying the master of rituals, is compelled to flee through the sacred forest of Kpassè, traversing villages and landscapes steeped in spirituality and mysticism, before being captured by the formidable warriors of Gankpé. This capture symbolises entry into the tumultuous cycle of the trade, where human beings are reduced to mere commodities, exchanged and sold amidst the icy indifference of slave markets. The trajectory of the protagonist, as the master of rituals, vividly portrays the landscapes traversed by enslaved individuals during the transatlantic slave trade, highlighting the dehumanising conditions they endured from capture to arrival in the New World. After undergoing capture and inspection to meet traders' criteria, the protagonist is sold into slavery. Alongside other captives, he arrives at Porto Seguro, a bustling hub for the slave trade. Escorted to an estate owned by the English trader Wood, they are temporarily housed underground before the journey to the New World begins. Amidst uncertainty, the protagonist, now named Miguel, anxiously awaits his fate. Finally, the day of embarkation arrives, and Miguel, along with others, is led to the well for a final wash before boarding the ship. The spaces depicted illustrate various stages of the slave experience. Porto Seguro is where Miguel and other slaves await their fate before being sold and shipped across the Atlantic. Within Porto Seguro, a depot serves to hold slaves before departure. It is a place of monotony and apprehension, where captives anxiously await news of their impending journey. The slave ship represents the next stage of the slave experience, where captives endure the brutal conditions of forced transportation across the vast expanse of the Atlantic, symbolising the journey into the unknown marked by suffering, peril, and the loss of freedom.

The epic saga continues on the plantations of the New World, between Recife and Bahia, where the novel depicts with striking precision the daily cruelty and brutal exploitation endured by the slaves.

Les contremaîtres les prirent en charge pour leur enseigner, outils à la main, les différents travaux liés à la culture de la canne; ils leur criaient des ordres en portugais, une langue qu'aucun d'entre eux ne comprenait. Les mots violentaient Miguel, car malgré leur obscurité, le ton avec lequel ils étaient prononcés était à la fois méprisant et suffisant. Pis encore, il n'avait personne à qui demander le sens des insultes. [The overseers took charge of the slaves to initiate them into the various tasks related to sugarcane cultivation, tools in hand; they shouted orders at them in Portuguese, a language none of them understood. The words directed at Miguel were like blows, as despite their obscurity, the disdainful and self-sufficient tone with which they were uttered was perceptible.]²⁵⁰

This passage exemplifies the psychological repercussions of commands delivered in Portuguese, a language unintelligible to the slaves. Language thus emerges as a mechanism of control and supremacy, underscoring the disparity in power dynamics between the enslaved and their oppressors. The inability of the slaves to comprehend the overseers' language amplifies their sense of isolation and helplessness within their circumstances.

Un fouet, manipulé par l'un des contremaîtres, siffla par-dessus sa tête, en guise d'avertissement: il avait fait tomber, plus par mauvais usage que par inadvertance, la lourde serpe effilée avec laquelle on coupait les ronces sous les plants de canne. [A whip, wielded by one of the overseers, whistled above his head as a warning: Miguel had dropped, more out of clumsiness than carelessness, the heavy, sharp sickle used to cut through the brambles under the cane plants.]²⁵¹

This episode, wherein Miguel accidentally drops the sickle and incurs reprimand through the menacing sound of the whip, emphasises the overseers' authority over the slaves and the severe repercussions of minor errors. The whip emerges as a potent symbol of the pervasive brutality and exploitation inherent in the slaves' daily existence. This moment adds to the narrative landscape, where violence and exploitation are pervasive, underscoring the relentless cruelty endured by the slaves as a recurring theme.

However, it is in the act of rebellion that the resilience and quest for freedom of the slave crystallises, ultimately leading to a triumphant return to Agoué, the place of origin. This reclaiming of the slave's trajectory, far from conforming to the fatalism depicted in some histori-

²⁵⁰ Alem, *Esclaves*. 144.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 144.

cal accounts, reaffirms the possibility of redemption and a return to roots, thus challenging simplistic narratives of impossibility of return, as propagated by the UNESCO memorial site through the concept of the “Door of No Return”.

The portrayal of the slave route in Alem’s *Esclaves* transcends mere historical narrative to embody a remarkable literary depth. By revisiting this dark episode of human history, the author transcends the boundaries of time and space to offer a reflection on the human condition, resilience, and quest for freedom. With acute sensitivity, Alem depicts the trials and tribulations of characters ensnared in the web of the slave trade, breathing new life into these often forgotten or oversimplified accounts. Through this literary reappropriation, the writer reveals the potential of literature to rewrite history by revisiting obscured narratives. By examining the shadows of history, Alem reminds us of the transformative power of fiction, capable not only of eliciting empathy but also of stimulating reflection and challenging dominant narratives. The literary representation of the slave route illustrates the essential role of the writer as an architect of collective memory, shaping our understanding of the past and our vision of the future.

The impact of this narrative polyphony is profound. By incorporating a multiplicity of voices, *Esclaves* avoids simplistic moral dichotomies and presents a multi-layered account of the slave trade. The various viewpoints allow Alem to examine not only the personal and collective stakes involved but also the long-term effects of slavery on both African and Brazilian societies. In doing so, he offers a historiopoetic framework that emphasises the complexity of historical processes, showing that the stories of individuals, however distant they may seem, are inextricably tied to broader historical forces. Through this polyphony, *Esclaves* transcends traditional historical narratives, offering readers a deeper, more intricate understanding of the past.

The novel critically examines the Amazons of Dahomey through a series of intense and harrowing events. One striking instance occurs when the Amazons murder the wife of the ritual master. The scene vividly portrays the brutality and callousness of these historical figures.²⁵² As the young woman is mercilessly tormented and killed, the Amazons

²⁵² Ibid., 91.

exhibit a lack of empathy and humanity, thus emphasising their role as ruthless enforcers. The ritual master, witnessing the horrifying act, experiences conflicting emotions, torn between his loyalty to the king and the tragic loss of his loved ones, who are taken into slavery. This episode exposes the cruelty of the Amazons and their unquestioning adherence to a system that perpetuates violence and oppression.

Nansica, the Amazon, is a complex and feared figure in *Esclaves*. Her beauty, which stands out even in the darkness, contrasts sharply with her brutality and merciless violence. She embodies the cruelty of the slave system, ready to carry out violent acts without hesitation, as shown by the image of her sword poised to decapitate a young wife. The term “Amazon traitor”²⁵³ emphasises her role as a complicit figure in the repression and systematic violence, presenting her within a framework of betrayal and submission to the oppressive power. Nansica evokes palpable terror, not only through her physical strength but also through her commitment to a system in which humanity is crushed in the name of order and control.²⁵⁴ In this way, she represents embodied brutality, both hated and respected, in her role as an executor of institutionalised violence.

By exposing these chilling events, the novel critically challenges the glorified portrayal of the Amazons and presents a social critique of their actions and the larger historical context in which they operated. The author’s narrative approach forces readers to confront the consequences of such atrocities, inviting reflection on the larger implications of power, dominance, and the human cost of subjugation in historical contexts. Through these powerful and evocative scenes, the novel ultimately offers a damning commentary on the Amazons and the complex dynamics of oppression during the time of the slave trade.

This critique is echoed in Hollywood productions such as the film “The Woman King”, which, while dramatising the story of the Agojie warriors of Dahomey, also brings to light the complexities and moral ambiguities of their historical role²⁵⁵ and the violence they perpetrated.

²⁵³ Ibid., 169.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 119.

²⁵⁵ Bay, Edna G. 1979. “On the Trail of the Bush King: A Dahomean Lesson in the Use of Evidence.” *History in Africa* 6, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3171738>.

This duality serves to highlight the complex reality of these women, who were both empowered²⁵⁶ and complicit in a brutal system. The Agojie, often romanticised as noble warriors, were deeply involved in the slave trade, capturing and selling their enemies to European traders.²⁵⁷ This involvement underscores the complex dynamics of power, gender, and violence in Dahomey society, challenging simplistic narratives of heroism and victimhood. By juxtaposing the novel's harrowing scenes with the broader historical and cultural context, the author invites readers to reflect on the enduring legacies of oppression and the ways in which history is remembered and retold. The narrative thus serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of subjugation and the moral complexities inherent in the exercise of power.

Esclaves serves as a profound reflection on the plight of enslaved individuals, encapsulating their harrowing journey within the intricate fabric of literary narrative. Alem charts historical landscapes, strategically locating key moments of the transatlantic slave trade between Ouidah, aptly dubbed the "Slave Coast", and Bahia in Brazil, where the spectre of slavery continues to loom large over Afro-descendant communities. Through characterisations, exemplified by figures such as Felix Santana and the slave Edum, as well as Afro-Brazilians hailing from West Africa, Alem imbues his narrative with a resonance that transcends temporal and spatial boundaries.

In dissecting Alem's methodology, one uncovers a complex critique of historical and symbolic dimensions. *Esclaves* emerges as more than a mere recounting of events; it evolves into a sophisticated meditation on the intricacies of history and the potency of symbolism. Alem positions markers of the slave trade in the novel, particularly in Ouidah, while orchestrating a symphony of temporal and spatial arrangements across the novel's principal sections: "Anciens temps", "Nouveaux Mondes", and "Temps mêlés". These sections artfully correspond to key junctures in the protagonist's journey, delineating his departure

²⁵⁶Law, Robin. 1991. *The Slave Coast of West Africa, 1550–1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

²⁵⁷Solly, Meilan. 2022. "The Real Warriors Behind 'The Woman King'." *Smithsonian Magazine*. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/real-warriors-woman-king-dahomey-agojie-amazons-180980750/>.

from Dahomey in 1818, his enslavement in Recife and Bahia, and his eventual return to Dahomey in the wake of the 1835 Bahia rebellion. Through this intricate narrative architecture, Alem traces historical discourse, inviting readers on an intellectual journey through the annals of the transatlantic slave trade.

Alem's narrative begins aboard the *James Matthew*, a vessel infamous for its role in the transatlantic slave trade. This choice adds depth to traditional portrayals of slave ships, moving beyond their function as mere symbols of transportation or abolitionist messaging. Alem intricately weaves the ship into the narrative, particularly its connection to Francisco de Souza, known as Chacha, a prominent slave trader and viceroy of Ouidah. By highlighting this association, Alem prompts readers to examine the complex roles played by individuals and institutions in perpetuating the slave trade. Placing readers within the confines of the ship, Alem creates a visceral experience that confronts the horrors endured by enslaved individuals during their harrowing journey across the Atlantic. Through this approach, Alem's depiction of the *James Matthew* transcends mere symbolism, offering a sustained examination of its historical significance and enduring impact on collective memory.

The protagonist's encounter with Sir Stephan Brickshaw and his associates further underscores the ship's tainted legacy. Brickshaw's account of the ship's cargo, including 433 enslaved individuals, amplifies its dark past:

Sa Royale Majesté, avec dans ses cales une cargaison de quatre cent trente-trois esclaves raflés en Afrique [...] le *James Matthew* continue d'intriguer. Certains racontent qu'on y entend parfois des plaintes sourde de la coque et des pleurs sortir des profondeurs de sa cale. [Her Royal Majesty, with its holds filled with a cargo of four hundred and thirty-three slaves snatched from Africa. [...] the *James Matthew* continues to intrigue. Some say that sometimes one can hear moans emanating from the hull and cries emerging from the depths of its hold.]²⁵⁸

The portrayal of the *James Matthew* transcends conventional depictions of slave ships, offering a fresh perspective on the transatlantic slave trade. By imbuing the vessel with renewed significance and introducing elements of mystique, Alem confronts readers with the

²⁵⁸ Alem, *Esclaves*. 16.

harsh realities endured by enslaved individuals while tapping into the realm of collective memory and the supernatural. Through vivid descriptions and haunting imagery, the ship becomes a metaphorical conduit for the curses and traumas inflicted by the trade, thereby resonating with African memory and inviting reflection on its enduring impact. Alem's narrative innovation allows for a careful examination of this dark chapter in human history, urging readers to confront the complexities of the past and its implications for the present.

The novel further prompts reflection on the power dynamics inherent in historical narratives, questioning whose voices are heard and whose perspectives are marginalised in the construction of history. *Esclaves* challenges dominant historical discourses by focusing on an ordinary character, Miguel, who experiences capture, deportation, exploitation, and eventual return. Through Miguel's journey, Alem retraces the paths of millions who endured and resisted the slave trade, symbolising their memory through the master of rituals. By centring on Miguel's story, the novel subverts the dominant epic mode of representation in Francophone African literature, as noted by Omuku.²⁵⁹ Ultimately, King Adandozan's fate serves as the gateway to this gripping narrative, transforming the elite's story into a vivid portrayal of the transatlantic slave trade from the enslaved individual's perspective.

By adopting this strategy of inversion, Alem effectively challenges established historical norms and offers a more inclusive understanding of African history. The shift in focus allows Alem to vividly describe the brutality and absurdity of slavery while also providing readers with a unique perspective on the life of an enslaved individual. Through Miguel's experiences, the novel addresses the trauma of the slave trade, resistance against injustice, and the survival strategies of the deported people. *Esclaves* stands as a remarkable work that revisits and redefines the current body of historical study, revealing the resilience and defiance of those who endured this dark period of history.

Alem's novel exemplifies a powerful historiopoetic approach, characterised by the strategic use of inversion to present a counter-narrative of the slave trade from an African perspective. Through meticulous

²⁵⁹ Omuku, 2012. *Representations of slavery and the slave trade in the Francophone West African novel*.

research and artistic finesse, Alem skilfully reimagines historical facts, challenges established discourses, and recovers forgotten narratives. By adopting a transgeneric form of the historical novel that incorporates theatrical elements, Alem resonates and performs the past in the present, giving voice to historical figures and inviting today's readers to revisit a harsh and buried past from a refreshed perspective. Through their skilful portrayal, writers not only expose the brutality of slavery but also humanise historical characters, such as Miguel, showcasing their suffering and resilience, which allows readers to connect with their experiences.

This shift towards literature as a medium for revisiting history provides a fertile ground for examining the past differently and envisioning a future shaped by memory.²⁶⁰ As a result, the role once exclusively reserved for historians finds a hospitable refuge in literature, enabling a complex understanding of the past and offering possibilities for future recollections. In *Esclaves*, Alem showcases the power of literature as an exemplary archive for preserving the historical values of decimated peoples. By revisiting history through the eyes of emblematic characters, Alem constructs a narrative that not only educates but also fosters a deeper understanding of the African experience during the transatlantic slave trade. The novel thus serves as a testament to Alem's commitment to his *devoir de mémoire* (duty to remember) as an African writer.

It is not a matter of casting accusatory blame upon their descendants, as is often the case in Togo, but rather of understanding and acquainting ourselves with our history by familiarising ourselves with those who have shaped it. The history of genealogies, particularly among the elite, is complex, as Alem seems to imply. Descendants do not always uphold the honour of their 'noble' lineage, yet they may also rectify the infamously tarnished memory of their forebears. Notably, it was a descendant of these slaveholding Afro-Brazilians who led Togo to independence:

Quand Francisco Olympio mourut en 1907, il laissait derrière lui sept épouses vertueuses, une famille riche et vingt et un enfants tous éduqués dans les meilleures écoles coloniales. L'un d'entre eux, Sylvanus Epiphanio Elpidio, surnommé plus tard

²⁶⁰Ricœur, Paul. 2000. *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*. Paris: Seuil.

le Métis par ses ennemis, sera le fer de lance de la lutte des indigènes contre la colonisation européenne, et deviendra, de ce fait, le premier président du jeune Etat indépendant de TiBrava. [When Francisco Olympio passed away in 1907, he left behind seven virtuous wives, a wealthy family, and twenty-one children all educated in the finest colonial schools. One of them, Sylvanus Epiphanio Elpidio, later dubbed “the Mulatto” by his adversaries, would spearhead the indigenous struggle against European colonisation and consequently become the first president of the nascent independent state of TiBrava.]²⁶¹

Esclaves exemplifies the power of literature as an archive for preserving the historical values of decimated peoples and revisiting history through the eyes of emblematic characters. By reconstructing the delicate and little-known historical and political context of African elites confronted with the pressure of the transatlantic slave trade, Alem reveals the collaboration of certain African elites with slave traders, challenging conventional narratives and offering a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of the past. Through the narrative lens of emblematic characters, such as Miguel, Alem constructs a narrative that not only educates but also fosters a deeper understanding of the African experience during the transatlantic slave trade. By humanising historical figures and presenting their stories in a compelling manner, Alem invites readers to engage with the past on a more empathetic and personal level, therefore contributing to the preservation of historical memory and the transmission of cultural heritage.

Esclaves also possesses a triple originality. Firstly, it addresses the issue of the inherent contradictions within the African discourse on slavery, which often confines itself to an accusatory narrative against the West. Secondly, the story holds contemporary relevance, given the controversial role of de Souza, which easily translates to both colonial and modern periods. Finally, *Esclaves* situates slavery within a universal framework, as the question of “collaboration” is not exclusive to Africa; it resonates with the human tragedies witnessed during both world wars, including the Holocaust. However, it must be acknowledged that this issue has been more ideological than critically examined. Through the author’s skill and the inherent qualities of the novel, the memory of the slave trade is vividly brought to the forefront. Alem, through the medium of fiction, provides readers with an opportunity

²⁶¹ Alem, *Esclaves*. 254–255.

to engage with the intricate history of the slave trade using narrative techniques. In doing so, he catalyses a profound reconsideration of a history that is far from linear, transcending the confines of binary discourses and intimately intertwined with the present and the fate of African and postcolonial societies. This underscores the transformative power of literature, which not only preserves historical memory but also prompts critical engagement and reflection, ultimately deepening our understanding of complex and interconnected human narratives.

4.2. N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*: Unshadowing the Shameful Past

Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents takes on this challenge by resurrecting the largely forgotten figure of Nsaku né Vunda, the first ambassador of the Kongo to the Pope. The novel immerses the reader in a literary journey that spans history and imagination, probing neglected historical narratives. How does he move between history and imagination, breathing life into the past and provoking deep reflections on its impact on the present? In his novel, what specific approach does this author employ to vividly exemplify the power of literature to prompt reflection on understanding of historical traumas?

Innovatively, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* foregrounds the character of Nsaku né Vunda, through whom N'Sondé revisits the ties between European kingdoms and the Kingdom of Kongo in the fifteenth century, revealing the power dynamics, contradictions, and paradoxes that defined these interactions. By centring Nsaku's perspective, N'Sondé challenges readers to reconsider entrenched historical narratives, opening space for new interpretations of the past. This analysis argues that the novel's autobiographical and coming-of-age structure, coupled with a historiographical narrative voice, enables N'Sondé to reveal the often-overlooked experiences of historical figures who have been erased or obscured by conventional histories. Such an approach disrupts monolithic representations of the past, allowing for a multiplicity of voices and interpretations. Through Nsaku's perspective, the reader is drawn into a journey that spans the brutality and inhumanity of the transatlantic slave trade, tracing his movements

from the hinterlands of Kongo to Europe and across the Americas, following the contours of the broader Atlantic triangle. N'Sondé's narrative techniques, characterised by emotional depth and urgency, effectively convey the inner turmoil and resilience that define this journey. The voice of the novel reflects the personal stakes of Nsaku's mission while simultaneously echoing the collective trauma endured by millions. Through Nsaku's eyes, the novel calls for a deeper understanding of history that recognises the complexity of the past and the enduring impact of its legacies on contemporary life.

This chapter critically examines the transformative potential of N'Sondé's novel in reshaping historical narratives into artistic expression. It investigates how N'Sondé's historiopoetic framework turns the novel into a fertile space for historiographic exploration, one where fiction does not merely represent the past but interrogates and reimagines it. By recovering the voices of those marginalised or silenced by conventional historical narratives, N'Sondé exposes the underlying hegemonic structures that have shaped these histories. In doing so, he opens the possibility for a more critical, reflexive, and inclusive historical discourse.

N'Sondé's work stands apart from conventional narratives of the slave trade through its exploration of the intricate complexities of human experience, offering a restored voice to a historical figure long relegated to obscurity. Rather than merely recounting the horrors of the transatlantic trade, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* immerses the reader in the emotional depth, contradictions, and moral dilemmas that shape the character of Nsaku. His journey, from Kongo to Europe and across the Americas, confronts the reader not only with the violence of the trade but also with the resilience, courage, and hope of its victims. N'Sondé thus transcends traditional historical narratives, providing a more humanist view of the transatlantic slave trade. This perspective invites readers to critically reflect on its enduring repercussions, urging a re-examination of its impact on the contemporary world.

Central to this analysis is the novel's ability to transcend traditional historiography through its use of key literary strategies, including narrative play, a transgeneric structure, and the interweaving of multiple motifs. These elements enable N'Sondé to position the novel in a limi-

nal space that exists between fiction and history, as well as between past and present. The analysis begins with an examination of Nsaku né Vunda as a central historical figure, emphasising his dual identity, diplomatic mission, and privileged role as a witness to significant historical events. His complex character reveals N'Sondé's unique approach to historiography, one that refuses to separate personal experience from historical facts. The alternating use of subjective first-person narration and a third-person historiographical voice highlights the tension between lived experience and historical reconstruction, offering a layered perspective on the past. The chapter then shifts to a discussion of the novel's genre hybridity, noting how N'Sondé blends historical fiction, autobiography, initiation narrative, and adventure genres. This fusion deepens the text, creating a polyphonic exploration of the transatlantic slave trade. The incorporation of memory sites such as the Middle Passage, the Kingdom of Kongo, Rome, and the Vatican anchors the narrative within a broader collective memory, while allowing for a critical examination of the various facets of the slave trade. These sites also reveal the spatial dynamics of the trade, emphasising the interconnectedness of the African continent, Europe, and the Americas. Nsaku's movement between Kongo and Rome serves as a powerful metaphor for the global scope of the slave trade and its pervasive impact across continents. Finally, the historiopoetic dimension of N'Sondé's work is central to the chapter's argument. By engaging with fiction as a mode of historical inquiry, N'Sondé moves beyond mere historical reconstruction. Rather, he uses narrative to critique the past, interrogate its complexities, and reflect on its ongoing legacies. In doing so, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* offers a compelling case for the reimagining of history, urging readers to reevaluate established historical narratives and consider a more inclusive and expansive historical imagination.

In this historical novel, N'Sondé weaves together the fruits of his exhaustive historical archival research and the intimate testimonies collected from his own family over seven years. N'Sondé has stated that it took him seven years to research, reflect on, and compose this novel. He aimed to remain faithful to the historical record but introduced fictional characters and deliberate anachronisms. Notably, the novel reassigns the role of the pirate captain to a fictional figure rather

than the historical Captain Diable, and fictionalises several episodes – including the Congolese ambassador's imprisonment, which did not occur under the Spanish Inquisition. The result is a narrative that not only reflects the historical realities of the transatlantic slave trade but also resonates deeply with readers through its authentic storytelling. N'Sondé's methodical approach, coupled with his access to personal testimonies, elevates this novel to a significant contribution in the genre of historical literature on the transatlantic slave trade, fusing history and literature in a searching manner.

The narrative unfolds through the lens of the Negrita statue of Nsaku, a black marble bust enshrined within the Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica in the Vatican. This self-diegetic narrator, reminiscent of the *bildungsroman* tradition, embarks on an exploration of his own origins. He traces his humble beginnings as an orphan in the kingdom of Kongo, a land marked by Catholicism and Portuguese asymmetric influence, and his eventual baptism as Dom Antonio Manuel. His unwavering faith in the divine propels him towards a connection with humanity, guiding his interactions with his fellow human beings.

The inaugural chapter of the narrative introduces a fictional pact, employing the first-person voice. This distinctive narrative technique underscores that the narrator cannot be the long-departed historical figure nor the author of the text. The reader is thus confronted with a work of fiction. As previously noted, the novel's elements place it in the realms of both historical fiction and a coming-of-age narrative, interweaving these elements with a lyrical, poetic language that imparts testimonial value, devoid of any ideological leanings. N'Sondé demonstrates exceptional skill in crafting a narrative that oscillates between the intimately personal and the historically anchored, creating a complex amalgamation. He manages to write a fiction that is at times almost intimate and certainly lyrical, with historical grounding. Functioning as an adventure novel, the narrative's internal focalisation offers a dynamic tempo, allowing readers to follow the tumultuous journey alongside the narrator-protagonist. His observations bear witness to the gradual decay of life in his native Kongo, a paradise marred by the thriving slave trade. Through the voice of this Congolese priest, readers are immersed in an oppressive system that not only commodifies its own people but also operates as an unrelenting force,

extending its reach into the hinterlands where the harrowing captures are at their zenith. This perilous journey traverses terrains marked by dense jungle²⁶² and treacherous mangroves, ultimately leading to the slave ships, where the unfortunates must endure the agonising Middle Passage across the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean.

N'Sondé's work emerges as a testament to the complex historical encounter between African and European cultures, the tragic realities of the transatlantic slave trade, and its paradox. The novel offers a portrayal of the convergence of history, faith, and human suffering during a defining era, prompting readers to grapple with the profound and enduring implications of this historical backdrop. Within the novel, N'Sondé embeds the narrative in a meticulously researched historical framework, entwining the lives of fictional characters with those of real historical figures, events, and places. This narrative straddles a period when the kingdom of Kongo, a powerful and influential African state in the sixteenth century, interacted with European colonial powers, particularly the Spanish, thereby epitomising the era's shifting dynamics. The novel introduces Nsaku né Vunda, a character born in 1583, set in the Kingdom of Kongo, a real-world African state characterised by a long history and indigenous culture. This historical grounding underpins the entire narrative, creating a dynamic platform for examining the interaction between Kongo's elites and the Portuguese and Spanish colonisers.

The work also addresses the broader historical context of the transatlantic slave trade, revealing its abhorrent practices, the deplorable conditions within slave ships, and the tragic treatment of enslaved individuals. N'Sondé presents this narrative within the framework of an Atlantic Triangle, emphasising the interconnectedness of Africa, Europe, and the Americas during this period. A key historical layer centres on the collision of cultures and religious transformation. Nsaku's transformation into Dom Antonio Manuel, a priest, symbolises the Christianisation of Africa through the efforts of European missionaries, underscoring the implications of religious encounters during this era. The protagonist's journey, which takes him from the African continent

²⁶²N'Sondé, Wilfried. 2018. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*. Arles: Actes Sud, 36.

to the New World, particularly Brazil, reflects the vast scope and brutality of the transatlantic slave trade. This journey stands as a historical illustration of the complexities surrounding the legal and paradoxical nature of the slave trade. It underscores the jarring juxtaposition of the trade's legality with the unfathomable suffering it inflicted upon countless individuals. Nsaku's arrival in Spain, where he encounters the Inquisition, adds another layer of historical complexity. The narrative's climax unfolds in Rome, as Nsaku meets with the Pope, symbolising a significant diplomatic and historical juncture of the sixteenth century, marking a defining moment in the protagonist's journey.

The novel explicitly juxtaposes narrative styles, alternating between a first-person testimonial account and a third-person historiographical narrative. This transition is most notably seen in the shifting perspectives – alternating between first-person narrative segments that provide a personal and experiential account, and documentary-like passages in the third person that create a seemingly objective, historical perspective. This narrative duality parallels the broader theme of history itself, drawing a clear distinction between the subjective, personal testimonial aspect and the objective, historical accounts. The historiographical perspective, presented in italics within the novel, serves as a window into the broader historical context, offering a more detached, didactic perspective. In contrast, Nsaku's personal journey is a *bildungsroman*, or a coming-of-age narrative, in which the reader witnesses his transformation, struggles, and growth. The convergence of these two narrative modes offers a complex exploration of history, emphasising the contrast between lived experiences and documented accounts. It underscores the complexity of historical narratives, acknowledging that history is not just about facts and events but is also deeply intertwined with the personal stories and experiences of individuals. This juxtaposition deepens the reader's understanding of the broader historical context while evoking a strong sense of empathy and connection with Nsaku's personal journey.

The novel further develops this dual structure by interweaving two distinct perspectives. One facet employs a third-person historiographical framework, delivering an impartial, historical portrayal of events. In parallel, Nsaku's first-person narrative unfolds as an intimate testimonial, granting readers a deeply personal lens through which to

engage with the narrative. This dual structure creates a distinctive relationship between historiography and autobiography, therefore blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. In fact, the combination of autobiographical style and historiographical narration introduces a complex layer of historiographical metafiction, which questions the objectivity of traditional historical accounts. The autobiographical elements infuse the narrative with subjective memories and personal interpretations, thus challenging the notion of an unbiased history. This approach encourages readers to critically engage with the story, examining the potential biases and assumptions underlying historical narratives. Through this interweaving of perspectives, the novel examines the fluidity of truth, the intricate dynamics of memory, and the diverse viewpoints that collectively construct our understanding of history. This method not only deepens the reader's engagement but also prompts reflection on the role of individual experience within broader processes of historical narration. The shift between first-person testimony and third-person historical narration sets the stage for examining the autobiographical pact. Nsaku né Vunda's personal narrative creates a deep connection between individual experience and broader historical forces. As the novel moves into the autobiographical pact, the reader is invited to reflect on the relationship between self-presentation, historical narrative, and the power of personal storytelling.

Autobiographical literature holds a significant position within literary discourse, with seminal contributions from scholars like Beaujour,²⁶³ Lecarme and Lecarme-Tabone²⁶⁴ and Lejeune.²⁶⁵ Central to Lejeune's framework is the notion of the autobiographical pact, encompassing fundamental gestures inherent to any autobiographical endeavour. This pact involves containing the effects of self-presentation, firmly asserting viewpoints, introducing coherence into the biographical narrative through periodisation, and enlivening these periods through identification, organisation, and analysis. Two key models underpin the autobiographical genre: the autobiographical

²⁶³ Beaujour, Michel. 1980. *Miroirs d'encre: Rhétorique de l'autoportrait*. Paris: Seuil.

²⁶⁴ Lecarme, Jacques, and Eliane Lecarme-Tabone. 1997. *L'autobiographie*. Paris: Armand Colin.

²⁶⁵ Lejeune, Philippe. 1975. *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Seuil.

narrative and the self-portrait. Defined as a retrospective prose narrative focusing on an individual's life and personality, autobiography encompasses language form, subject matter, authorial situation, and narrator's standpoint. Lejeune succinctly defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative crafted by a real person about their own existence, focusing on their individual life, particularly the history of their personality". Within this paradigm, a distinction arises between autobiography and the autobiographical novel, in which the narrator's identity diverges from the author's. The autobiographical novel stands as a testament to the enduring power of personal storytelling. By intertwining individual experiences with broader historical and cultural contexts, these narratives contribute to our collective understanding of the human condition. Through the lens of the autobiographical pact, readers are invited to embark on a journey of introspection and discovery, ultimately deepening their understanding of themselves and the world around them.

By employing the autobiographical style, N'Sondé engages with history and memory, reshaping the narrative of the slave trade from a personal perspective. Through this approach, the author melds personal experiences with historical events to present a compelling narrative. The witness narrator provides a new perspective, both internal and universal, on how individuals experienced and felt the key moments of the slave trade. Through the witness narrator, the story reveals details and perspectives that are not always present in traditional historical sources. The author, with this flexible approach to perspective, places personal experiences in context as they trace the tragic realities faced by victims. By contrasting a more personal story with one with clear historical elements, the author creates a dynamic that invites the reader to reflect on the complexities of human experience. This blend of intimate storytelling and more detached analysis allows the examination of universal themes while highlighting the intricacies of historical events. The contrast between a personal viewpoint and an objective perspective adds depth, enhancing our understanding of social and human dynamics.

Nsaku's personal account plays a critical role in deepening the grand narrative with an authentically human and distinctly African perspective. His identity, rooted in the complex relationship of Bakongo spir-

ity and Catholic faith, serves as a compelling case study in cultural hybridity and religious syncretism. As both Dom Antonio Manuel and Nsaku né Vunda, he embodies a dual identity that is simultaneously produced by and resistant to the colonial order. This duality is central in providing a counter-narrative to the dehumanising forces of the slave trade and the broader colonial enterprise. Nsaku's narrative, marked by a candid and straightforward tone, starkly contrasts with the abjection inherent in the transatlantic slave trade, where human lives – African and non-African – were commodified and exploited for economic and political gain. The dissonance between Nsaku's deeply rooted spiritual and cultural beliefs and the brutal realities of international relations at the time highlights the moral and ethical degradation that accompanied the exploitation of human beings. It also underscores the resilience and enduring spirit of African cultures despite systemic oppression. By centring Nsaku's personal story, the narrative not only illuminates the human cost of colonialism but also corrects the historical record by providing a voice that has often been marginalised or overlooked. His perspective offers a lens through which to critique the power structures that sustained slavery and colonialism, while also emphasising the depth of African spirituality and community.

In the inaugural chapter of this historical novel, the author establishes a distinctively autobiographical narrative technique by employing a first-person voice, an approach that sets the stage for an intimate connection between the reader and the protagonist, Nsaku né Vunda. This narrative strategy is significant because it signals that the narrator, despite recounting historical events, is neither the original historical figure nor the author themselves. The autobiographical pact is, therefore, a key element of this opening chapter, inviting readers to engage with the story on a personal level.

Through first-person narration, which takes the reader into the life of Nsaku né Vunda, the autobiographical pact is made explicit:

Je vins au monde vers l'an de grâce 1583 sous le nom de Nsaku né Vunda, et fus baptisé Dom Antonio Manuel le jour où l'évêque de l'Église catholique du royaume du Kongo m'ordonna prêtre. Aujourd'hui, on appelle "Nigrita" la statue de marbre érigée à mon effigie à Rome en janvier 1608 par les soins du pape Paul V. Je me suis tu il y a plus de quatre cents ans, mes mots se sont perdus dans le silence de la

mort mais, aux curieux qui s'arrêtent un instant devant mon buste, j'aimerais dire combien je regrette d'avoir été, au fil des siècles, réduit à la couleur qui jadis teintait ma peau. Je souhaiterais leur raconter mon histoire, parler de mes croyances, des légendes de mon peuple, évoquer la folie des hommes, leur grandeur et leur bassesse. [I came into the world around the year of grace 1583 under the name of Nsaku né Vunda, and was baptised Dom Antonio Manuel on the day the bishop of the Catholic Church of the Kingdom of Kongo ordained me a priest. Today, the marble statue erected in my likeness in Rome in January 1608 by the care of Pope Paul V is called 'Nigrita'. I have been silent for over four hundred years, my words lost in the silence of death, but to those who pause before my bust, I would like to express how much I regret having been, over the centuries, reduced to the colour that once tinted my skin. I would like to tell them my story, speak of my beliefs, the legends of my people, evoke the madness of men, their greatness and their baseness.]²⁶⁶

The first statement grounds the narrative in a specific historical context while highlighting the autobiographical pact, in which the narrator's voice acts as the conduit through which the reader experiences the unfolding story. By presenting himself as both witness and protagonist, Nsaku establishes a connection with the reader, fostering empathy and allowing for a deeper exploration of his personal journey. The reference to the statue erected in Nsaku's honour in Rome in 1608 underscores his enduring legacy while also serving as a symbol of the centuries of racial prejudice he regrets: "Je me suis tu il y a plus de quatre cents ans, mes mots se sont perdus dans le silence de la mort mais, aux curieux qui s'arrêtent un instant devant mon buste, j'aimerais dire combien je regrette d'avoir été, au fil des siècles, réduit à la couleur qui jadis teintait ma peau. [I have been silent for over four hundred years, my words lost in the silence of death, but to those who pause before my bust, I would like to express how much I regret having been, over the centuries, reduced to the colour that once tinted my skin.]" Through this statement, Nsaku emphasises the lasting impact of racial discrimination and his desire to reclaim his identity by sharing his story, beliefs, and the legends of his people, the Bakongo.

This autobiographical focus not only adds emotional weight to the narrative but also allows for an exploration of deeper themes. The narrator's personal journey acts as a lens to examine the complexity of human nature, cultural conflicts, justice, and freedom. By inviting readers to witness historical events through his eyes, Nsaku né Vun-

²⁶⁶N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 9.

da creates a powerful narrative that connects personal and collective memory. The novel's approach, centred on the autobiographical pact, thus provides a unique perspective on historical events, allowing the reader to empathise with the narrator's experiences and understand the broader context in which they occur. This method of storytelling effectively bridges the gap between personal experience and historical fact, offering a compelling and complex narrative that addresses identity, memory, and the human condition. Through this lens, the author creates a narrative that is both intimate and expansive, engaging readers and encouraging them to reflect on the broader themes and issues presented throughout the novel.

N'Sondé's manipulation of the first- and third-person voices also creates a complex entanglement. The first-person narrator is rooted in the past yet filtered through the protagonist's present consciousness, creating a sense of reflective retrospection. The third-person narrator, marked by a detached tone and presentational style, seeks to provide a broader historical framework but is also mediated by the protagonist's subjective experience. This dynamic constructs a narrative that is constantly in flux, reflecting the mutable, often contradictory nature of historical memory.

Alternating narrative perspectives is both a stylistic choice and a powerful narratological device that invites readers to reconsider the boundaries between autobiography and history. The tension between first-person testimonial and third-person historiographical modes foregrounds and problematises the construction of historical narratives, translating an ongoing negotiation between individual experience and collective memory.

Concurrently, the historiographic narrator contextualises the broader setting in which events unfold, providing details about the actors involved, geopolitical relations, and the religious and diplomatic nuances of the time. Fromont's analysis reveals that the Kongo's conversion to Christianity involved a complex process of acceptance, adaptation, and resistance. The Kongo elite, for instance, adopted Christian symbols and rituals to reinforce their own political and spiritual authority. Fromont meticulously documents how the Kongo people integrated Christian iconography and practices into their own cultural and religious traditions from the sixteenth to the nineteenth

centuries. This integration was not a mere adoption of European Christianity but a dynamic process of cultural negotiation and adaptation. This process of cultural and spiritual adaptation is mirrored in N'Sondé's novel, where Nsaku né Vunda's Catholic and Bakongo upbringing and later journey symbolise the broader cultural exchanges between Africa and Europe. The Christianity that developed in the kingdom of Kongo was not a copy of the one that dominated Portugal, but the result of independent thinking that arose in an expanding world, to which African elites made a major contribution, since they profited from the slave trade as well as from the import and export of metals, textiles, and luxury goods. In fact, Fromont's analysis reveals that the Kongo's conversion to Christianity involved the complexities of the Atlantic dimension of Christianity in the Kingdom of Kongo. In many respects, the enslavement of men and women is the price the Kongo elites had to pay to gain access to trade and diplomatic networks with overseas countries.²⁶⁷ Heywood affirms: "From the beginning of its relationship with Europeans, Kongo relied on the export of slaves to sustain the diplomatic, material and cultural ties the country developed with Europe."²⁶⁸

In the decades following Europe's first contact, slaves became a form of international currency, but the trade's harmful effects quickly became apparent. King Afonso I, who had once used slaves as gifts or payment in foreign dealings, strongly condemned the trade. The illegal enslavement of native Kongo people and the anarchy caused by Portuguese and local merchants weakened his authority and bypassed his fiscal control. Political instability, inheritance disputes, and other conflicts fuelled the trade. Ironically, some protective measures, such as deportation sentences for crimes like witchcraft or insulting the Church, only exacerbated the situation.²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷Fromont, Cécile. 2018. *L'art de la conversion. Culture visuelle chrétienne dans le royaume du Congo*. Paris: Les Presses du Réel.

²⁶⁸Heywood, Linda M. and John K. Thornton. 2007. *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas, 1585–1660*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²⁶⁹Fromont, *L'art de la conversion. Culture visuelle chrétienne dans le royaume du Congo*, 16.

This contextualisation anchors Nsaku's story in a robust historical framework, offering the reader a realistic glimpse into his era. In the first italicised passage of the novel, the narration adopts a pseudo-historical style, with an omniscient narrator recounting events in a realist mode. The story is presented linearly, beginning with the encounter between the king of Kongo and the Portuguese representative:

Un matin de juillet 1509, le roi du Kongo conclut le premier contrat qui l'engageait à vendre un millier de ses esclaves à son homologue portugais. Depuis 1480, date à laquelle les premiers navigateurs en provenance de Porto avaient débarqué dans la baie où serait construit plus tard le port de Luanda, les Lusitaniens entretenaient des échanges commerciaux avec Mvemba Nzinga, baptisé Alfonso Ier, septième roi du Kongo, le deuxième à s'être converti au catholicisme. [One morning in July 1509, the king of Kongo concluded the first contract committing him to sell a thousand of his slaves to his Portuguese counterpart. Since 1480, when the first navigators from Porto had landed in the bay where the port of Luanda would later be built, the Lusitanians had been engaging in trade with Mvemba Nzinga, baptised Alfonso I, seventh king of Kongo, the second to convert to Catholicism.]²⁷⁰

This passage offers concise, informative narration that highlights a specific historical event. The use of terms such as “navigators”, “Porto”, “Lusitanians”, “Luanda”, and “Mvemba Nzinga” situates the reader in a clear geographical and historical context. The reference to the seventh king of Kongo, Afonso I, who converted to Catholicism, underscores the religious and political stakes of the time. The narrator also mentions the commercial relations established since 1480 between Portugal and Kongo, providing crucial insight into the economic dynamics between the two nations and setting the stage for the story's development. Subsequently, the narration describes the negotiations and the decisions made by the characters. The use of period-specific terms and phrases enhances the authenticity of the narrative and creates a historical atmosphere.

The pseudo-historiographic narrator interweaves anecdotes and details into the narrative, enhancing the reader's immersion and deepening their understanding. Although fictional, these elements imbue the story with authenticity and depth. As the narrative unfolds, vivid depictions of the arrival conditions of the boats immerse the reader in the bustling atmosphere of commercial exchanges and political nego-

²⁷⁰ N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 17.

tiations. Through the narrator's lens, initially impartial and objective, value judgments emerge, particularly concerning the lordship and morality of King Bakongo, depicted as driven by greed for wealth and power. This narrative technique transports readers to a significant moment in history, where the King of Kongo anticipates a meeting with a Portuguese delegation.

Lorsqu'on lui annonça qu'une personnalité de haut rang arrivée de Lisbonne demandait audience à Sa Majesté, Alfonso Ier préféra aller à sa rencontre. Il était impatient de découvrir les tissus de luxe, la vaisselle en porcelaine, les outils en métal et les autres produits fabriqués en Europe. [When he was informed that a high-ranking personality arriving from Lisbon was requesting an audience with His Majesty, Alfonso I preferred to go and meet him. He was eager to discover the luxury fabrics, porcelain dishes, metal tools, and other products manufactured in Europe.]²⁷¹

The portrayal of the king's eagerness to encounter the high-ranking personality from Lisbon reveals insights into diplomatic relations and the materialistic aspirations of leaders of the time. Subsequently, the narrator offers a glimpse into the treatment of the king aboard the boat. The lavish descriptions of culinary delights and luxurious services, such as the assortment of fruits from the Algarve and the provision of a prostitute, underscore the opulence and extravagance enjoyed by rulers. These details not only provide historical context but also reveal social norms and indulgences prevalent in society.

Fort impressionné par la finesse de ces mets, le roi se régala et apprécia particulièrement l'assortiment de fruits cueillis dans les vergers de l'Algarve qu'on lui servit en dessert. Pour faciliter sa digestion et le mettre à son aise, on lui offrit les prestations d'une prostituée enlevée dans les bas-fonds de la capitale portugaise. [Highly impressed by the finesse of these dishes, the king feasted and particularly enjoyed the assortment of fruits picked from the orchards of the Algarve that were served to him for dessert. To aid his digestion and put him at ease, he was offered the services of a prostitute abducted from the depths of the Portuguese capital.]²⁷²

The narrator's emphasis on the king's sensory pleasures and immediate gratification highlights deeper themes of morality and superficiality. By juxtaposing the king's indulgent behaviour with the broader historical backdrop, the narrative prompts reflection on the complexi-

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

ties of human nature and the pursuit of power. Through this portrayal, the pseudo-historiographic narrator invites readers to examine the intricacies of historical events and societal dynamics, prompting them to consider the motivations and consequences of individual actions within the larger historical context.

The narrator reveals the covert motivations of the king regarding his involvement in the slave trade.

Il vit aussi dans ce Il vit aussi dans cet arrangement l'occasion de se débarrasser non seulement d'un grand nombre de prisonniers de guerre qui menaçaient de se rebeller, mais aussi de ses plus farouches ennemis politiques ainsi que de toute leur famille. Et puis son royaume comptait bien asses de criminels et de bons à rien qu'il pourrait exiler loin de ses terres. [He saw this arrangement as an opportunity not only to rid himself of numerous war prisoners on the verge of rebellion but also to dispose of his most formidable political adversaries and their entire families. Moreover, his realm had an abundance of criminals and ne'er-do-wells whom he could exile from his lands.]²⁷³

These revelations concerning his intentions to eliminate political rivals and consolidate his power through such transactions raise profound moral and ethical dilemmas surrounding human trafficking and political authority. Similarly, later in the narrative, attention turns to the Church and the Vatican.

L'ordre du jour était très préoccupant: le Portugal se trouvait victime d'un complot international fomenté par le pape Clément VIII et son nouvel allié Henri IV; appuyés par Alvaro II, roi du Kongo. À la demande de Sa Sainteté, un ecclésiastique, ambassadeur de ce royaume africain, était en route vers le Saint-Siège sur un navire français formellement identifié. Or, cette initiative constituait de fait un manquement inacceptable aux termes de la bulle pontificale de 1455 du pape Nicolas V qui avait concédé aux Portugais l'exclusivité du commerce avec l'Afrique, les exhortant aussi à convertir les païens de ce continent par tous les moyens. [The agenda was deeply disconcerting: Portugal found itself embroiled in an international conspiracy orchestrated by Pope Clement VIII and his newfound ally, Henri IV, with the backing of Alvaro II, the King of Kongo. At the behest of His Holiness, an ecclesiastic, an emissary from this African kingdom, was en route to the Holy See aboard a French vessel, formally identified. Yet, this endeavour constituted an egregious violation of Pope Nicholas V's papal bull of 1455, which accorded the Portuguese exclusive rights to trade with Africa, urging them to convert the pagans of the continent by any means necessary.]²⁷⁴

²⁷³Ibid., 18–19.

²⁷⁴Ibid., 137–138.

The pseudo-historiographic narrator reveals the Vatican's morally ambiguous stance at the time, as it recounts negotiations implicating the Vatican and successive pontiffs in a scenario in which the Vatican becomes a major player in the slave trade with the Kingdom of Kongo.

This passage unveils a complex dynamic between evangelistic missions and colonisation in Africa. It resonates with postcolonial perspectives in African literature, where postcolonial African writers expose the ambiguous role of religion and missionaries on the continent. They critique how evangelisation was exploited to justify colonisation and economic exploitation, portraying missionaries as agents of cultural domination who exploited faith to maintain colonial hegemony. Thus, these writers underscore the moral contradictions of missionaries and their complicity in oppressing indigenous populations.

The scenes witnessed by the narrator contribute to the desacralisation of the holy city and shake Nsaku's beliefs. Treated as a king sent by Alfonso I, he witnesses the mockery of Jews at the Vatican, as well as on the slave ship, where he witnesses the suffering of these poor souls firsthand.

Ridiculisés, ils avaient été réduits à l'état de nature à côté des costumes admirables et raffinés de leurs concitoyens chrétiens. Ce fut un drame terrible qui se déroula sous mes yeux, et dans ma mémoire se gravèrent l'attitude et le regard des adolescents rabaissés, jetés en pâture au mépris des habitants de Rome. [Ridiculed, they had been reduced to a state of nature next to the admirable and refined costumes of their Christian fellow citizens. It was a terrible drama that unfolded before my eyes, and in my memory, the attitude and gaze of the debased adolescents, thrown to the contempt of the inhabitants of Rome, were etched.]²⁷⁵

The witnessing narrator, Nsaku, is deeply saddened by this injustice and by the fact that even in Rome, the city of the Pope, there is no compassion for these young men. He depicts the scene as a loud and pompous farce, thereby revealing the contradictions between the ideal of Christian compassion and the reality of human cruelty.

The pope is portrayed with a sense of irony, highlighting his role in the human trafficking of the time from which he benefited. This pope, to whom the priest Nsaku had been sent with a mission to inform

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 259–260.

about “these ignoble traffics”,²⁷⁶ appears in an unflattering ethical light. “His behaviour indicates a priority given to earthly affairs rather than spiritual considerations, thus reinforcing an image of secular rather than religious leadership.”²⁷⁷ The witnessing narrator depicts the pope as an authoritarian and distant figure, focused on financial matters rather than spiritual concerns. “So far from the wonderful citadel lost in the clouds that I had dreamed of on The Paraclete Wind, where the Vatican was a place of contemplation, prayers, and study”,²⁷⁸ Nsaku realises that at the Holy See of the Church “it was only about interests, influence, and finances, questions far removed from heavenly concerns”.²⁷⁹

The concluding lines of the novel reveal the witnessing narrator’s profound sense of disillusionment with the pope, whose image he had long idealised. As he describes the pope, the narrator paints a picture that shatters the preconceived notion of a saintly figure, revealing a hollow, self-absorbed individual. The imagery used to depict the pope is striking:

Moi qui avais si longtemps cru rencontrer un saint homme, je ne vis qu’un quinquagénaire usé, parfumé d’essences délicates, coiffé d’une superbe tiare et richement paré d’une robe blanche descendant jusqu’à ses pieds. Un homme aux traits fatigués sous son teint relevé par des poudres aux couleurs vives, un dirigeant enfermé dans le faste, occupé à rester élégant dans son apparence, figé dans les postures, les gestes machinaux et futiles du protocole. L’expression de son visage témoignait de la platitude d’un individu obligé de vivre loin d’un quelconque idéal. Je scrutai en vain son regard fier et concupiscent, à l’affût de ce que son cœur pouvait contenir de profondeur d’âme, de mansuétude et d’humilité. Mais l’être insignifiant qui m’adressa un regard ne sut que me tendre la pierre précieuse de sa bague. Je venais lui dire les souffrances d’enfants, de femmes et d’hommes opprimés, niés, livrés à l’arbitraire, et lui me réclamait un acte de subordination. [For so long, I believed I would meet a holy man, yet all I saw was a worn-out fifty-year-old, perfumed with delicate essences, crowned with a superb tiara, and richly adorned in a white robe cascading to his feet. A man with tired features beneath his powdered, vibrant complexion, a leader ensconced in splendour, preoccupied with maintaining elegance in appearance, frozen in postures, and the mechanical, futile gestures of protocol. His

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 48.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 262.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 263.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

facial expression betrayed the banality of an individual compelled to live far from any ideal. In vain, I searched his proud and lustful gaze, seeking any depth of soul, gentleness, or humility it might contain. However, the inconsequential being who met my gaze only knew to offer me the precious stone of his ring. I came to tell him of the sufferings of oppressed children, women, and men, denied, and subjected to arbitrariness, yet he demanded an act of submission from me.²⁸⁰

The narrator's disillusionment is intensified through the detailed depiction of the pope's appearance, contrasting the grandiosity of his attire with the emptiness of his demeanour. The pope's "tired features" and "frozen postures" suggest a man more concerned with outward appearances and protocol than with compassion or humility. His facial expression reveals the banality of a figure "obligé de vivre loin d'un quelconque idéal", indicating a life devoid of higher purpose. This imagery exposes the hypocrisy of religious authority, questioning the legitimacy of a leader who is unable to demonstrate the basic qualities expected of his position. The narrator's discontent grows as he searches the pope's gaze for any sign of "profondeur d'âme, de mansuétude et d'humilité", only to find "l'être insignifiant" offering nothing but the stone of his ring in response to stories of suffering and oppression. This act, instead of offering comfort or understanding, symbolises a demand for subordination, reinforcing the pope's disconnection from the ideals of service and spiritual leadership. This depiction of the pope serves as a sharp critique of the religious establishment, highlighting the discrepancy between the perceived sanctity of religious figures and the reality of their behaviour. The use of irony underscores the broader themes of hypocrisy and the contradictions within religious and political institutions, as well as the societal norms and values they represent.

The narrative approach used by N'Sondé resonates with the ideas addressed by Hayden White, where irony becomes a tool for exposing underlying truths beneath superficial appearances. By employing a pseudo-historiographical narrator, the novel challenges traditional narratives, questioning the integrity of religious and colonial structures. This critique is furthered by the portrayal of morally ambiguous scenarios and interactions among influential figures, revealing the

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 266–267.

inherent absurdities within colonial society. N'Sondé, as both author and historian, utilises historical metafiction to reclaim agency over historical memory, weaving personal narratives into broader historical discourse. His autobiographical approach, through a double perspective strategy, offers a layered and complex understanding of the slave trade and its impact. By emphasising personal stories within a larger historical context, the novel critiques institutional power while reclaiming the voices of those marginalised by history. This approach ultimately provides a deeper and more precise perspective on the human condition, exploring the intersections of personal identity, cultural memory, and institutional critique.

This fusion of fact and fiction allows N'Sondé to humanise history, similar to the dynamic created by blending intimate storytelling with formal historiographical elements. His approach brings to light the forgotten voices and experiences that traditional narratives might overlook. This aligns with the idea of challenging the conventional historiography that often marginalises personal accounts. The personal connection in N'Sondé's work echoes the empathetic resonance found in the earlier discussion of the double perspective approach. By encouraging readers to confront the complexities of the slave trade with a sense of empathy and understanding, his narrative adds depth to the examination of universal themes within the historical context. N'Sondé's technique of mixing autobiographical elements with historical facts highlights the subjectivity inherent in personal stories while grounding them in a broader historical framework. This resonates with the earlier analysis's emphasis on the balance between personal and objective perspectives, demonstrating how this approach can lead to a more inclusive and complex view of history. By giving voice to this work of art, the author accomplishes two significant things: creating an entity that transcends stereotypes and providing a personal account from this historical figure who remained silent for over four centuries. N'Sondé finally grants him the right to speak to rectify this oversight. Thus, literature here serves to narrate both deeply personal and historical events, and the storytelling process reinvigorates the meaning of history and memory.

This narrative juxtaposition is in alignment with Toni Morrison's insights on the enlivening power of literature in its humanising capac-

ity toward history. Morrison contends that literature animates history, transcending it from a mere compilation of past occurrences into a visceral, living journey. She distinguishes between “fact” and “truth”, asserting that while facts can exist without human intelligence, truth cannot. For Morrison, the truth lies in understanding the inner lives of individuals – their emotions, thoughts, and motivations – which are often absent in historical accounts that focus solely on external events. She considers it her duty as a writer to fill these gaps and do justice to the complexity of the human experience, even in the darkest moments of history. Drawing on the “fragments” of the past, such as images, voices, or scraps of memories, she reconstructs the inner lives of individuals and uncovers a truth that transcends mere raw facts. This approach, what she calls “literary archaeology”, seeks to reconstruct a deeper truth beyond the raw facts, emphasising the complexity of human experience, especially in the darkest chapters of history.²⁸¹

In N’Sondé’s literary work, history is not relegated to a detached recitation but is rendered as a profoundly evocative expedition through the lens of Nsaku’s experiences. This narrative synergy conveys the intricacies of the slave past, serving as an illustration of literature’s transformative potential in our comprehension of history. Overall, N’Sondé’s historical metafiction supports the notion that personal narratives can play a crucial role in reinterpreting history. His ability to bring personal experiences into the grand narrative not only deepens the storytelling but also contributes to a deeper understanding of past events. By fostering empathy and exploring the complexities of the slave trade, N’Sondé’s work aligns with the broader theme of challenging traditional historical paradigms and reclaiming stories that have been marginalised.

N’Sondé’s historical novel exhibits a remarkable transgeneric convergence, combining elements of history, adventure, and initiation to create a unique approach to narrating history. This transgeneric blend not only blurs the boundaries between fiction and historiography but also reveals a new, poetic perspective on the history of the slave trade, particularly from an African figure’s point of view. The novel’s varied

²⁸¹ Morrison, Toni. 1995. “The Site of Memory.” In William Zinsser, ed., *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, 83–102. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 91.

genres and sub-genres underscore literature's potential to illuminate historical events through lyrical and pedagogical lenses, allowing for a deeper examination of the complexities surrounding the transatlantic slave trade.

The multifaceted character of N'Sondé's novel demonstrates how literary genres can intersect to challenge and transform conventional methods of narrating history. The concept of historiographical metafiction, where the distinctions between fiction and historiography are deliberately blurred, serves as a critical foundation for this narrative strategy. As noted by Nünning, this technique raises essential questions about the construction and interpretation of historical narratives:

Another border that postmodernist historiographic metafiction explores, crosses, and undermines is that between fiction and historiography. This results not only in a blurring of the different generic conventions that these two types of narrative employ to represent past events, but also in questions about narrativising history. One way of crossing the border between fiction and historiography is by closing the gap between history and stories.²⁸²

N'Sondé's work exemplifies this transgeneric approach by integrating narrative forms such as the epistolary style, historical fiction, and legendary motifs. This balancing of historical fact and fictional storytelling allows for a careful examination of the complexities of the slave trade era. The novel's structure, blending historical context with fictional elements, creates fertile ground for exploring the blurred lines between past and present, fact and fiction.

The question of whether N'Sondé's novel is primarily historical fiction, an adventure narrative, or an initiation story is resolved by recognising that it is a seamless amalgamation of all three, and more. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* embodies a transgeneric convergence, merging various narrative forms to tell the story of the protagonist's journey through the slave trade era. The back cover blurb reflects this ambiguity, classifying the book as historical fiction while also hinting at elements of biographical fiction and adventure.

Within its historical context, the novel traces the life of a real historical figure, whose legacy persists in the form of a marble bust at

²⁸²Nünning, Ansgar. 2004. "Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Cultural Narratology." *Style* 38, no. 3: 352–374, 367.

the Vatican. The narrative follows this historical figure's perilous journey across three continents, encountering oppression, war, and the relentless grip of capitalism. This adventurous dimension is woven seamlessly with the novel's initiatory aspect, which emerges through diverse genres such as the *bildungsroman*, legend, and testimonial storytelling. The inclusion of legendary motifs, such as the story of the three heroic women who fled death to establish the Kingdom of Kongo, serves as a compelling example of how N'Sondé uses historical markers to anchor the narrative while exploring broader themes of resilience and transformation. The novel's use of the *bildungsroman* structure allows for the depiction of the protagonist's personal and cultural growth. This approach to historical fiction encapsulates the transgeneric storytelling technique, where the narrative engages with complex themes surrounding the transatlantic slave trade, resonating with Semujanga's²⁸³ work on genre dynamics in Francophone African literature. Through this intricate fusion of history, adventure, and initiation, N'Sondé's novel aligns with the broader tradition of African literature that addresses collective traumas, particularly those stemming from colonisation and genocide. This transgeneric convergence offers a compelling examination of an era marked by profound human suffering and resilience, demonstrating the power of literature to engage with complex historical narratives while engaging readers on multiple levels.

The novel follows a *bildungsroman* structure, tracing the protagonist's coming-of-age and personal growth as he confronts the challenges and experiences of the slave trade. Nsaku né Vunda's journey is marked by self-discovery, moral dilemmas, and transformative encounters. The *bildungsroman* structure allows readers to witness the protagonist's development, reflect on their own journey, and contemplate broader themes of identity, power, and agency. N'Sondé incorporates elements of the epistolary form, as the protagonist, Nsaku né Vunda, writes letters throughout the novel. These letters serve as a means of self-reflection, expression, and communication, allowing the reader to gain insight into the protagonist's thoughts and emo-

²⁸³Semujanga, Josias. 1999. *Dynamique des genres dans le roman africain*. Paris: L'Harmattan.

tions. The epistolary form offers a personal and intimate connection between the protagonist and the reader, enhancing the sense of authenticity and immediacy.

In this work, N'Sondé takes the reader on a journey that explores the human condition through the prism of history and memory. Written in the tradition of the *bildungsroman*, the story focuses on the moral, psychological, and intellectual development of the protagonist through the hardships of his life. In this story, Nsaku né Vunda, or Dom Antonio Manuel, guides us through his inner and outer journey, marked by struggles against oppression and the search for his deepest identity. Through a poignant autobiographical narrative, the author invites us to follow Nsaku's journey, from his birth to his struggle to pass on his testimony on slavery and its implications. By analysing the key elements of the *bildungsroman* in this text, we gain a better understanding of the complexity of the protagonist's personal development, as well as his importance in the historical and social representation of his time. Nsaku, born Vunda, embodies the archetypal hero's quest for truth and freedom in a world marked by oppression and injustice. His journey of personal development is evident from the very first lines of the story, where his name and social role evolve, reflecting his spiritual and intellectual growth. Nsaku's inner conflict is illustrated through his reflections on his identity and place in the world, particularly when he expresses his regret at having been reduced to his skin colour over the centuries. The social and historical context of the story is carefully woven into the narrative, offering a vivid insight into oppression and resistance to slavery in the Kongo kingdom. Finally, the autobiographical narrative gives the reader intimate access to Nsaku's thoughts and emotions, reinforcing the authenticity and emotional impact of his recollections. By combining these elements, the author creates a profound and compelling work that resonates with readers, offering a powerful reflection on slavery and the universal themes of freedom, identity and human resilience.

In this work, the *bildungsroman* emerges as a recurring motif, depicting, as in a travel narrative, the personal development of the protagonist through a series of trials and encounters. This traditional narrative structure, inherited from the eighteenth century German literary genre, provides a coherent framework for tracing the stages of

growth, learning, and maturation of the main character. In the novel, as the character grows, the seeds of a slave system are sown, foreshadowing the impending moral decline of the Bakongo kingdom. This blending of legend and history adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the interconnectedness of myth and reality in shaping cultural identity. Nsaku né Vunda recounts a legend passed down through generations about the nine founding mothers of the Kongo kingdom.

La légende qui me fut contée dans mon enfance raconte qu'elles vécurent quelque part non loin de l'embouchure du Niger, peu après la période où les humains réussirent à maîtriser la science de la métallurgie. [The legend that was told to me in my childhood recounts that they lived somewhere near the mouth of the Niger River, shortly after the period when humans mastered the science of metallurgy.]²⁸⁴

While the story contains mythical elements, such as the celestial sign guiding the women on their journey, it is set within a historical context marked by the advancement of metallurgy. This integration of legend and history serves multiple purposes in the novel. By intertwining legend with historical events, the narrative reinforces the cultural identity of the Kongo people. The legend of the nine founding mothers becomes a foundational myth that shapes the collective memory and identity of the community. Despite its mythical elements, the narrative maintains a connection to historical realities, such as technological advancements and geographical locations. This grounding in historical context adds credibility to the legendary tale and provides readers with a framework for understanding the cultural and historical backdrop of Nsaku né Vunda's story. The blending of legend and history allows for the examination of symbolic and allegorical themes. For example, the journey of the nine founding mothers can be interpreted as a metaphor for the resilience and determination of the Kongo people in the face of adversity.

N'Sondé's novel innovatively reconfigures the *bildungsroman* within a postcolonial context, offering a profound examination of the protagonist's moral, psychological, and intellectual growth. Unlike traditional *bildungsromans* that often focus on personal development within a relatively stable social framework, N'Sondé's novel foregrounds the tumultuous history and memory of the Kongo kingdom,

²⁸⁴N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 11.

emphasising the pervasive impact of slavery. This historical backdrop not only deepens the protagonist's journey but also situates it within a broader critique of colonial oppression. N'Sondé's intimate portrayal of Nsaku's thoughts and emotions enhances the authenticity and emotional resonance of the story, akin to the narrative depth found in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. However, N'Sondé extends this introspection to grapple with the protagonist's identity and heritage, reflecting a struggle against the dehumanising forces of slavery. This thematic focus aligns with the postcolonial *bildungsroman* tradition, as seen in works like Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, which similarly interrogates the intersections of personal and collective histories.²⁸⁵

N'Sondé's emphasis on the protagonist's resistance to oppression and his role as a witness to the atrocities of slavery introduces a unique dimension to the *bildungsroman*. This aspect is less common in classical iterations of the genre but resonates with contemporary works such as Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*, which also addresses the enduring impact of slavery on personal identity and development.²⁸⁶ By integrating these elements, N'Sondé not only adheres to the *bildungsroman* tradition but also expands its boundaries, offering a critical perspective on the genre in a postcolonial context.

The legend of the nine founding mothers of the Kongo kingdom is crucial as a historiographical element because it offers readers insights and subtle clues about the seeds that fostered both the emergence of the slave trade and the subsequent decline of the kingdom. It illuminates the origin of slavery through the escape of the founding mothers to avoid oppression, as well as the internal tensions exacerbated by the social rift between the crown prince and his tyrannical uncle.²⁸⁷ Elements of the initiation tale are found, especially in the narration of the trials and tribulations of the founding mothers of the Bakongo kingdom, who faced the worst to ensure the survival and prosperity of

²⁸⁵ Dangarembga, Tsitsi. 1988. *Nervous Conditions*. London: The Women's Press.

²⁸⁶ Emecheta, Buchi. 1977. *The Slave Girl*. London: Allison & Busby.

²⁸⁷ N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 12–13.

their people. This story highlights the foundational values of Kongo society and the resilience of its members in the face of adversity.²⁸⁸

The forced migration of the founders underscores the destabilising consequences of massive population displacements, while the centralised power of the tyrannical king exposes the kingdom's vulnerability to external exploitation.²⁸⁹ These factors reveal the deep roots of the slave trade and its lasting impacts on African societies.

The final passage of the text explicitly suggests the elements conducive to the emergence of the slave trade and the decline of the Kongo kingdom. It mentions the rise of domestic slavery, a social hierarchy based on birth, and a predisposition toward human exploitation.

Des liens d'allégeance et de dépendance entre les uns et les autres virent lentement le jour, des différences inhérentes à la naissance de chacun, et même si les femmes et les hommes ainsi offerts restaient des êtres humains à part entière, leur statut dans la société demeurait inférieur. Ce furent les débuts de l'esclavage en pays kongo. [Ties of allegiance and dependency slowly emerged among individuals, stemming from inherent differences in each person's birth. Although these offered women and men remained fully human, their status in society remained inferior. These were the beginnings of slavery in Kongo territory.]²⁹⁰

The passage suggests that the early signs of slavery were present in the Kongo kingdom, where ties of dependency and differences in social status were already established from birth. These factors contributed to the creation of a stratified society where the exploitation of individuals was accepted, paving the way for the later acceptance of the slave trade by Europeans. The normalisation of the idea that some people were destined for subordinate positions made small-scale human exploitation easier, setting the stage for more systematic exploitation by colonial powers.

²⁸⁸Thornton, John K. 2001. "The Origins and Early History of the Kingdom of Kongo, c. 1350–1550." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 1, 89–120. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3097288>.

²⁸⁹Thornton, John K. 2006. "Elite Women in the Kingdom of Kongo: Historical Perspectives on Women's Political Power." *The Journal of African History* 47, no. 3, 437–460. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4501072>.

²⁹⁰N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 14.

The legend thus plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and in deepening our understanding of the history of the transatlantic slave trade. It provides a mythical framework for the story, giving it cultural and spiritual depth. By recounting the tale of the nine founding mothers of the Kongo kingdom, the legend transcends mere historical narrative and allows the text to examine the deep roots of the slave trade, highlighting the social, political, and economic dynamics that paved the way for this practice. N'Sondé uses the legend to contextualise and deepen the history of the slave trade, demonstrating how the tensions, divisions, and injustices present from the kingdom's earliest days facilitated the later exploitation of African populations by Europeans. By incorporating this mythical dimension into the story, the author emphasises the importance of understanding the cultural and historical roots of the slave trade, beyond simple historical facts. By using legend in this text, literature demonstrates its potential to illuminate and deepen our understanding of history by allowing us to engage with aspects of the past that are often overlooked or forgotten. By giving voice to legends and traditional narratives, literature deepens our perception of history by offering multiple perspectives and inviting us to reflect on the cultural and social forces that have shaped the world we live in today. This legendary dimension is reinforced by the magical atmosphere surrounding the events, such as the appearance of a celestial body guiding the ancestors in their exodus to a new land. In this way, genealogically narrated novels thus translate Glissant's idea of a "digenesis": a historiopoetic narrative that allows for an extensive exploration and recollection of distant pasts, helping the reader to understand how they might be part of his or her present.

From a historiographical perspective, the integration of legend and history in the narrative structure reflects the complexities of interpreting and understanding the past. Historiography involves the study of how historical events are interpreted and recorded over time, often reflecting the perspectives and biases of the historians who write them. In the case of Nsaku né Vunda's narrative, the blending of legend and history reflects the historiographical challenge of reconciling oral traditions and written records. Oral traditions, such as the legend of the nine founding mothers, are passed down through generations and play a crucial role in shaping cultural identity. In the narrative, histori-

cal events such as advancements in metallurgy and the establishment of the Kongo kingdom are presented alongside legendary tales, highlighting the interconnectedness of oral and written sources in shaping historical narratives.

The excerpt also incorporates elements of historical narrative, especially in its depiction of the social and political practices of the era, such as the rise of the Kongo kingdom and the formation of its initial governance structures. These historical details anchor the story in a specific time and place, lending it a more realistic and authentic quality.

Besides the *bildungsroman*, several other literary genres can be identified in N'Sondé's novel. It has elements of an adventure story, but it extends beyond pure fiction to offer a unique historiographical perspective. Through narratives of conflict, survival struggles, and vividly depicted characters, N'Sondé immerses readers in a journey through the historical contexts that underpin these fictional events.

Devant mes yeux apparut un navire filant à vive allure, une vision du malheur, avec des étendards de pirates à sa poupe, reconnaissables même sous la force du vent, et des batteries de canons braqués sur *Le Vent Paraclet*. La menace se glissa le long de notre bord. On distingua des silhouettes accrochées à la lisse, concentrées, à peine agressives, sûres de leur victoire compte tenu de leur supériorité numérique et de leur férocité. [Before my eyes appeared a ship speeding by, a vision of misfortune, with pirate flags flying at its stern, recognisable even against the force of the wind, and batteries of cannons aimed at *The Paraclete Wind*. The threat slipped alongside our vessel. We could make out silhouettes clinging to the railing, focused, barely aggressive, confident of their victory given their numerical superiority and ferocity.]²⁹¹

The ship-to-ship clashes and intense combat scenes described in the text bring to mind real historical events, such as naval battles from bygone eras. The pirates, depicted as a “motley crew of highwaymen, former beggars, ex-convicts, and outcasts”, reflect the social and economic reality of the time, in which marginalised individuals sought to escape poverty and hunger by any means necessary. The violence and savagery permeating the narrative highlight the brutalities of maritime conflicts and the cruelty of historical pirates. The scenes where “cannonballs”, “splinter wood”, and “gruesomely mutilated corpses” litter the deck illustrate the horrors that marked those times, echoing

²⁹¹ N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 170.

similar historical accounts of looting and war. N'Sondé uses these adventure novel elements to address profound themes related to history and the human condition. Captain Louis de Mayenne, once respected, is described as “unrecognisable, willing to commit any disgraceful act to save his own life”, reflecting the dehumanisation that can occur in extreme warfare and violence. Overall, N'Sondé's novel, with its classic adventure novel elements, invites readers to reflect on historiographical themes, examining questions of power, violence, survival, and dehumanisation. These aspects give the narrative historiographical value, connecting fiction to broader historical realities and allowing readers to appreciate both the adventurous aspect and the underlying historical context of the novel.

The dominant literary genre in this text, alongside the *bildungsroman*, is the historical novel. This genre involves setting the story in an authentic historical context while featuring fictional characters and story elements within a real-world setting. As a slave trade historical novel, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* falls under the genre of historical fiction. N'Sondé meticulously researches and depicts the historical context, events, and figures of the era, providing a backdrop against which the protagonist's journey unfolds. The genre of historical fiction enables N'Sondé to examine the complexities of the slave trade and its impact on individuals and societies, therefore recovering forgotten narratives and historical injustices. The sections written in italics in this work capture several key traits of the genre.

Before examining the historiographical form of the novel, it is crucial to understand the context in which the novel is set. Renaissance Europe in the seventeenth century was a time of significant social and economic inequalities, with slavery deeply entrenched in the societal structure. This rigid hierarchy supported absolutist regimes, but the rise of a new class of merchants, traders, and bankers during the Renaissance fuelled European expansion through the triangular trade between Europe, Africa, and the “New World”. This trading system brought immense wealth to Atlantic coastal cities like Nantes, La Rochelle, and Bordeaux, primarily through the slave trade, attracting people from rural areas in search of better economic opportunities. These cities grew quickly, creating a diverse mix of merchants, mariners, artisans, and shipbuilders. Merchants and shipowners who capi-

talised on the slave trade and commercial exchanges accumulated vast fortunes, leading to significant architectural transformations in these port cities. The wealth generated by the triangular trade helped solidify European dominance in global commerce and power, laying the groundwork for colonial expansion and furthering social inequalities. This context of social disparity, burgeoning mercantile wealth, and the harsh realities of the slave trade forms the backdrop for the novel's narrative. The story takes place in a turbulent era, focusing on the reign of Álvaro II in the Kingdom of Kongo (1584–1614) while referencing other significant historical events. For example, the reign of Henry IV in France (1589–1610) marked a reconciliation between Protestants and Catholics, while the Edict of Nantes in 1598 granted religious freedoms to Protestants, signalling the end of the French Wars of Religion. In Spain, Philip III's reign (1598–1621) witnessed the 1609 expulsion of Moriscos, descendants of converted Moors, intensifying religious hostilities and contributing to the rise of the "Barbary corsairs". The shifting religious and political landscapes of this period created a complex setting for the novel's exploration of profound themes. European powers competed for control over trade routes and colonies, with the seas becoming battlefields for naval supremacy. The defeat of the Spanish Armada, the secession of the Dutch provinces, and the gradual dominance of English and French navies exemplified the turbulence of the times. The Thirty Years' War (1618–1648) further highlighted the era's instability and how it extended to European colonies. The Renaissance, marked by philosophical, artistic, and scientific innovation, was also a time of great upheaval and contradiction. The baroque movement, with its themes of inconsistency, transformation, and the permanence of death, reflected this ambivalence. Within this complex historical context, the novel blends historical authenticity with fictional storytelling to examine universal themes and moral dilemmas. The central character, Nsaku né Vunda, moves through a world where the brutality of the Inquisition and the slave trade raises questions about power, exploitation, and the moral complexities of the time.

The narrative is set in a specific historical period, using real events, locations, and historical figures to shape the story. While the broader events are historically accurate, the main characters are often products of the author's imagination, inserted into a historically accurate back-

drop. The narrative blends these historically verifiable details with fictional elements to create an engaging and cohesive storyline. Readers can sense the thorough research and effort to maintain historical accuracy, although the author sometimes takes creative liberties to advance the themes and story structure. Despite its historical roots, the plot often explores universal themes and moral dilemmas that remain relevant to contemporary readers. As a result, the historical novel merges fact and fiction to create a gripping tale set in a specific historical context, while also exploring broader themes.

In the text's first pseudo-historiographical passage, the author sets the story in the sixteenth century, incorporating real events such as the trade between the Kingdom of Kongo and Portugal and the widespread practice of slavery during that era. By referencing King Alfonso I of Kongo and his dealings with the Portuguese, the author firmly establishes the historical context. Similarly, by including well-known historical figures like Pedro Álvares Cabral and Amerigo Vespucci, the text strengthens its grounding in historical reality, thus adding credibility to the narrative.

The author introduces fictional characters, such as Dom Diogo Soares, to interact with historical events and real-life figures. These characters serve as conduits through which the author examines themes and dilemmas relevant to the era. For instance, Dom Diogo Soares exemplifies the role of Portuguese agents in the slave trade and the economic motivations driving this practice. By using fictional characters in the context of real historical events, the narrative allows for a more flexible examination of various themes and moral questions. The text merges historical detail with fictional storytelling, creating an immersive experience for readers. The scenes depicting festivities to welcome Afonso I, as well as the negotiations over trade agreements between Kongo and Portugal, exemplify how the author combines historical context with narrative fiction. This blend of real and imagined elements adds depth to the story.

Finally, the historical novel examines universal themes through a historical lens. The text addresses power, political manipulation, and the social implications of the slave trade, revealing the ethical challenges and complexities faced by historical figures. The moral ambiguity in Afonso I's decision to engage in the slave trade underscores

the broader ethical conflicts of the era, reflecting themes that resonate with modern audiences. By addressing these themes through a historical framework, the author adds depth and relevance to the narrative, making it not only an engaging historical account but also a compelling exploration of universal human concerns. From its multiple narrative perspectives to its historical intertextuality and stylistic experimentation, N'Sondé's novel distinguishes itself from a narratological standpoint. The incorporation of diverse voices, the tension between history and fiction, and the use of poetic language contribute to a complex and engaging narrative experience. These narratological elements elevate the novel, offering readers a unique and searching examination of the slave trade and its enduring impact.

N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* redefines historical fiction by weaving together a number of genres, resulting in a complex and engaging narrative. The novel's foundation in historical authenticity provides an insightful look into the late 16th- and early 17th-century transatlantic slave trade, while its adventurous elements trace the protagonist Nsaku né Vunda's perilous journey across continents, exposing the era's moral and ethical dilemmas. The epistolary form adds an intimate dimension, allowing readers to connect with the protagonist's personal reflections, while the inclusion of legendary motifs and poetic language deepens the narrative with cultural depth and emotional resonance. N'Sondé's approach challenges traditional Eurocentric perspectives by focusing on history from an African perspective, thus reclaiming agency over historical memory and celebrating the resilience and resistance of African communities. By blurring the boundaries between fiction and historiography, the novel offers a compelling examination of an era marked by both human suffering and indomitable spirit, providing a complex and thought-provoking experience for readers and scholars alike.

In *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, the author employs various *lieux communs*, or sites of memory, to commemorate the slave trade and its enduring impact. These sites of memory provide symbolic resonance, cultural significance, and a framework for collective remembrance. The following analysis examines the key *lieux communs* in the novel and examines their role in memorialising the legacy of

the slave trade, juxtaposing them with official historical narratives and drawing connections to other cultural contexts, such as the Americas.

A critical site of memory in *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* is the Middle Passage, which represents the transatlantic journey endured by enslaved Africans. N'Sondé's depiction of this harrowing voyage captures the profound suffering and dehumanisation experienced by those forcibly transported across the Atlantic. The Middle Passage serves as a potent reminder of the brutal conditions, the pain of separation, and the loss experienced by those subjected to the slave trade. In one passage, N'Sondé writes:

Pris d'étourdissements, j'allais perdre l'équilibre lorsque me saisirent des ombres venues d'ailleurs: des esclaves sortant de l'entrepont. Des paysannes abusées s'empressèrent de me soutenir, des prisonniers torturés de Tolède m'entourèrent, des juifs nus sous la pluie vinrent à mon secours. [Overcome by dizziness, I was about to lose my balance when shadows from elsewhere seized me: slaves emerging from the hold. Deceived peasant women rushed to support me, tortured prisoners from Toledo surrounded me, and Jews, naked in the rain, came to my aid.]²⁹²

This vivid imagery underscores the solidarity and shared suffering among diverse groups, all of whom endure the brutal realities of the Middle Passage. By depicting these moments of unity in the face of adversity, N'Sondé underscores the collective experience of oppression and the strength that emerges from it.

Another crucial site of memory in the novel is the Kingdom of Kongo, which represents the protagonist's ancestral homeland and the initial site of enslavement. N'Sondé portrays the Kingdom of Kongo as a place of cultural depth, steeped in traditions and spirituality. The kingdom symbolises the connection to ancestral roots, serving as a poignant reminder of what was lost due to the slave trade. In one example, N'Sondé writes: "Le souvenir de ma terre natale restait vif, une tendre mélancolie, mais il ne fut plus une déchirure. Mon périple m'avait enseigné le mouvement vers l'avant, plus enrichissant que le repli dans la nostalgie du passé. [The memory of my homeland remained vivid, a tender melancholy, but it was no longer a wound. My journey has taught me the value of moving forward, far richer than retreating into

²⁹²N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 263.

the nostalgia of the past.]”²⁹³ This reflection captures the bittersweet nature of the protagonist’s relationship with his homeland. Despite the forced separation, the memory of the Kingdom of Kongo remains a source of strength and resilience, reinforcing its significance as a foundational site of memory.

In addition to these *lieux communs* centred around African history and identity, N’Sondé incorporates European historical sites and institutions, such as Rome and the Vatican. These locations symbolise the seat of power and moral authority, yet they also expose the hypocrisy and corruption that enabled the slave trade. By contrasting the grandeur of Rome with the exploitation and dehumanisation fostered by the Catholic Church, N’Sondé criticises the complicity of religious institutions in perpetuating the slave trade. In a powerful passage, the protagonist’s idealised perception of the Vatican is shattered by the harsh reality of its involvement in worldly affairs:

Je me sentis si loin de la merveilleuse citadelle perdue au milieu des nuages dont j’avais rêvé sur *Le Vent Paraclet*, là où le Vatican était un endroit de recueillement, de prières et d’étude ... Ici, il ne s’agissait que d’intérêts, d’influence et de finances, des questions très éloignées des préoccupations célestes. [I felt so far removed from the marvellous citadel lost amidst the clouds that I had dreamed of in *Le Vent Paraclet*, where the Vatican was a place of contemplation, prayers, and study ... Here, it was only about interests, influence, and finances, questions far removed from celestial concerns.]²⁹⁴

This stark contrast between spiritual aspirations and the pursuit of power and wealth underscores the broader context of the slave trade, illustrating the dissonance between ideals and actions.

N’Sondé’s depiction of these *lieux communs* offers a unique perspective that aligns with and challenges traditional historiography. His focus on the African experience and the Kingdom of Kongo provides a different lens through which to view the legacy of the slave trade, contrasting with the more familiar narratives rooted in American history. By emphasising the African perspective, N’Sondé advances the discourse surrounding the slave trade and its lasting impact on both sides of the Atlantic. The historical elements in N’Sondé’s novel also

²⁹³ N’Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 268.

²⁹⁴ N’Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 263.

underscore the global nature of the slave trade by tracing its shared themes across different cultures. The juxtaposition of the Middle Passage with sites like Rome and the Kingdom of Kongo demonstrates the interconnectedness of the events that shaped the transatlantic slave trade, highlighting the complex legacies that continue to influence contemporary society.

In *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, N'Sondé weaves together *lieux communs*, creating a narrative that honours the memory of the slave trade while exploring broader themes of power, violence, survival, and dehumanisation. By incorporating these recurring motifs, N'Sondé provides a compelling and complex view of the slave trade, inviting readers to reflect on its enduring impact and the need for a more comprehensive understanding of its legacy. Through his emphasis on African history and the Kingdom of Kongo, N'Sondé offers a unique perspective that adds depth to the discourse surrounding the slave trade. By juxtaposing historical sites like the Vatican with the experiences of enslaved Africans, he analyses the power structures that enabled exploitation and challenges conventional narratives. Ultimately, N'Sondé's novel serves as a poignant reminder of the need to confront and engage with the complex legacies of the slave trade, encouraging readers to examine the cultural and historical forces that continue to shape our world today.

Character duality also plays into this narrative duality as it is a central theme in the novel, exemplified through Nsaku, the protagonist. His trajectory not only reveals the concomitant practice of African spirituality and Christianity rather than presenting them as mutually exclusive, but also challenges the historical opposition of these two spiritual traditions. At various junctures, the character of the priest demonstrates a spiritual openness, stemming from a subtle blend of Bakongo mysticism and Christian faith. This synthesis of worldviews illustrates his complex identity and the convergence of cultural and religious elements that shape his character. Nsaku embarks on a dual mission as he journeys to the Vatican. On one level, he serves as the official representative of the Bakongos before Pope Clement VIII, symbolising his role as a diplomatic envoy. Simultaneously, he carries out a covert mission, an undertaking of immense moral weight. His clandestine mission is to expose the harsh and dehumanising condi-

tions endured by his people as slaves, advocating ardently for their emancipation. This dual purpose encapsulates the complex nature of his character and the ethical dilemmas he grapples with. The character's role as both an indirect and a direct witness to suffering underscores the novel's exploration of human suffering in various forms. In his homeland, Nsaku is an indirect witness to the plight of his compatriots who endure unimaginable hardship. However, it is during his harrowing voyage aboard *Le Vent Paraclet*, a symbol of the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, that he becomes an explicit and firsthand witness to the barbarity of this trade. His direct confrontation with the violence during the inquisitorial phase becomes evident during his imprisonment in Toledo, Spain, prior to his journey to Rome. This dual witnessing of suffering underscores the character's transformation and the narrative's exploration of the moral and ethical complexities of the era.

N'Sondé's novel examines the theme of value reversal, presenting an insightful critique of both African and European elites, as well as the entwined role of the Catholic Church in the transatlantic slave trade. By deconstructing the racial underpinnings of the trade, the novel effectively challenges the prevailing narratives of the time, revealing the complicity of elites from both continents in perpetuating the horrors of slavery. A crucial scene for examining this theme occurs in the final chapter during Nsaku's arrival in Rome, within a Carnival setting that is reminiscent of the sixteenth-century literary tradition. Here, the novel highlights the unwavering faith of the priest in the face of the horrors perpetrated by human society, drawing parallels with the works of authors such as Rabelais and with the analyses of Bakhtin. The entire narrative is characterised by a systematic subversion of universal and religious values. The novel critiques both African and European elites, dismantling the racial hierarchies that underpinned the transatlantic slave trade. Simultaneously, it serves as a potent critique of Christianity, specifically the Catholic Church, for its complicity in the trade and the massive violence it engendered. This dual critique draws attention to the role of religion within these historical events, demonstrating how an institution ostensibly dedicated to moral and spiritual values became entangled in the atrocity of slavery. In a broader literary context, the theme of value reversal evokes resonances with

Caribbean literature, such as Maryse Condé's novel *Segou*, and notably with neo-slave narratives in American literature. N'Sondé's novel thus extends beyond a singular historical critique to contribute to the broader discourse on the complex relationship between faith, morality, and societal decay within the context of the transatlantic slave trade.

N'Sondé's novel takes readers on a journey through various geographical spaces, each playing a significant role in shaping the narrative. The novel unfurls against the backdrop of two primary settings, beginning with the African kingdom of Kongo and later transitioning to the European context. These shifts in location underscore the wide-reaching repercussions of the transatlantic slave trade, providing the canvas upon which the complex narrative is painted. N'Sondé's descriptive precision emerges as he vividly captures the essence of each locale. From the picturesque landscapes of the African continent, brimming with natural beauty and cultural depth, to the harrowing realities of the transatlantic voyage. In his depiction of these spaces, N'Sondé portrays the stark contrast between the opulence of the Vatican, symbolising ecclesiastical power, and the brutal, dehumanising conditions aboard the slave ships. These visual and sensory descriptions effectively emphasise the disparities between distinct social and cultural environments.

A profoundly Afro-centric perspective emerges as the novel traces the trajectory of the enslaved individuals. This perspective, notably shared with authors such as Alem and Miano, follows the intricate route of enslavement, commencing with the village, the place of capture. It then moves through the menacing forest, which becomes a site of transportation in chains for the captives, culminating at the Atlantic coast, the point of deportation. This process of deportation, the Middle Passage, unfolds predominantly on the slave ship, which acts as a thematic nucleus of the narrative. The significance of the slave ship is undeniable, as it serves as the primary setting for a substantial portion of the story. Beyond its immediate narrative role, the vessel embodies the economic motives alluded to in the novel's title. It encapsulates the essence of capitalism during an era marked by the ruthless exploitation of American lands and the commodification of African and European lives. This ship, by its very nature, can be viewed through a dual lens. It is simultaneously a carceral space, incarcerating countless

individuals, and a microcosm that enables the observation of human society in miniature. The character-narrator is a critical observer of those confined to the ship's hold, individuals who lack a direct voice. Although physically detached, the narrator's observations and the flow of his thoughts constantly transcend the confines of this carceral universe. The character, by choice and necessity, remains within the limited space of the deck reserved for him.

The Afrocentric perspective in the novel aligns seamlessly with Rothberg's theories. The journey of the enslaved individuals, from capture to the Middle Passage, mirrors the multidirectional narrative framework by connecting the trauma of slavery with broader themes of human exploitation and suffering.²⁹⁵ N'Sondé's novel on the slave trade, much like Rothberg's analysis of Holocaust memory, engages with the idea that the trauma of slavery is not isolated but interconnected with other histories of violence and oppression. This multidirectional approach allows for a comparative analysis that highlights the shared experiences of suffering across different contexts. The slave ship, as both a carceral space and a microcosm, serves as a powerful symbol of the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression. This dual symbolism underscores the interconnectedness of various forms of human suffering, a central tenet of Rothberg's multidirectional memory. Rothberg examines how memories of the Holocaust intersect with other histories of suffering, such as colonialism and slavery. This approach highlights the non-competitive, multivalent connections between different traumatic histories, allowing for a richer understanding of global suffering. N'Sondé's novel on the slave trade therefore relates to other trauma literatures.

The organisational structure of the ship depicted in the novel offers insights into the hierarchical distinctions within European society. These juxtapositions and parallels drawn by the author provide a lens through which European societies of the era can be understood. This literary technique not only offers a complex representation of the historical period but also safeguards the novel from being confined to a singular genre or a univocal interpretation. The novel's interpretative

²⁹⁵ Rothberg, Michael. 2009. *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

flexibility allows it to transcend genre constraints, providing a reading experience that mirrors the complexities of the historical era it portrays.

The temporal framework of N'Sondé's novel presents a non-linear narrative structure. While the novel lacks many specific dates, its chronology is perceivable through the movement, the journey, and the geographical transitions. The narrative technique is marked by an alternating rhythm, characterised by passages and suspensions, which act as informational interludes throughout the narrative flow. These intermissions, rendered in italics, offer historical insights, akin to moments of respite in the novel's stream. They serve to contextualise the ordeals experienced by the characters and provide detailed historical information. Consequently, they contribute to the novel's structural coherence, ensuring a continuous flow while slowing the pace during descriptive phases removed from immediate action. This thematic use of time structures the novel, which is divided into chapters of approximately equal length. These chapters are concise, unnumbered, and untitled, serving as distinct segments. This division of the narrative keeps readers engaged while also creating scenes where actions unfold and moments of introspection occur, revealing Nsaku's inner dialogue.

This approach to the narrative arc generates tension within the storytelling, forming a key element of its progression. The narrative advances in several discernible stages, a classic storytelling trope reminiscent of folktales. While the chapters remain unnumbered and untitled, the text is divided into forty-two passages, each encapsulating a principal subject and key actions. This division provides a comprehensive overview of the narrative and highlights key turning points. N'Sondé's novel embraces a multi-layered treatment of time, offering a non-linear narrative structure that interweaves personal recollections with historical events. This technique emphasises the lasting influence of the past on the present, underscoring the enduring consequences of the transatlantic slave trade. By juxtaposing diverse temporal moments, N'Sondé effectively illustrates the cyclical nature of history and prompts readers to contemplate the interconnectedness of past and present injustices.

This analysis has examined the multi-layered facets of N'Sondé's novel. The relationship between history and memory, juxtaposed

with the temporal shifts in the text, exemplifies the enduring consequences of the transatlantic slave trade, transcending the boundaries of time. This analysis resonates with historians' works which illuminate the importance of understanding the historical context and the relationship with time. In addition, the dialogic nature of narratives and their historical underpinnings, as emphasised in Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais, offers a valuable lens through which to comprehend the dynamics at play in the novel. In sum, N'Sondé's novel transcends the limitations of a singular genre, addressing issues of memory, history, and time, therefore making it a productive site for continued scholarly inquiry.

N'Sondé's novel is a combination of diverse geographical spaces, traversing from the African Kingdom of Kongo to the heart of Europe. Through descriptions, the novel paints a picture of these physical landscapes, capturing Africa and the harsh realities of the transatlantic voyage. It strikingly contrasts spaces of power, such as the opulence of the Vatican, with the brutality of the infamous slave ships, highlighting the disparities between social and cultural environments. This spatiality extends to the enslaved perspective, with a distinctly African trajectory reminiscent of other works by authors such as Alem and Miano, tracing the path from capture to the Atlantic shore. The slave ship, as the focal point of the middle passage, is a carceral space, offering a microcosmic view of human society. The narrator's unique vantage point adds depth to the narrative. This organisation, with untitled and unnumbered chapters, maintains reader engagement and reveals the story's unfolding structure in a classic, recognisable pattern, despite the absence of numerical chapter markers. The spatial engagement deepens the narrative by offering a complex experience, echoing historical realities and allowing for diverse perspectives and insights.

4.3. Recomposing the Haunting Past: Amnesia and Memory in Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*

Critics have lamented the absence of an African perspective on the transatlantic slave trade and its profound impact on the continent, with some suggesting that "there is, properly speaking, no African

memory of slavery”.²⁹⁶ Unlike their African American and British counterparts, African scholars have generally not addressed the slave trade and its repercussions on contemporary African life, largely due to various political and cultural obstacles to open discourse about African involvement in the slave trade. This hesitance has led to the view of the slave trade as a “colonial parenthesis”,²⁹⁷ a period often omitted from African narratives. Amid this widespread amnesia about the slave trade, literature can serve as a crucial repository for exploring the African experience during this dark chapter of history. For Miano, the African experience is encapsulated in the moment of capture, when everything changed, and a once-familiar Africa was thrust into chaos and exploitation. It was a time when the known became unknown, when stability gave way to a brutal reality driven by the dehumanising force of capital. This moment, which Ngũgĩ describes as “dismemberment”, represents the uprooting of the African subject, a dislocation from which the continent has yet to fully recover. By focusing on this defining point, literature provides a way to examine the African side of the transatlantic slave trade, tracing the trauma and resilience that defined this era. Through storytelling, authors like Miano can reconstruct the narrative, offering a platform for the African voice while challenging the notion that this history is lost or forgotten.

This chapter examines the impact of Miano’s narrative structure, thematic choices, and stylistic techniques on the reader’s understanding of historical events. By scrutinising the relationship between the fictional elements and the historical record, we can gain a deeper insight into how *La Saison de l’ombre* functions within the broader genre of historical fiction and its role in reshaping historical narratives. This analysis focuses on Miano’s ability to reconstruct historical moments that traditional historiography often overlooks. A close reading approach allows for a dissection of the narrative strategies Miano

²⁹⁶Mbembe, Achille. 2000. African modes of self-writing. *Public Culture*, 14(1), 239–273, 259. https://www.sas.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Mbembe_African_Modes_of_Self_Writing.pdf.

²⁹⁷Murphy, Laura T. 2007. “Into the Bush of Ghosts: Specters of the Slave Trade in West African Fiction.” *Research in African Literatures* 38, no. 4, 141–152. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20109543>.

employs to create a sense of authenticity and emotional resonance, despite the fictional elements woven throughout the story. This approach reveals the underlying themes of collective memory and historical consciousness in *La Saison de l'ombre*, demonstrating the power of literature to reclaim forgotten histories and give voice to those who are neglected or not fully represented by conventional historical accounts. By highlighting the complex relationship between fact and fiction, this analysis shows how Miano's work questions established narratives and invites readers to reconsider their understanding of the past. Ultimately, this analysis demonstrates how Miano's novel serves as a literary tool for reclaiming historical memory, offering a narrative that challenges conventional views and provides a more inclusive perspective. Through this analysis, the study seeks to understand how Miano's work contributes to a broader redefinition of historical storytelling, providing a platform for narratives that resonate with both historical authenticity and creative imagination.

Historical narrative, as a construction of memory, does more than replicate the past; it selectively curates events, piecing together a narrative that both reflects and shapes our understanding of history. In this role, the writer becomes both a storyteller and a memory maker, choosing specific elements to create a meaningful and coherent narrative. While historical texts are often based on factual events, they can also exhibit a fluidity, incorporating elements of fiction to fill in gaps. What often separates history from fiction is the tone and intention of the narrative, which seek to create a sense of authenticity for the reader. Fiction, by contrast, is a space where imagination reigns, with the freedom to construct stories that do not necessarily hinge on historical accuracy. In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano addresses the neglected and often forgotten aspects of the slave trade, focusing on African perspectives that have been largely absent from traditional historical narratives. Through a story in which amnesia and recollection intertwine, Miano traces the blurred boundaries between history and fiction, reconstructing the memory of capture and exploring the trauma it caused on African soil.

Miano's literary oeuvre demonstrates how personal stories can be intricately woven into a broader historical context. This analysis examines the fabric of memory that underpins *La Saison de l'ombre*,

examining how Miano's work illuminates the intersection of individual experiences with the larger narrative of history. Through her portrayal of characters, society, and themes, we can understand the ways in which Miano challenges conventional interpretations of historical accuracy and encourages readers to contemplate the complexities of storytelling within a historical framework. Miano's use of vivid imagery and elements drawn from oral traditions deepens the narrative, grounding it in an authentic cultural context. This, in turn, enhances the reader's comprehension of the historical period, emphasising the impact of the slave trade on African communities. Her careful characterisations offer insights into the societal dynamics and personal struggles faced by these communities, with a particular focus on the role of women amid the chaos and devastation of the slave trade. A key aspect of Miano's narrative is the dichotomy between amnesia and memory, which serves as a driving force that shapes the experiences of her characters and influences the readers' engagement with the story. By managing this balance, Miano traces the trauma and resilience inherent in the African experience during the slave trade, inviting readers to consider the ways in which memory is reconstructed and preserved. This analysis not only challenges traditional historical narratives but also serves as a compelling reminder of the human stories that underpin historical events.

Miano's literary work exposes the brutal realities of the transatlantic slave trade, providing a profound examination of the mechanisms of power and the violence of enslavement. This examination reaches into the very essence of colonialism, peeling back layers of oppression, a recurrent theme in Miano's earlier works, notably *L'Intérieur de la nuit* and *Les Aubes écarlates*. Her narratives prompt scholarly reflection on the incursions of dominance, exploitation, and the negation of inherent dignity and developmental prospects for both individuals and communities. In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano meticulously reconstructs the defining moment of capture, marking a turning point that irrevocably alters the course of many lives. Through vivid prose, she illustrates the collective trauma caused by the loss of the eldest sons of the Mulongo community to slave raids, detailing the psychological turmoil of grieving mothers and the disintegration of established societal structures. Miano's narrative technique depicts the overlooked

tragedies of those ensnared in the slave trade, creating a narrative framework conducive to introspection and cultural immersion. The novel also examines the economic and power dynamics within African communities, revealing the inherent brutality of human enslavement. Miano's portrayal of these dynamics lays bare the complex relationships and internal divisions that facilitated the slave trade, challenging conventional narratives that often focus solely on Western culpability. Structurally, the novel unfolds through a fragmented narrative, with scenes that respond to the existential questions arising from themes of disappearance, silence, and shadow. Miano's work serves as a potent reminder of the human cost of the slave trade, offering readers an opportunity to reflect on the deep-seated impacts of colonialism and its enduring legacy. Through her evocative storytelling and characterisation, Miano brings to light the often-overlooked stories of those who suffered during this dark period.

The novel, viewed as both an initiatory tale and a historical thriller, takes place in precolonial Africa within the imagined Mulongo clan during the era of slave capture. At the outset, there is no indication of the looming slave trade or of potential betrayal among neighbouring communities. Both readers and characters are intrigued by a seemingly minor incident in a tranquil Sub-Saharan African village. To tell this story, the author uses multiple narrative voices, effectively combining elements of realism and adventure. Realism is present throughout the narrative, with detailed character development and a careful depiction of thoughts, emotions, and interactions, lending the story a solid foundation in a believable context. This grounding invites readers to connect with the characters on a personal level. At the same time, the adventure aspect emerges through unexpected plot twists and gripping turns, creating a dynamic and immersive experience. This blend of realism and adventure allows the narrative to transcend conventional boundaries, encouraging readers to engage with both the historical context and the complexities of the human condition. By reflecting on societal themes and presenting a compelling narrative, the novel establishes itself as a notable contribution to the literary tradition. It offers a unique lens through which to view precolonial African society, the effects of the slave trade, and the broader themes of betrayal and survival.

One night, a massive fire devastates part of the Mulongo village, and by the next morning, twelve men are missing – ten recently initiated boys and two adults, including the village's minister of cults. As the villagers confront this unsettling disappearance, internal tensions rise, with blame falling on the mothers of the missing boys, leading to their quarantine in order to protect the community from suspected curses. The story, told through a polyphony of voices, weaves multiple narrative perspectives to dramatise the mystery of the capture and the unravelling of community bonds. As the plot unfolds, the escalating tensions reveal complex social dynamics and power struggles in a precolonial African setting. Suspicion and fear spread through the village, prompting the main characters to embark on a journey to find the missing men and understand the events surrounding the fire. This quest gradually exposes a hidden network involved in the trafficking of human lives, spanning neighbouring communities like Bwele and reaching distant places like Isedu. The revelation of "men with chicken feet", a metaphor for white colonisers, underscores the broader scope of this clandestine operation. The narrative's trajectory not only addresses universal themes of violence, resilience, and justice but also examines the unique beliefs, rituals, and cultural values within the African community. Through a sustained examination of dreams and visions, the novel illuminates the collective memory of slavery, inviting readers to contemplate the deep-seated trauma and lasting effects of this dark period in African history. By interweaving personal stories with broader historical contexts, the narrative encourages reflection on the relationship between individual experiences and the broader forces that shape them.

How does one craft and narrate a tale of enslavement and forced migration for those whose historical accounts were stolen from their homelands, some murdered and others deported? How do we capture the experiences of peoples whose civilisations were decimated by slavery, with no written record of their memory, rituals, languages, or traditions? Is it feasible to recount a story that has never been documented or told before? How can we narrate the transatlantic tragedy of enslaved Africans in the absence of factual evidence and firsthand experiences of the endured violence? Writing and telling the story of enslavement and forced migration is a daunting challenge, especially

when the historical accounts of those affected have been stolen, suppressed, or destroyed. Recounting the experiences of peoples whose civilisations were devastated by the slave trade requires addressing contexts in which written records of their memory, rituals, languages, or traditions are scarce or absent. These questions drive Miano's work, illuminating the obscured shadows of forgotten memories and reclaiming the voices of those whose stories have been erased.

J'ai fait le choix d'une démarche de création pure, la seule valide à mon sens, pour cheminer vers les mondes disparus que je comptais explorer. Il s'est agi de bâtir un projet esthétique permettant de lever les silences et de faire revivre des êtres dont l'Histoire ne semble avoir gardé nulle trace. Des êtres chassés du souvenir de leur propre descendance. Ceux qui, sans connaître les cales des navires négriers furent, eux aussi, précipités. [I made the choice of a pure creative approach, the only valid one in my opinion, to journey towards the vanished worlds that I intended to explore. It was about building an aesthetic project to lift the silences and to revive beings of whom History seems to have kept no trace. Beings chased from the memory of their own descendants. Those who, without knowing the holds of the slave ships, were also cast down.]²⁹⁸

Miano's choice to embrace a "pure creative approach" represents a conscious effort to build an aesthetic project capable of lifting the silences and reviving the stories of those whom history seems to have forgotten. The passage from Miano's 2010 interview, encapsulates this intent, emphasising the need to give voice to those who have been excluded from the narrative, whether because they never boarded slave ships or because their descendants no longer remember them. It is an artistic endeavour that involves imagining and reconstructing the lives of those who were, in Miano's words, "chased from the memory of their own descendants". Miano's artistic approach underscores the power of creativity and imagination in the face of historical erasure. By reinterpreting and reconstructing the past, she challenges dominant narratives and traditional frameworks of historiography. This approach is more than just storytelling; it is a call to embrace diverse perspectives and to recognise the human experiences that have shaped history. Miano's work invites readers to engage with the complexities of memory, identity, and history, encouraging a broader understand-

²⁹⁸Yoassi, Tola Séna. 2010. "Entretien avec Léonora Miano." *Nouvelles Études Franco-phones* 25, no. 2, 101–113. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41104008>.

ing of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring legacy. Through this commitment to creative inquiry, Miano opens up new pathways for reclaiming lost histories and honouring the stories of those who endured violence, displacement, and dehumanisation.

La Saison de l'ombre utilises a narrative methodology that moves beyond traditional historical frameworks, providing a powerful platform for expressing the African perspective on the transatlantic slave trade. By examining the slave past through an African-centred lens, Miano's narrative reshapes historical paradigms, presenting a more comprehensive and inclusive portrayal of precolonial African society. Miano's approach involves integrating a range of historical fragments, including languages, oral traditions, and cultural symbols, to create a dense and authentic narrative. This method allows her to reconstruct the context in which the transatlantic slave trade occurred, giving voice to those often silenced or marginalised in conventional historical accounts. Her examination of the internal dynamics within African communities reveals the emotional and psychological impact of enslavement and forced migration, offering a compassionate examination of these traumatic experiences. The critical reassessment of historical events in *La Saison de l'ombre* invites reflection on the concept of collective memory, emphasising the role of narrative discourse in both commemorating the past and shaping the future. Miano's meticulous narrative choices, structural arrangements, and thematic depth underscore the evolving and essential nature of historical storytelling. By breaking down conventional boundaries and embracing a broader perspective, Miano challenges readers to reconsider established narratives and recognise the complex histories that define our understanding of the past.

The novel represents a significant undertaking in its attempt to unravel a complex historical mystery. According to Miano, resolving this enigma requires an aesthetic approach.²⁹⁹ She places a strong emphasis on the role of literature in understanding and interpreting history, especially when dealing with sensitive subjects such as the African slave trade. Miano raises a fundamental question about the collective mem-

²⁹⁹Mokam, Yvonne-Marie. 2016. "Littérature francophone d'Afrique subsaharienne: L'avènement du polar historique." *Dalhousie French Studies* 109: 77–86. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26380203>.

ory of capture, highlighting the challenges of recalling these traumatic events without granting agency to those who experienced them or acknowledging their perspective. Consequently, her narrative commits to addressing this historical gap by offering an empathetic depiction of those affected by the slave trade, tracing their experiences and perspectives during this dark chapter in African history.

Miano's fascination with the shadows cast by the transatlantic slave trade in Africa stems from academic sources that inspired and guided her writing of *La Saison de l'ombre*. Her intense examination of these historical themes reflects a long-standing dedication to understanding the complexities of the African experience. She shares her journey in reading extensively about the Transatlantic Slave Trade and other topics connected to the experiences of Sub-Saharan Africans and Afro-descendants.

Qui fréquente mes écrits s'en doute, cela fait des années que je lis à propos de la Traite transatlantique, de bien d'autres thématiques liées à l'expérience des Subsahariens et/ou des Afrodescendants. [Those who are familiar with my writings suspect it; it has been years since I have been reading about the Transatlantic Slave Trade, extensively, and other themes related to the experience of Sub-Saharan Africans and/or Afro-descendants.]³⁰⁰

Miano's work is a testament to her deep engagement with the memory of the slave trade in Africa. Through her writings, she seeks to bring to light the stories that have often been overlooked or forgotten, while also exploring broader themes of African identity and experience. Her commitment to examining these themes reflects a profound personal connection.

Miano's inspiration for exploring the memory of capture in her work stems from an investigation led by Lucie Nkake in Benin, which focused on the forgotten narratives surrounding the slave trade. This inquiry revealed the depth of oblivion surrounding this critical episode in African history, motivating Miano to rekindle the collective memory of the slave trade. Driven by this impetus, she embarked on a thorough documentation process to faithfully recreate the daily lives

³⁰⁰ Cakeljic, Vanja. 2019. "Un regard autre sur l'histoire de l'Afrique dans *La Saison de l'ombre* de Léonora Miano." *Les Études françaises aujourd'hui* 11, 233–234. <https://doi.org/10.18485/efa.2019.11.ch29>.

of precolonial Sub-Saharan communities. Miano sourced information from various texts, including works by Prince Dia Akwa Nya Bonambela, to deepen her narrative with insights into the mythology, beliefs, and customs of these societies.

Miano's approach to reconstructing the Sub-Saharan experience of the slave trade is not focused on validating historical accuracy but rather on reimagining this narrative from an African perspective. Her objective is to restore an African memory of the slave trade, recognising the need to correct historical representation, which is often dominated by external narratives and concepts. Her work provides a platform for Sub-Saharan Africans to share their experiences and viewpoints on this significant period. By recalibrating the discourse, she underscores the importance of a more inclusive historiography that honours the diversity of voices and experiences that have influenced the course of African history.³⁰¹ This comprehensive approach goes beyond the factual reconstruction of history. Miano integrates elements from her familial and social background, incorporating linguistic elements such as Douala and perspectives on how Africans viewed Europeans on the African coasts. This integration of cultural and linguistic insights lends her novel a depth and authenticity that transcend conventional storytelling. It underscores her commitment to an informed and respectful examination of African history and the slave trade, inviting readers to contemplate the broader implications of these historical events. Miano's work serves as a poignant reminder that history is complex and that reclaiming lost narratives is essential to understanding the past and shaping a more inclusive future.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano adopts a historiopoetic approach, crafting a narrative that intricately weaves together elements of history, prose, and African oral narrative technique. Central to this approach is the incorporation of the enigma novel genre, serving as a generic matrix for the story. Within this framework, the narrative quest is presented as a prototype of metahistorical narration, with analytical discourse inherent within it. Through this lens, the novel engages readers by presenting historical events within the context of a mystery,

³⁰¹ Cakeljic, "Un regard autre sur l'histoire de l'Afrique dans *La Saison de l'ombre* de Léonora Miano," 234.

prompting reflection on historical complexities and on the nature of history itself. Described as a ‘*récit initiatique*’ [initiation story]³⁰² and a ‘*polar historique*’ [historical thriller],³⁰³ *La Saison de l'ombre* takes on the forms of a metahistorical discourse, drawing inspiration from African oral traditions. In fact, the question-and-answer style characteristic of these traditions is evident in the sequencing of events in the novel. The novel opens with a collective questioning of the eventful night when the fire consumed part of the village and the able young sons and old men were taken away, followed by ongoing consultations with elders, the search for a course of action, interviews with the quarantined women, and subsequent journeys outside the village in search of the missing individuals. This incorporation of African oral narrative techniques deepens the storytelling experience and contributes to the novel’s examination of historical realities.

This approach is notably didactic, structured in an investigative manner that involves multiple characters embarking on their own inquiries for various reasons. Through a multiperspectival approach, the narrative unfolds gradually, transitioning from the initial questioning surrounding the disappearance of the twelve men of the Mulongo clan to the eventual revelation of the truth. Three distinct investigators are central to this pursuit. The first, Mukano, leads an official investigation with his elite soldiers, but tragically they meet their demise during a storm in the dense forest they traverse. Meanwhile, Mukano’s half-brother, Mutango, conducts a covert investigation driven by personal gain. He eventually finds himself captured and enslaved, ultimately finding redemption through aiding the third investigator, Eyabe. Eyabe, in turn, sets out on a journey to the coastal area in search of the missing men, further deepening the complexity of the investigation. Miano’s narrative technique not only serves to entertain but also educates, offering insights into historical events while engaging readers in a compelling mystery.

³⁰² Achour, Christiane Chaulet. 2016. “L’Esclavage dans *La Saison de l'ombre* de Léonora Miano: Donner corps à un espace cicatriciel.” In *L’œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano*, edited by Alice Delphine Tang, 123–140. Classiques Garnier.

³⁰³ Mokam, “Littérature francophone d’Afrique subsaharienne: L’avènement du polar historique.”

The narrative unfolds against the backdrop of a larger historical context of the emergence and expansion of a brutal global trade network driven by the activities of Bwele's slave raiders. These raiders captured twelve men from the Mulongo community, who were then sold to a merchant named Isedu. Isedu, in turn, bartered them to foreign traders, including Western slave traders, thus entangling the fates of these individuals in the vast and dehumanising web of the transatlantic slave trade.

The mystery that perplexes the Mulongo villagers symbolises the disorientation and chaos experienced by countless African communities during this dark period of history. The sudden disappearance of the twelve men serves as a poignant representation of the vast reach and devastating impact of the Atlantic slave trade. This local enigma acts as a microcosm, reflecting the broader patterns of abduction, forced migration, and exploitation that characterised the transatlantic slave trade therefore illustrating the scale of human suffering and the complex network of commerce that perpetuated it.

La capture battait son plein. Les Mulongo, comme d'autres, s'étaient trouvés mêlés à quelque chose qui les dépassait. La nuit du grand incendie, lorsque les Bwele avaient jeté leurs filets sur douze mâles de cette communauté, ces derniers étaient loin de se douter que leur mésaventure n'était qu'une parmi les mille péripéties émaillant une histoire complexe. Combien d'hommes, de femmes, d'enfants, issus de combien de peuples, seraient eux aussi arrachés aux leurs, jetés sur des voies souvent inconnues pour aboutir ici, à l'extrémité de *wase*? La situation était facile à comprendre [...] le prince isedu, avait décidé d'aller encore plus loin que ses aînés, dans la production et le commerce des captifs. [The capture was in full swing. The Mulongo, like others, found themselves involved in something beyond their control. On the night of the great fire, when the Bwele cast their nets over twelve males of this community, they had no idea that their misfortune was just one among the thousand twists and turns in a complex history. How many men, women, and children, from how many peoples, would also be torn from their own and thrown onto often unknown paths to end up here, at the edge of *wase*? The situation was easy to understand [...] the prince Isedu in title, had decided to go even further than his predecessors, in the production and trade of captives.]³⁰⁴

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano crafts a compelling narrative that brings together a complex mix of characters, locations, testimonies, and ac-

³⁰⁴Miano, Léonora. 2013. *La Saison de l'ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 188.

tions. This entanglement allows for a thorough examination of themes such as truth, inquiry, and redemption, set against the backdrop of a meticulously detailed historical setting.

Miano confronts the silences of history by combining historical facts with fictional narratives, bringing the past to life in *La Saison de l'ombre*. Her aesthetic project aims to illuminate the gaps in historical records by reconstructing events through the lens of what is known, then expanding on that foundation with imaginative storytelling. From the very first chapter, "Aurores fuligineuses" [Fuliginous Dawn], Miano demonstrates the fluidity between history and fiction, moving along the fine line between the two to craft a narrative that both enlightens and engages.

The chapter sets the stage with a devastating event that catalyses the narrative: "Les cases n'ont pas toutes été rebâties après le grand incendie. Regroupées dans une habitation distante des autres, elles combattent de leur mieux le chagrin."³⁰⁵ This description not only introduces the devastating fire but also captures the emotional turmoil that follows, offering insights into the psychological impact it has on the Mulongo villagers. Miano uses this tragic event to address broader themes of disappearance and collective memory. The sudden disappearance of twelve men leads to a community-wide search and questioning, where "Le Conseil a pris les décisions qui semblaient s'imposer. Des femmes ont été consultées, les plus âgées."³⁰⁶ This process of consultation and reflection among community elders echoes African oral narrative traditions, grounding the story in cultural practices.

The theme of fear and suspicion is evident in the community's response to the disappearances: "Soucieux de ne pas être en reste, le chef Mukano, approuvant d'un hochement de tête le confinement des mères éplorées, a donné l'ordre que les hommes les plus vaillants inspectent la brousse alentour. [Concerned not to be left behind, Chief Mukano, nodding in approval at the confinement of the grieving mothers, ordered that the bravest men inspect the surrounding jungle.]" This reaction shows how the community's leaders address the crisis, through both practical and symbolic measures designed

³⁰⁵Ibid., 11.

³⁰⁶Ibid., 12.

to contain the perceived threat. Miano also examines the complex dynamics within the Mulongo community. The power struggle between Mukano and his half-brother Mutango is portrayed as a potential source of further turmoil: “Le regard franc de la matrone a croisé, à plusieurs reprises, celui de l’adipeux Mutango. Dans les yeux globuleux du dignitaire, la femme a vu se lever des houles dont elle n’a pas douté qu’elles se déverseraient sur le chef, à la première occasion. [The matron’s frank gaze met, several times, that of the corpulent Mutango. In the bulging eyes of the dignitary, the woman saw waves rising, and she had no doubt that they would crash upon the chief at the first opportunity.]”³⁰⁷ This depiction of internal conflict reveals the tension and underlying power dynamics that will play a critical role as the story unfolds. Miano combines historical context with fictional elements, offering a narrative that addresses not only the specific events depicted in the novel but also the broader cultural and social dynamics of precolonial African communities. The use of multiple narrative perspectives, along with cultural details, creates a compelling backdrop for examining the impact of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring legacy.

The novel’s historical elements are evident in its detailed portrayal of customs, rituals, and social dynamics specific to the era in question. References to fires, mysterious disappearances, and the community’s responses to these events echo historical realities, grounding the story in a specific temporal context. This attention to cultural and societal details helps to evoke a sense of historical authenticity.

Miano crafts a vivid portrayal of precolonial African society, embedding historical elements in detailed descriptions of customs, rituals, and social dynamics. This approach creates a strong sense of historical authenticity and temporal context, as the story unfolds in response to a significant event: the mysterious disappearance of twelve men from the Mulongo village following a devastating fire. The community’s reaction to this disaster illustrates societal structures and customs that are unique to this era and place. The fire and the mysterious disappearances lead to specific cultural responses, as seen in the actions taken by the village council. The elders’ approach to resolving the crisis reflects

³⁰⁷Ibid., 11.

traditional communal practices: “Le Conseil a pris les décisions qui semblaient s’imposer. Des femmes ont été consultées, les plus âgées.”³⁰⁸ This process of seeking advice from the village’s elders resonates with traditional African governance systems, where decisions often involve consultations with respected members of the community. The cultural dynamics are further examined through the role of women in the village. Following the tragic fire and the disappearance of the men, women whose sons are among the missing are quarantined: “Ainsi, a-t-elle déclaré, leur douleur sera contenue en un lieu clairement circonscrit, et ne se répandra pas dans tout le village.”³⁰⁹ This action illustrates the community’s attempt to contain perceived curses and to align its response with traditional beliefs surrounding grief and mourning. The focus on customs and rituals is evident in the detailed depiction of childbirth and death, where the elder Ebeise plays a significant role in calming the village’s anxieties: “Elle a vu trembler certains des notables siégeant au Conseil alors qu’ils attendaient, à l’extérieur de la case où une vie allait éclore, se mordant les lèvres, mâchouillant des herbes médicinales dans l’espoir de se calmer, murmurant des suppliques.”³¹⁰ This depiction of childbirth rituals and their cultural significance reflects the societal dynamics within the Mulongo community, grounding the narrative in specific temporal customs. These elements from “Aurore fuligineuses [sooty dawn]” demonstrate Miano’s commitment to incorporating detailed cultural references, customs, and societal dynamics, thus providing a narrative grounded in historical realities. Through such attention to such detail, Miano evokes a sense of historical authenticity, creating a backdrop against which the broader story of the transatlantic slave trade and its impact on African communities can be understood.

The boundary between history and fiction is intentionally blurred in *La Saison de l’ombre*, where the subjective perspective of the narrator and the presentation of events introduce fictional elements that shape the emotional core of the story. The characters’ emotions, intimate thoughts, and personal struggles are crafted to evoke empathy

³⁰⁸Ibid., 11.

³⁰⁹Ibid.

³¹⁰Ibid.

and draw readers deeper into the narrative. Even when testimonies and historical documents are referenced, the perspective used adds a subjective layer, emphasising the complexity of historical truth. Ebeise, the matron, serves as a key link between the historical and fictional aspects of the novel. Although her experiences are fictionalised, they are grounded in a plausible historical reality. The ways in which she and other characters engage with life, death, and the rituals surrounding birth reflect how a community might have coped in a similar context. This subtle balance between historical accuracy and creative storytelling demonstrates how a historical novel can inhabit a porous boundary, blending the two in a meaningful way. Miano's use of historical facts as a grounding framework is complemented by the freedom she exercises in exploring the inner lives of her characters. This approach underscores that history and fiction can coexist, each deepening the other. By weaving fictional elements into the backdrop of historical facts, Miano captures the essence of an era while providing readers with an immersive and emotionally resonant experience. Ultimately, this blurred boundary allows Miano to challenge traditional narratives, filling in the silences with a compelling and insightful examination of the past.

The narrative perspective in this excerpt is third person, providing an omniscient viewpoint. However, the narration is closely tied to the experiences and observations of the characters, allowing readers to immerse themselves in their thoughts and emotions. The opening of the novel briefly uses a first-person perspective before transitioning to third person as the story unfolds. In this excerpt, women whose sons have gone missing live in pain and grief. They find themselves isolated, trying to hide their suffering during the day. The narrator observes their actions with a certain detachment, adopting a distant and impartial perspective, typical of a historiographic narrator.

Elles l'ignorent, mais cela leur arrive au même moment. Celles dont les fils n'ont pas été retrouvés ont fermé les yeux, au bout de plusieurs nuits sans sommeil. Les cases n'ont pas toutes été rebâties après le grand incendie. Regroupées dans une habitation distante des autres, elles combattent de leur mieux le chagrin. Le jour durant, elles ne disent rien de l'inquiétude, ne prononcent pas le mot de perte, ni les noms de ces fils que l'on n'a pas revus. [They are unaware, but it happens to them at the same time. Those whose sons have not been found have closed their eyes after several sleepless nights. Not all huts were rebuilt after the great fire. Grouped in a dwelling

away from the others, they do their best to fight grief. During the day, they say nothing about the worry, do not mention the word loss, nor the names of these sons who have not been seen again.]³¹¹

The narrator here describes the actions and emotions of the women without directly engaging with their experiences. The style is objective, presenting events with a degree of neutrality. The narrative voice illustrates the events and emotions of the characters without interpreting or judging them, therefore reflecting a historical approach to storytelling.

Further along, still in the third person, the narrator describes the scene in a more immersive way, plunging readers into the mysterious atmosphere of the dream and using evocative language to depict the sensations and emotions of the characters. The omniscient perspective reveals the thoughts and feelings of the women during their dreams without interpreting their experiences or expressing personal opinions.

Les femmes dorment. Dans leur sommeil, il leur arrive une chose étrange. Comme leur esprit navigue dans les contrées du rêve qui sont une autre dimension de la réalité, elles font une rencontre. Une présence ombreuse vient à elles, à chacune d'elles, et chacune reconnaît entre mille la voix qui lui parle. Dans leur rêve, elles penchent la tête, étirent le cou, cherchent à percer cette ombre. [The women sleep. In their sleep, something strange happens. As their minds navigate the realms of the dream, which are another dimension of reality, they have an encounter. A shadowy presence comes to them, to each of them, and each would recognise among a thousand the voice that speaks to her. In their dream, they tilt their heads, stretch their necks, and try to pierce this shadow.]³¹²

The narrative voice adopts a contemplative tone, evoking an atmosphere of grief and mystery. The impact of this narrative perspective lies in the ability of the narrator to reveal the characters' intimate thoughts while maintaining a sufficient distance to observe the events objectively. The reliability of the narrator is therefore brought into question, as the narration appears to lean towards empathy for the mourning mothers in the village. Subtle signs of subjectivity emerge in the words chosen to describe grief and the struggle against loss. This bias cre-

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid., 14.

ates an emotional connection between the reader and the characters, highlighting the complexity of historical narratives, in which the truth is often complex.

Characterised by poetic language and evocative descriptions, the narrator uses a vocabulary rich in precise nuance to depict the customs, emotions, and social dynamics of the period. Linguistic details related to the historical context, such as specific terms and turns of phrase, contribute to an authentic immersion into the past. The narrative approach balances objectivity and emotional depth. The omniscient perspective provides a broad view of events, while the more intimate moments offer readers a glimpse into the personal lives of the characters. The use of multiple voices and perspectives deepens the story, offering a complex exploration of themes such as grief, loss, and resilience.

A polyphonic narrative is a storytelling approach that incorporates multiple voices and perspectives, allowing for a richer and more complex portrayal of events and characters. In the context of the given text, Miano employs this polyphonic technique by weaving together the viewpoints of different characters, thereby offering a complex depiction of their experiences. This approach provides depth to the narrative by showcasing a range of viewpoints and examining the complexities of the slave trade and its aftermath. Historical novels often utilise different narrative perspectives to provide a comprehensive view of the era they depict. This includes characters from varying social classes, ethnic groups, or nations, each bringing distinct experiences and perspectives. The choice of narrative viewpoint can vary, with many historical novels opting for a first-person or limited third-person perspective in order to allow readers to see the world through the eyes of a character from that period.

The pluralisation of narrative voices is a common feature in contemporary historical novels, aiming to narrate different visions of history, including contradictory ones, through multiple narrative perspectives. This pluralisation, often characterised by an ethnic interweaving, seeks to challenge dominant narratives entrenched in national historiographies. A polyphonic approach to storytelling emphasises the diversity of voices, allowing the protagonists of the novel to drive the memory work being portrayed.

Regarding tone and style, the narrative voice reflects the atmosphere of the period while remaining accessible to contemporary readers. The choice of words, prose style, and even grammar can be tailored to evoke the historical era while retaining readability. This adaptation helps create a bridge between the historical setting and the modern audience, allowing them to engage with the story while also appreciating its historical context. A polyphonic narrative creates a dynamic and intricate storytelling structure, presenting multiple perspectives that offer a more comprehensive and layered understanding of historical events. By embracing a range of voices, the narrative can subvert traditional historical narratives and provide a richer, more authentic representation of the past.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, the narrator serves as a conduit for bringing to light the hidden suffering of the slave trade era. For instance, through the narrator's perspective, the novel gives voice to marginalised experiences, challenging traditional historical narratives that often overlook or minimise the role and suffering of women. By situating the plot within the historical context of the slave trade, the narrator immerses the reader in an African sense of time, thus amplifying the authenticity and depth of the narrative. Through these techniques, the narrator becomes a powerful vehicle for tracing the complexities of history and resilience within the novel.

Considered alongside Hartman's critical fabulation, Miano's narrative choices take on an additional dimension. *La Saison de l'ombre* invents a community with no certifiable historical referent, set in a place deliberately stripped of a proper name, among people whose disappearance no archive records. This is not an evasion of history but a response to the fact that the transatlantic slave trade, experienced from the African shore, generated almost no testimony from those who were taken. The ten women who open the novel, gathered in silence at the margin of a community that does not yet understand what has been done to it, embody the condition that Hartman identifies as the starting point for any ethical literary engagement with the slave trade, namely the condition of figures who entered the historical record, if they entered it at all, as casualties rather than as subjects.³¹³

³¹³ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2–3

What makes Miano's practice critical rather than merely inventive is the discipline that governs this invention. The withholding of proper place names, the refusal of an omniscient narrator who knows more than the characters, and the deliberate incompleteness of the historical picture. These formal choices acknowledge the limits of what literature can recover, even as they insist on the necessity of attempting the recovery. In this, *La Saison de l'ombre* reaches back into silence to create, in the present, the conditions for a mourning that institutional history has never authorised.

Miano's use of multiple narrative perspectives enhances the historiopoetic approach embedded in the narrative voice. The first-person plural perspective fosters a sense of collective memory and resilience, the third-person limited perspective offers an intimate understanding of individual experiences, and the meta-narrative voice encourages critical engagement with official historical narratives. These narrative perspectives work in tandem to provide a layered and searching examination of the historical novel of the slave trade.

One of the prominent narrative perspectives in the novel is the first-person plural. This collective voice serves as a collective memory of the community, embodying the shared experiences and collective consciousness of the enslaved people. It gives voice to the silenced and forgotten individuals, allowing them to reclaim their history and assert their presence. In the passage, the collective voice conveys the community's endurance and resilience.

A sequence at the very beginning of the novel illustrates this perspective in several ways. In this passage, Musima, the son of the ritual master, conducts interviews with the women in quarantine, questioning them about their experiences with the shadow looming over the hut that shelters them. Most of them mention Mwititi, a mysterious figure linked to loss or deceit. Eyabe, one of the women interviewed, stands out by expressing a bold opinion and questioning the Council's measures to exclude women whose sons have disappeared, treating them as criminals. Despite the scepticism of others, Eyabe articulates her pain at the irreparable loss of their loved ones. Despite the others' perplexed looks and the imposed silence, Eyabe asserts her dignity and determination to be heard.

D'abord, c'est pour elle-même qu'elle prononce ces mots. Puis, elle les énonce à voix haute, sans crier, inclut les autres femmes dans cette dénégation : Nous n'avons rien fait de mal. Nous n'avons pas avalé nos fils et ne méritons pas d'être traitées comme des criminelles. C'était de partir à leur recherche qu'il s'agissait. Ils ne sont plus, à présent. Tels que nous les avons connus, nous ne les verrons plus ... [First, she speaks these words to herself. Then, she articulates them aloud, calmly, without shouting, including the other women in this denial: We have done nothing wrong. We have not eaten our sons and do not deserve to be treated like criminals. It was about searching for them. They are no longer here, now. As we knew them, we will see them no more ...]³¹⁴

When Eyabe utters the words “we have done nothing wrong”, she speaks not only on her own behalf but also encompasses all the women present, echoing their collective experience. This use of the plural pronoun underscores the strength of the collective and the resilience of the female community in the face of adversity. When Eyabe declares, “We will not see them anymore ...”, she not only evokes the individual loss of her own loved ones but also expresses the shared grief of all the women whose sons have disappeared. This “we” thus reinforces the emotional bond between the women, highlighting their shared experience of loss and their mutual need for support and solidarity. The collective “we” used by Eyabe in the passage functions as a powerful symbol of the unity and shared suffering of the women in the village, illustrating their collective strength and determination to make their voices heard in a world where they are often marginalised.

Another narrative perspective used by Miano is the third-person limited perspective. This viewpoint focuses on individual characters and provides insight into their personal journeys and internal struggles. It allows for a deep examination of the characters' emotions, motivations, and conflicts. Through this perspective, Miano introduces a sense of intimacy and empathy to the narrative, enabling the reader to connect with the characters on a personal level. An example of this can be seen in the passage when the narrative examines the inner thoughts of a character, describing their turmoil and yearning for a sense of identity and belonging. Miano also incorporates a meta-narrative voice, at times breaking the fourth wall and directly addressing the reader. This narrative strategy disrupts the traditional narrative

³¹⁴ Ibid., 25–26.

structure, challenging the reader's preconceptions and inviting critical engagement with the text. It heightens the self-reflexivity of the novel, prompting the reader to reflect on established historical narratives. The meta-narrative voice questions the reliability and limitations of historical accounts, urging the reader to consider alternative perspectives and to question the dominant historical discourse.

An illustrative example of these narrative voices can be found in the first chapter. Although the village has been ravaged by fire, Mukano, the chief, fails to pass a measure that is particularly dear to him. Despite his conviction that the incident was not an accident but rather a crime committed by individuals, the Council members appear reluctant to heed his wishes. For Mukano, the failure to pass this measure represents a betrayal of his clan's motto.

Depuis sa fondation, la devise du clan dit: *Je suis parce que nous sommes*. Pour la première fois, Mukano a le sentiment de l'avoir foulée aux pieds en ne parvenant pas à imposer sa volonté. Pour lui, ne pas tenter l'impossible pour retrouver les disparus, revient à livrer au *néant* un morceau de soi-même. [Since its foundation, the motto of the clan says: *I am because we are*. For the first time, Mukano has the feeling of having trampled it underfoot by not managing to impose his will. For him, not attempting the impossible to find the missing individuals amounts to delivering a piece of oneself to *oblivion*.]³¹⁵

In this passage, the narrative offers a close examination of the social dynamics, internal tensions, and cultural values within the Mulongo clan. Through the portrayal of Mukano, who embodies leadership and tradition, the author addresses universal themes such as collective identity, the imperative of remembrance, solidarity, and resilience in the face of adversity. The heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator unveils the motto of the Mulongo clan, "I am because we are", which underscores the fundamental importance of unity and solidarity within the group's culture and tradition. This narrative approach adopts an empathetic stance towards Mukano, highlighting his frustrations and aspirations, and therefore inviting the reader to engage with the emotions and dilemmas faced by the village chief.

The collective imperative of ubuntu, articulated by Mukano, resonates as a moral lesson and a reminder of the fundamental values of

³¹⁵ Ibid., 31.

the Mulongo clan. Ubuntu, with its emphasis on interconnectedness among individuals and the community, becomes a thematic guiding principle that informs the actions and motivations of the characters. This notion underscores the importance of solidarity, empathy, and mutual responsibility in the construction and maintenance of collective identity. The first-person singular and plural function as symbolic pillars that structure the social dynamics of the Mulongo clan. Through this duality, the author examines tensions and compromises between individuality and community, autonomy, and collective obligation. The first-person singular embodies the expression of individuality, while the first-person plural represents the strength and cohesion of the community. By merging these two perspectives, the author reveals Mukano's internal conflict between his desire for personal justice and his commitment to the collective well-being. The use of the collective imperative of ubuntu and the "I" – "we" duality deepens the narrative by breathing life into complex characters and examining tensions between the individual and the community within a precisely rendered historical context.

The effects of these narrative perspectives are multiple. The first-person plural perspective creates a sense of collective identity, resilience, and communal memory. It emphasises the continuity and endurance of the enslaved people's culture and history despite the atrocities they endured. The third-person limited perspective, on the other hand, engenders empathy and emotional connection with individual characters, enabling a deeper understanding of their experiences and struggles. This perspective humanises the historical narrative and provides a more precise portrayal of the complexities of identity and agency in the context of slavery. Lastly, the meta-narrative voice disrupts linear and monolithic historical narratives, challenging the reader's assumptions and encouraging a critical examination of historical discourse.

The narrative in *La Saison de l'ombre* is multifaceted, employing various narrative perspectives to convey the complex and layered nature of the slave trade historical narrative. By utilising these distinct narrative perspectives, Miano enhances the historiopoetic approach of the novel, providing a precise and insightful examination of the historical events and their impact on individuals and communities.

The unique narrative structure of *La Saison de l'ombre* aligns with the concept of historiographic metafiction, as defined by Nünning,³¹⁶ through its integration of polyphonic narration, fragmented chronology, intertextuality, and poetic language. These elements work together to create a complex and multi-layered story that challenges conventional approaches to historical storytelling.

One of the novel's most striking features is its polyphonic narratology. Miano brings together multiple voices and perspectives to provide a varied and layered portrayal of the realities of the slave trade. By giving space to different narrative voices, the author examines a range of experiences and viewpoints, allowing for a deeper understanding of the events and their impact. For example, the opening chapter focuses on Ebeise, a village midwife, and reveals the communal and cultural aspects of pre-slave-trade society. Other chapters, such as those featuring Ebusi, Eyabe, and Mukano, further diversify the narrative perspective. Subsequent chapters give voice to the poignant testimonies of captives Mutimbo and Mukudi, deepening the narrative and examining their unique perspectives as they intersect with the broader context of the story.

Miano's use of fragmented chronology complements this polyphonic approach. Through a non-linear structure that includes flashbacks and shifts between past and present, the narrative mirrors the fragmented nature of memory. This technique effectively conveys the sense of confusion and disorientation that often accompanies traumatic events. The flashbacks provide critical context for the present state of the Mulongo village. This non-linear structure contributes to the narrative tension, as Miano invites readers to piece together the story's underlying connections. The fragmented chronology is central to the novel's examination of historical trauma, emphasising that memories can resurface unexpectedly and that the effects of the slave trade are deeply rooted, affecting generations. By weaving multiple timelines, Miano challenges conventional storytelling and offers a complex view of history, demonstrating that even as time progresses, the shadows of the past remain an inescapable part of the present.

³¹⁶Nünning, Ansgar. 2004. "Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Cultural Narratology." *Style* 38 (3): 352–374.

Intertextuality and references to mythology, folklore, and cultural traditions further enhance the novel's narrative complexity. By incorporating these elements, Miano connects the story to broader cultural and historical contexts. The inclusion of traditional rituals, ancestral beliefs, and creation stories provides continuity and depth, linking the individual experiences of the characters to larger narratives. The spiritual dimension introduced by ancestral spirits and traditional ceremonies adds a layer of cultural authenticity and reflects the communal identity of the village before its destabilisation by the slave trade. The text emphasises the destabilisation caused by the capture of the sons and spiritual master of the Mulongo clan, which ultimately leads to the eventual collapse of their society. Miano's inclusion of ancestral spirits and traditional rituals provides a spiritual dimension to the story, showing the connection between the living characters and their ancestral roots. The retelling of creation stories, along with the use of traditional ceremonies and rites, serves to reinforce the cultural embedding of the narrative. Through these references, Miano offers readers a glimpse into the belief systems and communal identity of the village before its disintegration. Miano's approach also showcases the importance of oral storytelling traditions in preserving history and transmitting collective memory. The characters often express themselves in their native Douala language, reflecting the cultural specificity and collective significance of the storytelling.

Miano's poetic language and symbolism add emotional depth and sensory density to the narrative. Through vivid imagery and evocative metaphors, the author creates an immersive atmosphere that reinforces the story's central themes. A poignant example is her description of the marsh, which symbolises entrapment and uncertainty, evoking a sense of foreboding and reflecting the characters' struggles with confinement. The symbolism of natural elements, such as rivers and oceans, recurs throughout the novel, representing both the potential for freedom and the latent dangers embedded in the journey from enslavement to liberation. Traditional artifacts and objects also serve as symbolic anchors, linking the characters' present experiences to their cultural heritage and ancestral roots. These elements contribute to the sensory and emotional impact of the narrative, allowing Miano to ex-

amine the broader themes of memory and identity within the context of the slave trade.

By weaving together these elements, Miano creates a narrative structure that challenges conventional historical storytelling. The polyphonic narrative and fragmented chronology encourage readers to reconsider traditional interpretations of history, while intertextuality and poetic language add layers of meaning and emotional resonance. This approach aligns with the aims of historiographic metafiction, inviting readers to engage with history in a manner that embraces complexity and acknowledges the enduring legacies of the slave trade. Through this multi-layered approach, Miano crafts a narrative that offers a complex examination of historical trauma and its lasting impact on individuals and communities.

Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* epitomises transgeneric tendencies, blurring the boundaries between literary genres to create a novel that is both historically grounded and imaginatively engaging. By combining historical fiction, magical realism, poetic expression, and oral storytelling traditions, Miano crafts a narrative that examines the complexities and legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. Nünning suggests that postmodernist historical fiction occupies a space at the intersection of historiography and literature, fact and fiction, often crossing boundaries and blurring genre distinctions. Contemporary fiction achieves this in such varied ways that it becomes challenging to categorise these works under a single label, whether "historiographic metafiction" or "postmodernist revisionist historical novel".³¹⁷ *La Saison de l'ombre* exemplifies this fluidity by combining multiple genres to memorialise the African experience of the slave trade in a complex way. Historical fiction, magical realism, poetry, and oral storytelling traditions, each contribute to the examination of an African-centred perspective of the transatlantic slave trade. This amalgamation allows Miano to engage with history while employing creative storytelling techniques, demonstrating the approach to genre boundaries that Nünning describes.

At its core, *La Saison de l'ombre* is rooted in historical fiction, drawing upon actual events, settings, and figures associated with the transatlantic slave trade. Miano's meticulous research provides a solid

³¹⁷ Ibid., 360.

foundation for the narrative, allowing readers to engage critically with the historical context of the slave trade. The historical fiction elements are evident in the detailed portrayal of precolonial African society, where Miano reconstructs the contexts and events surrounding the slave trade. For example, she depicts slave markets and the journey of enslaved individuals with a level of detail that reflects careful research and attention to historical accuracy. These foundational elements provide readers with a clearer understanding of the broader socio-economic structures that supported the slave trade.

Miano introduces elements of magical realism to blur the lines between fact and fiction, adding depth and symbolism to the narrative. The presence of spirits, dreams, and supernatural occurrences enriches the story, allowing Miano to examine the psychological and emotional aspects of the characters. This fusion of reality and the fantastical creates a compelling and immersive atmosphere that captures the spiritual and symbolic dimensions of the African experience during this period. This dynamic is exemplified in various dream sequences and supernatural events throughout the story. The realism in the novel often takes shape within the dream realm, serving as a unique lens through which characters process their experiences and trauma. These sequences enable Miano to examine deeper themes of memory, loss, and redemption in ways that transcend conventional storytelling. The detailed analysis of these dream sequences and their role in blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction is reserved for a subsequent chapter.

Miano's prose frequently assumes a poetic quality, with vivid imagery and rhythmic patterns that evoke a deeper emotional response from the reader. These poetic elements enhance the sensory experience of the narrative, creating moments of poignancy within the tragic. In a passage describing the aftermath of the second raid on the Mulongo village, Miano conveys the devastation through the eyes of Matron Ebeise, the only survivor. As she walks through the deserted village, the imagery is hauntingly vivid: "C'est le cœur battant que la matrone découvre, à mesure qu'elle avance, un territoire vidé de sa population. [With a pounding heart, the matron discovers, as she

advances, a territory emptied of its population.]”³¹⁸ Scattered totems and overturned utensils symbolise the chaos and violence that swept through the village. The sensory details in this passage are both grim and poignant. The “corps sans vie commencent à pourrir [lifeless bodies begin to rot]” with “visages crispés en un masque de douleur [faces frozen into a mask of pain]” evoke a visceral reaction, underscoring the brutality of the raid. The rhythmic repetition in phrases like “il n’est pas bon de fuir devant l’épreuve [it is not good to flee in the face of trial]” reinforces the emotional turmoil faced by the characters. This poetic approach not only illustrates the harsh reality of the raid’s aftermath but also invites readers to connect with the characters’ distress and confusion. Miano’s personification of the heart in “Le cœur battant [the pounding heart]” and metaphorical language, such as feeling like “voyager dans une autre dimension [travelling in another dimension]”, further emphasise the disorientation and surreal nature of the scene. This poetic quality creates a deeper emotional engagement, turning a historical account into an immersive experience. The tragic poignancy of this passage contributes to the broader themes of trauma, loss, and resilience, emphasising the importance of storytelling as a means of preserving memory and honouring those affected by the transatlantic slave trade.

The incorporation of oral storytelling traditions, including folktales, songs, and traditional storytelling techniques, connects the narrative to its African roots, emphasising the importance of cultural heritage and communal memory. This aspect of the narrative underscores the significance of storytelling as a means of resistance and as a vehicle for the preservation of history, reinforcing themes of collective memory and cultural resilience. A notable example of this traditional storytelling style is seen in the passage that discusses the heterodiegetic narration of the story. Miano’s use of a proverbial tone and style lends a sense of wisdom and cultural depth to the narrative. For example, in the passage describing the intentions and motivations of Mutango, Miano uses a proverbial structure to hint at the underlying themes of power, betrayal, and societal norms. The narration suggests that the character is contemplating deeper moral questions while remaining

³¹⁸ Miano, *La Saison de l’ombre*, 177.

embedded within a culturally specific worldview: “Pour Mutango, les communautés n’ont pas de sentiments. Elles ont des intérêts. [For Mutango, communities have no feelings. They have interests.]”³¹⁹ This proverbial expression encapsulates a broader worldview, grounding the narrative in a shared cultural understanding. The storytelling tradition is also evident in the way Miano describes the beliefs and customs of the community. The heterodiegetic narrator often uses a narrative style that resembles a storyteller sharing folktales or parables. This approach helps to create a sense of continuity with the oral traditions of African cultures and adds a layer of communal knowledge to the story. For example, when the narrator examines Mutango’s interactions with the spiritual world and his understanding of ancestral practices, the prose adopts a cadence and structure that resonates with traditional storytelling methods.

By integrating this proverbial tone and style, Miano deepens the narrative, infusing it with a sense of cultural heritage and collective memory. This method not only reinforces the African roots of the story but also serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring legacy of oral traditions in preserving history and cultural identity. Through these storytelling techniques, Miano emphasises the resilience and strength of the African experience, even in the face of profound adversity.

One of the most poignant aspects of this transgeneric approach is the inclusion of firsthand testimony from a captured son of the Mulongo clan, offering a chilling account of his journey from capture to enslavement. This testimonial, embedded in the novel, blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by providing a raw and emotional account of the brutal treatment endured by those taken during the slave raids. The testimony paints a vivid picture of the march to the coast, the brutality of the captors, and the mental and physical degradation suffered by the captives. “Nous étions là, marchant de nuit le long de voies improbables, crâne rasé, poings liés, nus comme les enfants que nous avons cessé d’être... [We were there, marching at night along improbable paths, heads shaved, fists bound, naked as the children we had ceased to be...]”³²⁰ This stark image not only pro-

³¹⁹ Ibid., 79.

³²⁰ Ibid., 178.

vides historical context but also conveys the profoundly dehumanising nature of the slave trade. Miano uses this testimonial to deepen the emotional resonance of the narrative, allowing readers to connect with the lived experiences of those captured during this dark period. The description of the relentless march, the violence directed at those who falter, and the overall sense of despair collectively illustrate the devastating impact of the slave trade on individuals and communities. Miano effectively bridges historical fiction and oral storytelling, demonstrating how personal stories can serve as powerful means to memorialise the past. This narrative approach brings to light the often-overlooked voices of those subjected to the transatlantic slave trade, highlighting both their struggles and their resilience in the face of unimaginable hardship.

In sum, Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* demonstrates how a transgeneric approach can be used to examine complex historical themes while creating an engaging and immersive narrative. By blurring genre boundaries and incorporating multiple storytelling techniques, Miano crafts a novel that challenges traditional historical narratives and provides a platform for reimagining the African experience during the transatlantic slave trade.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, the tension between the official and the unofficial emerges as a central theme, underscoring the complex dynamics of power, authority, and agency. Mukano, as the official investigator, represents sanctioned authority seeking to uncover the truth behind the disappearance of the twelve men from the Mulongo clan. His investigation, conducted with elite soldiers, symbolises an institutionalised approach to inquiry. However, Mukano's tragic demise during the investigation highlights the limitations of official channels and the vulnerability of established power structures. In contrast, Mutango embodies the unofficial investigator, driven by personal motives rather than institutional authority. His covert investigation, motivated by personal gain, reflects the marginalised perspectives and clandestine efforts often overlooked by official narratives. Mutango's capture and enslavement further illustrate the risks associated with challenging dominant power structures and pursuing alternative avenues of inquiry. The introduction of Eyabe as a third investigator disrupts traditional gender dynamics and challenges dominant perspectives. Ey-

abe, a woman, embarks on a journey to the coastal area in search of the missing men, defying societal norms and expectations regarding women's roles in investigative pursuits. Her agency and determination highlight the resilience and resourcefulness of marginalised voices in challenging patriarchal norms and contributing to the uncovering of truth.

Miano reimagines and gives voice to historical figures from the slave trade era, allowing them to transcend their historical roles and emerge as complex, fully realised characters. Through her poesis and characterisation, she humanises these figures and invites the reader to engage more deeply with their personal experiences and emotions.

In the novel, characters such as Ebeise, Ebusi, and Mukano, as well as Mutimbo, Mukudi and Mutango, are not merely representative of historical archetypes but are presented as individuals with their own fears, desires, and inner struggles. Miano explores their thoughts, memories, and dreams, therefore giving them agency and humanity beyond their historical context. Miano's novels open up discussions that are absent from Sub-Saharan African literature. The writer stages female figures who share narrative space to recount their everyday transgressive experiences. Despite their differences, they express an identity fragmentation stemming from a censored colonial heritage in social discourse. In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano illustrates the fortitude of her female characters, particularly Ebeise and the other women whose sons have not been found, in the face of tragedy. Ebeise, a matron and revered figure within the community, exemplifies leadership and compassion as she takes charge in proposing a housing arrangement for grieving women. Her initiative not only demonstrates her concern for the collective well-being but also underscores her role as a guiding force during times of turmoil. Meanwhile, the women, despite grappling with grief, exhibit remarkable resilience by maintaining composure and engaging in rituals that honour their traditions and support their emotional well-being. Through their unity and unwavering support for one another, they find solace and strength in facing their collective sorrow. The narrative further highlights the courage of these women as they confront the mysteries and dangers lurking outside their dwelling. Together, they devise a plan to confront the

unknown entity, highlighting their determination and solidarity in the face of adversity.

Eyabe emerges as a potent symbol of strength and resilience, confronting societal obstacles with unwavering determination and refusing to conform to traditional gender roles. Her resolute declaration, “Je ne serai pas réduite à rien. Je ne serai pas une femme qui n’a pas de valeur [I will not be reduced to nothing. I will not be a woman without value]”, encapsulates her defiance against marginalisation. Eyabe’s interactions with other characters illuminate her role as a transformative force within her community, inspiring other women to assert their autonomy and challenging entrenched power structures. Her complexity as a character, depicted through moments of introspection and vulnerability, adds depth to her portrayal, rendering her a relatable and compelling figure for readers. Through Eyabe, Miano examines identity and the enduring power of individual agency in the face of societal constraints, offering readers a probing examination of the transformative potential inherent in challenging oppressive norms. Miano’s portrayal of Eyabe speaks to her larger project of reclaiming agency and voice for marginalised people within the slave trade novel. By giving voice to characters such as Eyabe, Miano challenges historical erasure and offers a counter-narrative that celebrates the resilience and humanity of those who have been oppressed. Through characterisation and poetic language, Miano invites readers to bear witness to the personal journeys and emotional landscapes of these individuals, fostering a deeper understanding of the lasting impact of historical injustice and the enduring power of human resilience.

In *La Saison de l’ombre*, Miano utilises the theme of capture as a fundamental *lieu de mémoire* for African slave memory. She portrays capture as a defining moment in the historical process of the slave trade, one that encapsulates the trauma and suffering experienced by countless individuals. Through the narrative lens of the Mulongo clan, Miano exposes the horror of a global system that ensnares them unwittingly. Her portrayal of capture and transportation from the hinterlands to the African coast serves as a poignant reminder of the impact of the trade on the continent. This depiction includes the unrooting, the suffering of families torn apart, the torment of the sea voyage, and the abjection of the slave ship, all of which are central to the represen-

tation of trauma within the novel. Miano's observations on historical narratives surrounding the transatlantic slave trade reveal a tendency towards abstraction, in which individuals are often reduced to faceless entities devoid of personal histories or connections. She underscores the importance of literature in giving voice and life to these forgotten narratives, thus challenging historical erasure and emphasising the human cost of slavery. Through her examination of capture, Miano reaches into the depths of historical memory, reimagining and humanising the experiences of those who suffered under the brutal regime of the slave trade.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, spatiality serves as a *lieu de mémoire*, capturing collective memory and historical consciousness through vivid descriptions and symbolic representations of place. Each location, whether the Mulongo village, the Bwele lands, or the Isedu territory, embodies layers of meaning, reflecting the relationship between history, power dynamics, and cultural identities, and thus contributing to the ongoing construction of memory in the novel. Spatiality serves as the nexus between the tangible and the symbolic. The topological description serves an ethnographic function, grounding the seemingly timeless fiction in real-time or historiography by recreating the immediate environment of the communities depicted in the work. The successive spaces in the narrative organise the diegetic and symbolic functioning of the story, becoming sites of memory. However, the spaces depicted in *La Saison de l'ombre* elude a true geographical representation. While possessing encyclopaedic knowledge allows for the recognition of the African reference, it does not permit precise localisation of these spaces. Through this double artifice, fiction both manifests and simultaneously challenges its relationship to reality. The narrative's temporality aligns with the cosmogonic perception of time among African peoples, determined by the positioning of the stars.

Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* explores the concepts of time and space through a non-linear narrative structure and a variety of spatial dimensions, offering a layered examination of the transatlantic slave trade and its impact on the characters. By employing a non-linear timeline, Miano disrupts conventional narrative progression, moving between different time periods and perspectives. This approach reflects the fragmented nature of historical memory and calls into ques-

tion the conventional notion of linear historical narratives. By shifting across different timelines, Miano highlights that the repercussions of the slave trade remain relevant in contemporary contexts. The narrative's spiritual dimension, encompassing visions, dreams, and ancestral encounters, contributes to the sense of non-linear time, allowing characters to connect with their past through metaphysical experiences. This ancestral time provides a source of resilience and cultural identity, reinforcing the significance of the past in shaping the present and suggesting that the effects of slavery extend beyond conventional chronological frameworks. Miano's manipulation of space plays a critical role in *La Saison de l'ombre*. The narrative traverses various geographical locations, from African villages to Atlantic shores, and from plantations to modern urban landscapes. This spatial fluidity underscores the extensive reach of the transatlantic slave trade and its impact across different regions. The novel's examination of liminal spaces, such as marshes and oceans, symbolises the transitional experiences of the characters. The marsh represents uncertainty and entrapment, while the ocean signifies both a physical barrier and a potential pathway to freedom. By integrating these spatial metaphors, Miano examines the blurred boundaries between captivity and liberation, reflecting on the complex dynamics of power, resistance, and transformation. In addition to its unique treatment of time and space, the novel employs *lieux communs*, or sites of memory, as recurring motifs throughout the narrative. These motifs serve to memorialise the transatlantic slave trade and create a collective memory that ties the narrative together. For example, the Atlantic Ocean functions as a central site of memory, symbolising both the physical divide between Africa and the Americas, as well as the potential for transgressive liberation. Similarly, the marsh represents the liminal space between captivity and freedom, illustrating the struggles faced by those subjected to the slave trade.

The village serves as a site of memory in which ancestral traditions and communal bonds are preserved, providing a counterpoint to the oppressive environments of plantations and urban spaces. Ancestral spirits and ritual practices further contribute to cultural continuity and resilience, allowing characters to reconnect with their heritage and emphasising the importance of collective memory. Through sto-

rytelling, music, dance, and traditional meals, the narrative celebrates African culture and resistance against historical trauma, creating a sense of continuity across generations. Miano's use of a proverbial tone and oral storytelling techniques adds authenticity and depth to the narrative, reinforcing the cultural roots of the story. These elements reflect broader themes of collective memory, cultural resilience, and the ongoing journey toward reconciliation and re-membling. By incorporating these *lieux communs*, Miano creates a sustained examination of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring impact, challenging traditional historical narratives while providing a platform for reimagining the African experience during and after the transatlantic slave trade. Through her historiopoetic approach, Miano redefines the boundaries of historical fiction, blending historical elements with poetic and fictional techniques to create a multi-dimensional examination of the transatlantic slave trade. This fusion of historical facts, spiritual elements, and cultural motifs creates a compelling and evocative narrative that invites readers to reflect on the fluidity of time, space, and memory, emphasising the enduring legacies of slavery and the importance of cultural resilience and remembrance.

The Mulongo and Bebayedi lands respectively embody obstructed and rediscovered memory. These spatial descriptions underscore the duality between Mulongo and Bwele, symbolising the opposition of the savage to the civilised, with the Mulongo clan ultimately crushed by the urban structure of the Bwele in the process of progress. Isedu, the land of capture, reflects the moral extension of Bekombo and suggests its possible degeneration, illustrated by a shocking ceremony in which widows are thrown into the same pit as their deceased husbands, eliciting Eyabe's revulsion and positioning at the apex of the axiological pole. An axiological orientation of space is thus at play, whereby the virgin paradise embodied by the Mulongo village is aligned with life and elevation, while the Bwele or Isedu lands are associated with the underworld. The power of the Bwele rests on the subjugation of neighbouring peoples, who are compelled to provide frequent human tribute. Motivated by resentment towards their cousins, the Isedu act as suppliers of captives in order to preserve their status and obtain prestigious objects from Pongo. However, this dehumanising strategy

ultimately exposes them as pawns at the mercy of superior domination.

The detailed exposition of Mukudi on the Isedu and Bwele worlds highlights the duality between the city, depicted as a hell of the underworld, and nature, portrayed as a desecralised paradise symbolising a vision of authentic Africa. The narration underscores that Mukudi, before addressing capture, first presents these two worlds, establishing a causality linked to the symbolism invested in both tropes. These spaces act as narrative nodes and chronotopes, embodied in the village of Bebayedi and the water country, and play a key role in the character's journey, serving as points of awakening and as anchors of memory against oblivion.

Miano uses the metaphor of shadows to construct a memory of forgetting, skilfully employing the image of the cloud to evoke the uncertainty that encapsulates the memory of the slave trade. She identifies the act of capture as the definitive moment that crystallises the collective trauma of transatlantic slavery.³²¹ In the novel, the cloud acquires profound symbolic resonance, embedding itself within the book's *traumatomimesis* and reflecting the deep scars left by the transatlantic slave trade on the Mulongo community. Introduced in the opening pages, the cloud becomes a powerful emblem of collective trauma, uncertainty, and silence that come to define the Mulongo people's experience. It foreshadows the novel's broader concerns: the memory of slavery and its enduring impact on African identity.

La femme pointe le doigt en direction de la case où sont regroupées celles dont on n'a pas revu les fils. Une brume épaisse plane au-dessus de l'habitation. Si une telle curiosité existait, on pourrait la décrire comme une fumée froide. Cette opacité prolonge la nuit autour de la demeure, quand le jour s'est levé, à quelques pas de là. [The woman points her finger toward the hut where those whose sons have not returned are gathered. A thick mist hovers above the dwelling. If such a curiosity existed, one could describe it as a cold smoke. This opacity extends the night around the home, even though the day has risen a few steps away.]³²²

The cloud, in its physical manifestation, signifies the abrupt eruption of the unknown and the incomprehensible. Its presence above the hut

³²¹ Miano, Léonora. 2016. *L'Impératif transgressif*. Paris: L'Arche, 65.

³²² Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 17–18.

housing the grieving mothers – described as a “thick mist” or “cold smoke” – obscures the light of dawn, offering an almost supernatural representation of the collective trauma following the sudden and unexplained disappearance of the village’s men. The cloud conveys the heavy burden of silence and secrecy that envelops the community. The women, bearing their grief in isolation, are “forced not to touch each other, lest the world plunge into chaos”.³²³ The cloud thus evolves into an ambivalent symbol, embodying both repressed pain and the potential for liberation. When Eyabe, overwhelmed by sorrow, retreats behind the communal dwelling and returns “adorned with a crown of leaves” and her face covered in kaolin, the cloud begins to dissipate.

Au lieu de rejoindre ses compagnes assises devant la case, elle se rend derrière l’habitation commune. Quand elle revient, elle s’est lavée, coiffée d’une couronne de feuilles, enduit le visage et les épaules de kaolin. Les autres femmes tressaillent à sa vue. L’homme réprime un cri. L’argile blanche, appliquée sur la face, symbolise la figure des trépassés qui viennent visiter les vivants. Le blanc est la couleur des esprits. [Instead of joining her companions seated before the hut, she heads to the back of the communal dwelling. When she returns, she is washed, adorned with a crown of leaves, and her face and shoulders are covered with kaolin. The other women startle at her sight. The man suppresses a cry. The white clay applied to her face symbolizes the figure of the deceased visiting the living. White is the colour of spirits.]³²⁴

Eyabe’s act symbolises an acknowledgement of grief, embodied in the kaolin – a colour associated with spirits and the departed – which allows for a measure of release. The cloud’s dissipation signals not the eradication of pain but rather a step forward in the communal process of mourning. The Mulongo community, confronted with the unspeakable, must seek ways to honour its dead and reconstruct its identity. The vanishing cloud represents the hope of rebirth, a transition from shadow to light. Much as the cloud darkens the Mulongo village, the transatlantic slave trade casts its shadow over Africa’s history and collective memory. The victims, torn from their land and stripped of identity, became voiceless, their fates often left unknown.

The missing members of the Mulongo clan, whose destinies remain uncertain, embody these shadows, haunting the survivors and

³²³Ibid., 20.

³²⁴Ibid., 24.

symbolising the irreparable loss inflicted by the slave trade. The cloud also signifies the silence shrouding the full implications of this historical atrocity. The Mulongo women's enforced silence, dictated by fear and tradition, mirrors a broader suppression that has historically hindered a comprehensive reckoning with the mechanisms, stakes, and consequences of the trade. Eyabe's defiant act, dissipating the cloud, becomes a metaphor for breaking this silence and granting a voice to the shadows. As the cloud gradually clears, it heralds the possibility of identity reconstruction for both the Mulongo people and Africa as a whole. Eyabe's subsequent march symbolises a journey toward liberation from amnesia – a movement from darkness into self-awareness. Through this narrative, Miano argues that confronting trauma and bringing the realities of the slave trade into the light are essential for healing historical wounds and envisioning a more equitable future. Her use of the cloud as both a literal and metaphorical device is emblematic of a broader aesthetic and ethical project: to restore agency to the silenced and to reclaim a history obscured by repression.

The village of Bebayedi in *La Saison de l'ombre* serves as a transformative spatiality, acting as both a physical and metaphorical site where Eyabe's journey takes a profound turn. It symbolises a moment of suspension in her odyssey, a juncture at which nature assumes the role of a life force and Eyabe is metaphorically aligned with Inye, the spiritual essence of renewal and continuity. Bebayedi's name itself evokes a series of dualities: rupture and genesis, destruction and rebirth. This village is described as a space of origin, a "genesis" that emerges from chaos. It is "un espace abritant un peuple neuf, un lieu dont le nom évoque à la fois la déchirure et le commencement, la rupture et la naissance [a space sheltering a new people, a place whose name evokes at once rupture and beginning, break and birth]." The inhabitants of Bebayedi are characterised as a new people, formed through a synthesis of diverse ancestries and languages: "Ceux qui sont ici ont des ancêtres multiples, des langues différentes. Pourtant, ils ne font qu'un. [Those who are here have multiple ancestors, different languages. Yet they are one.]" They are bound by their shared escape from violence and existential uncertainty, therefore embodying resilience and renewal. Their collective history of survival marks Bebayedi as a sanctuary for those who refuse to succumb to oblivion: "Ils ont jailli du chaos, refusé de se

laisser entraîner dans une existence dont ils ne maîtrisaient pas le sens, happés par une mort dont ils ne connaissaient ni les modalités, ni la finalité. [They burst from chaos, refused to be drawn into an existence over which they had no mastery, seized by a death whose form and purpose they did not know.]”

The arrival at Bebayedi represents a threshold, both spatial and temporal, where night and dawn converge. This liminal moment allows for the examination of unconscious forces, highlighting Eyabe’s courage as she steps into an unknown yet nurturing realm. The imagery of the villagers emerging from vegetation, described as a hybrid fusion of life forms, underscores their connection to both nature and a primordial state of being: “Les Bebayedi émergent de la végétation comme de grands bourgeons, leur présence transcendante dépasse les barrières linguistiques avec une énergie apaisante. [The Bebayedi emerge from the vegetation like great buds, their transcendent presence crossing linguistic barriers with a soothing energy.]” This setting functions as a place of renewal, mirroring the cyclical nature of life and history.

In contrast to the stasis and silence that pervade the Mulongo, Bebayedi offers Eyabe an experience of revitalisation. The tactile warmth of the Bebayedi people acts as a soothing energy, their communal ethos beginning to heal the fractures in her identity caused by trauma. The Bebayedi have managed to mend shattered identities caused by history, blending diverse totems, beliefs, and knowledge into a shared collective memory. This transformation is rooted in their ability to “mettre les souvenirs et les coutumes au service de la communauté [put memories and customs at the service of the community]”, thereby transcending historical fragmentation. The Bebayedi community embodies the reconciliation of personal and collective memory, offering a model for a future in which suffering is transformed into strength. Bebayedi represents not just a place but an ideal – a community that refuses to forget its past while actively forging a future. “Ce retour au village, s’il advient, ne sera pas un simple retour en arrière, mais une réappropriation de l’histoire et une réaffirmation de l’identité Mulongo. [This return to the village, if it comes, will not be a simple going back, but a reappropriation of history and a reaffirmation of Mulongo identity.]” Their existence illustrates the possibility of mending shattered identities through unity and shared purpose. For Eyabe, Bebaye-

di marks the turning point at which the mire of self-doubt gives way to a profound understanding of her role in both her community's history and its regeneration.

This vision of rebirth aligns with the overarching narrative of *La Saison de l'ombre*, in which trauma and loss are countered by resilience and the imperative to remember. The village becomes a metaphor for the possibility of reconstructing identity and history after profound destruction. For Eyabe, her departure from Bebayedi signifies not a return to the past but a reclamation of agency, memory, and identity for the Mulongo. The journey to and from Bebayedi encapsulates a movement from rupture to renewal, thus offering hope for the community's reemergence from the shadow of history.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, the narrative unfolds through a complex dialogic structure manifested in the interactions between characters, the narrative discourse, and its hermeneutic code. The testimonies of the characters become crucial clues and milestones for the protagonist, Eyabe, in her quest for truth. Encounters with witnesses deepen the narrative by offering multiple perspectives on past events, thereby broadening the scope of the story and adding nuance to the narration. This dialogic dynamic not only shapes the spatial progression of the narrative but also its discursive evolution, creating an interconnectedness between different locations and characters' voices. The narrative examines the cathartic role of testimony, providing characters with an opportunity to release pent-up emotions and find inner peace. Thus, the dialogic structure becomes a fundamental element in the construction of collective memory and historical truth, allowing various narratives to converge and intertwine to form a complex and precise portrayal of the past.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, the testimonies of Mutimbo and Mukudi depict the dissolution of meaning and the inversion of principles during their capture, highlighting the processes of dehumanisation through animalisation. The abducted men are stripped of their cultural identity, adornments, and clothing, symbolising a commodification akin to that of objects on an assembly line. The constraint on sight and speech further reinforces the loss of identity. The forced march, coupled with the inability to communicate, becomes a profoundly dehumanising experience. The testimonies reveal a tension between the surrealism of

the situation and the meticulousness of the violent details, expressing the horror endured. The disintegration of the world is evidenced by the loss of spatial-temporal references, symbolising the truth spoken by the Bwele regarding perpetual darkness. The loss of the notion of time leads to a non-historical existence, further animalising the men. The testimonies also have a perlocutionary effect, eliciting changes in Eyabe's feelings and thoughts, fostering bonds of trust, and highlighting the similarity in humanity among community members.

La Saison de l'ombre ultimately serves as a poignant allegory of the transatlantic slave trade, providing readers with a lens through which to examine themes of redemption and resilience for its victims. Milano intricately crafts the novel as a complex narrative device, moving through the complexities of history to unearth truths and construct a rhetoric of memory. The conclusion of the novel marks a decisive moment, perceived as a transition towards humanity, urging readers to embrace the narrative's constructed reality as a pathway to accessing emotional truth. Central to this journey is the theme of hope, symbolised by the metaphorical rebirth and childbirth of Eyabe, which becomes a compelling focal point, illustrating a collective desire for rehabilitation and emphasising the central role of memory in comprehending the human experience.

5. Slave Trade Trauma and the Francophone African Imagination

Contemporary African literary production remains inherently linked to its historical past, yet fictional texts in French by African writers that specifically address the slave trade are relatively rare. As Miller observes, Francophone literature is full of allusions to slavery; there is, however, still a certain silence surrounding the slave trade.³²⁵

The trauma surrounding this historical past persists through an absence that stems not only from the seemingly distant slave memory and pluralistic nature of concerns in the African postcolony, but also from the shame and guilt involved in confronting its complexity and paradoxes. Consequently, writers venturing into this work of memory (*travail de mémoire*) face a twofold challenge. First, they must undertake meticulous research into a history that is often shadowed, obscured, forgotten, or distorted, since the archives were generally authored by the perpetrators. Second, they must find a way to capture this pain and allow it to resonate with readers while negotiating the demands of language and representation. This is a delicate balancing act, because the weight of the past bears heavily on the present, influencing the collective memory of African communities as centuries of exploitation, violence, and forced displacement have left lasting scars that continue to shape the cultural, social, and economic fabric of the continent.

Although the transatlantic slave trade, orchestrated by Europeans and Americans, represents a far greater evil than the enslaving practices of Africans themselves, the betrayal by African peers reveals a particularly poignant trauma that is often overlooked in traditional slavery narratives. This form of trauma is rarely examined in depth, partly due to the dominant focus on the transatlantic voyage and the lack of African perspectives in existing analyses. In contrast, *Barracon*, Hurston's most subversive work, stands out for its attempt to unravel the complexities of lived experience without reducing them to simplified facts. The heartrending memory that Lewis holds of

³²⁵ Miller, Christopher L. 2008. *The French Atlantic Triangle: Literature and Culture of the Slave Trade*. Durham: Duke University Press, 39.

the African perpetrators who captured and sold him to white slave traders complicates the alignment between the slave narrative with historical facts.³²⁶ Through the three novels under examination – *Esclaves*, *La Saison de l'ombre*, and *Un Océan, deux mers et trois continents* – contemporary Francophone African writers directly address these neglected dimensions of the slave trade tragedy. These works make a significant contribution to the discourse on the unexplored dimensions of slave trade trauma and its representation in African literature.

This complex portrayal of trauma and memory in African literature aligns with broader critical discussions about how Africa grapples with its past. Notably, in his article on African modes of self-writing, Mbembe criticises African intellectuals for failing to engage deeply with the philosophical implications of colonial oppression, including the painful history of slavery.³²⁷ According to Mbembe, this neglect is symptomatic of a broader tendency in African criticism to focus on victimhood while overlooking the need for a deeper reflection on memory and responsibility. He argues that African intellectuals have failed to ask themselves philosophical questions prompted by issues of colonial oppression to apprehend Africa in its trajectory in the history of humanity. These fundamental interrogations include the forms of extreme violence, suffering, the work of memory, the question of forgetting, and the symbolism of exile. African criticism, in his view, has adopted a victim-oriented approach that consists of systematically refuting and denouncing Western discourse on Africa. According to Mbembe, African criticism prefers to cloak itself in a dogmatic discourse haunted by the “spectres” of apartheid, colonisation, and slavery, whose masks are race, geography, and tradition.³²⁸ Within this essentially polemical and revanchist framework, African criticism neglects the work of memory, which would expose its share of responsibility in present misfortune, but which would also make it possible

³²⁶Hurston, Zora Neale. 2018. *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo.”* New York: Amistad.

³²⁷Mbembe, Achille. 2002. “African Modes of Self-Writing.” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1: 239–273.

³²⁸*Ibid.*, 257.

to express pain and thus bring about the emergence of an African self-consciousness. For Mbembe, there is clearly no African memory of slavery per se:

In contrast to the Jewish memory of the Holocaust, there is, properly speaking, no African memory of slavery or, if there is such a memory, it is one characterised by diffraction. At best, slavery is experienced as a wound whose meaning belongs to the domain of the unconscious – in a word, witchcraft. When efforts at conscious recollection have been made, they have scarcely escaped the ambivalence that characterises similar gestures in other historical contexts.³²⁹

This assertion is arguably in line with the claims of early trauma studies theorists, who argue that victims of trauma suffer from traumatic amnesia and are consequently unable either to remember or to articulate their past traumatic experiences, instead being “condemned to express itself in a preestablished discourse that masks its own, censures it, or forces it to imitate.”³³⁰ Caruth argues that a traumatic event cannot be experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event.³³¹

Mbembe’s critique of the lack of a coherent African memory of slavery, which he argues is obscured by a victim-oriented and polemical discourse, aligns with broader discussions in trauma studies. Cathy Caruth’s examination of traumatic amnesia and the delayed manifestation of trauma complements Mbembe’s view, providing a psychological explanation for the fragmented and often unconscious nature of such memories. Expanding on this, Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory offers a framework for understanding how these fragmented memories are transmitted across generations, thereby influencing contemporary African narratives about the slave trade. This theoretical intersection highlights the complex relationship between memory, trauma, and historical fiction in African literature.

Caruth’s notion of delayed trauma manifestation finds a compelling parallel in Marianne Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. Postmemory

³²⁹ Ibid., 259–260.

³³⁰ Ibid., 257.

³³¹ Caruth, Cathy. 1991. “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History.” *Yale French Studies*, no. 79: 181–92, 185. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930251>

describes trauma memories that are transmitted from the first generation of survivors to subsequent generations, who then experience these memories with a vividness and immediacy as if they were their own.³³² This theoretical framework is instrumental in understanding the recent proliferation of historical fiction by African authors that address the slave trade. Are these narratives genuinely memories, in the traditional sense of being stabilised accounts that faithfully connect to historical origins? The form of memory at play here transcends mere recollection; it pertains to the transmission of narratives and images so potent that they effectively become memory. Marianne Hirsch's analysis of this phenomenon, which she terms postmemory, elucidates its ramifications:

Le rapport de la postmémoire avec le passé est en vérité assuré par la médiation non pas de souvenirs, mais de projections, de créations et d'investissements imaginatifs. Grandir avec l'héritage d'écrasantes mémoires, être dominé par des récits qui ont précédé sa propre naissance ou sa propre conscience fait courir le risque que les histoires de sa propre vie soient elles-mêmes déplacées, voire évacuées, par nos ascendants. C'est être formé, bien qu'indirectement, par des fragments traumatiques d'événements qui défient encore la reconstruction narrative et excèdent la compréhension. [Post-memory's relationship with the past is in fact mediated not by memories, but by projections, creations and imaginative investments. Growing up with the legacy of overwhelming memories, being dominated by narratives that preceded our own birth or consciousness, means running the risk that the stories of our own lives will themselves be displaced, or even evacuated, by our ancestors. It means being formed, albeit indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension.]³³³

To liberate oneself from these distorted and ossified representations, it is imperative to craft narratives capable of subverting the repetitive forms that masquerade as memory. Historical inquiry, and even archaeological investigation, by enabling the retrieval of physical loci, offers a crucial pathway towards this end. This postmemorial framework thus not only explicates the emergence of new historical fiction within African literature but also underscores the necessity of reimag-

³³² Hirsch, Marianne. 2008. "The Generation of Postmemory." *Poetics Today* 29, no. 1: 103–128.

³³³ Hirsch, Marianne. 2014. "Postmémoire." *Témoigner. Entre histoire et mémoire*, no. 118: 205. <https://doi.org/10.4000/temoigner.1274>

ining and rewriting the past in order to break free from the constraints of inherited trauma. Central to this reconfiguration of memory is the creation of an appropriate vocabulary that accurately designates and depicts the African Atlantic experience.

The examination of memory and trauma, particularly through concepts such as postmemory, highlights the importance of accurately representing historical experiences. Such theoretical perspectives not only deepen our understanding of how trauma is transmitted across generations but also reveal the critical need for precise language in historical discourse. It is in this vein that Miano calls for a rethinking of the term “trade” in the context of the slave trade. For her, the term is fundamentally flawed and misleading, failing to capture the full scope of the African experience under slavery. She contends that the term implies a degree of consent among Sub-Saharan Africans in relation to their own deportation, thus distorting historical reality. By focusing solely on the exchange phase, symbolised by the presentation of small trinkets before negotiations, the term restricts our understanding to a merely transactional perspective. This perspective neglects the broader and more complex context, including the pre-deportation experiences that are central to Sub-Saharan history. Miano contends that this terminology erases the profound suffering of those who were forcibly displaced and separated from their families. It also fails to acknowledge the robust resistance mounted by Sub-Saharan Africans against the transatlantic slave trade. Therefore, Miano’s analysis calls for a re-evaluation of the language used to describe this historical period, advocating for terms that more accurately reflect the depth of the sub-Saharan experience, and the injustices endured.³³⁴ To her, the term “slave trade” fundamentally reflects the perspective of the powerful: local elites, legitimate or otherwise, who often acted primarily in their own interests, and the European states that initiated this ignominious practice and derived a significant part of their prosperity from it. Miano therefore urges a deeper engagement with the actual experience, advocating for terms that call a spade a spade:

³³⁴ Miano, *L'Impératif transgressif*, 160.

Pour les victimes du crime, les transportés/déportés et leurs proches, il n'y eut pas de traite, mais une déflagration, la désagrégation du monde connu. C'est cela que doivent avoir à l'esprit les spécialistes subsahariens de ce sujet épineux, les artistes qui s'en emparent aussi, faisant, à leur manière, œuvre de transmission. [For the victims of the crime, the transported/deported and their loved ones, there was no trade, but an explosion, the disintegration of the known world. This is what Sub-Saharan specialists on this thorny subject must keep in mind, as well as the artists who take it up, each in their own way, working to transmit this history.]³³⁵

In Miano's view, the capture, *transportation*, and deportation of Sub-Saharan Africans form the crux of the African Atlantic memory. Reconfiguring this memory requires creating narratives that reflect these realities and challenge the euphemistic language that has long obscured the true nature of the African experience under slavery.

Miano's critique highlights the need to rethink the language and narratives surrounding the African experience of slavery. This re-examination is particularly pertinent for contemporary Francophone African writers, who face the challenge of engaging deeply with the complex realities of the slave trade. What, then, can contemporary Francophone African writers truly achieve when writing the slave trade trauma? They must map out and explain the logics of capture, *transportation*, deportation, and enslavement through their stories. However, to write the trauma of the transatlantic deportation of Sub-Saharan Africans, they must venture beyond traditional approaches and examine the faces and experiences of Africans who endured raids in villages, chaining and endless marches, the dungeons of forts, the terrifying sound of the ocean, and the abjection of the ship's hold. They must remember those who did not cross the ocean, and those who triumphed through death in the Middle Passage. Writing the African experience of the slave trade means moving away from the coasts, entering the forest and the bush to reach the hinterlands where millions of Africans were torn from their ancestral lands and beloved families, essentially by other Africans. It is in these remote and often overlooked areas that the initial violence and trauma occurred, far from the eyes of the world. To write the Atlantic memory of Sub-Saharan Africans, one must address what happened among local peoples,

³³⁵ Ibid.

without complacency or self-flagellation.³³⁶ Writers must embrace this complex, painful, and shameful history, symbolically boarding the slave ship themselves in order to better understand and recount these human experiences with greater intimacy.

Building on this need for re-examination, Miano's examination of capture offers a critical framework for understanding the complex trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. In *L'impératif transgressif*, Miano argues for a deeper examination of the experience of capture, which she considers central to the Atlantic memory of the African continent. This perspective serves as a critical reading grid for analysing the works of Alem, Miano herself, and N'Sondé, offering an alternative approach to the historical and literary examination of the slave trade. Miano emphasises the need to articulate the journey of those captured, stressing that Sub-Saharan Africa occupies the most uncomfortable position in this triangular history. This discomfort stems from the dual reality of defending against capture while simultaneously participating in it. Europeans exploited numerous factors, both human and other, to facilitate this process. These factors include greed, political ambition, and the need for security, as well as the overwhelming military advantage of European slavers, who employed terror as a tactic. Miano's framework offers a comprehensive lens through which to read and interpret the novels of Alem, Miano, and N'Sondé. It emphasises the importance of capturing the complex experiences of the slave trade, from political conspiracies and human greed to religious manipulation and cultural trauma. Through this lens, these literary works contribute to a deeper and more empathetic understanding of one of history's most painful legacies, ensuring that the memory of capture and its implications are fully acknowledged and remembered.

In Alem's *Esclaves*, the conspiracy against King Adandozan, who opposed the slave trade, illustrates the political and human factors that Miano describes. Adandozan's downfall, orchestrated by African collaborators in league with European traders, underscores the complexity of internal complicity and the betrayal of African leaders who resisted the ominous commerce. This narrative reveals how greed and ambition could destabilise regimes, leading to the capture and enslavement

³³⁶Ibid., 174.

of countless individuals. The story of Adandozan exemplifies how political ambition, as described by Miano, facilitated the slave trade and contributed to the disintegration of African governance structures.

Miano's own work further explores these themes, highlighting the interaction of human and other factors in the perpetuation of the slave trade. Her examination of human greed and political necessity reveals the motivations behind African participation in the trade. The tragic reality that African rulers sometimes partook in the trade to secure firearms and ensure the safety of their people illustrates the moral and ethical complexities faced by these leaders. This participation was not a simplistic act of betrayal but a response to the geopolitical pressures and existential threats of the time. N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* expounds on the role of religious manipulation in the slave trade machinery. The story of Nsaku né Vunda exemplifies how European powers, including the Vatican, used religion as a tool of deceit. By presenting Christianity as a force for good, Europeans gained the trust of African leaders and communities, only to exploit this trust for their own gain. This religious manipulation is a stark reminder of the paradox of religious virtues and its deployment by ruling authorities, as Miano describes.

Miano's insights into the trauma of those who were captured but not deported – those “transported” (in her own terms) to the coast – highlight another critical aspect of the slave trade's legacy. For these victims, the experience was not merely a matter of being part of the trade but a catastrophic disruption of their entire world. This notion of deflagration and disintegration of the known world underscores the profound psychological and cultural impact of the slave trade on African societies. It is this deep-seated trauma that Francophone African writers like Alem, Miano, and N'Sondé strive to convey through their works. By operationalising Miano's concepts through characterisation and narrative, these authors provide a more complex and humanised account of the slave trade. They allow readers to engage with the minds of the actors involved, offering an understanding of the motivations, fears, and moral dilemmas faced by those entangled in this tragic history. This approach transcends the simplistic vocabulary of the “slave trade”, by engaging with the embodied experiences and enduring scars left on Sub-Saharan communities.

5.1. Memory and Moralities of Capture

La Saison de l'ombre offers a powerful examination of the lasting impact of capture on African societies. Miano highlights the deep-seated effects of this historical trauma, demonstrating the capacity of literature to convey such profound suffering. In this work, Miano presents the African community as a microcosm of a continent disrupted by the slave trade. Central to the narrative are the Mulongo people, an ancient society rooted in traditions and customs. Their world is violently shattered by the brutal forces of the slave trade, which rip apart their kinship and spiritual bonds. The kidnapping of their eldest sons, meant to be future leaders, and the loss of their spiritual guides symbolise the devastating rupture inflicted upon the Mulongo clan. Miano illustrates how the clan's collapse symbolises the broader struggles faced by precolonial Africa's hinterlands. The brutal reality of capture transforms into a monumental historical disaster for the Mulongo, who are ultimately doomed by a system of slavery that is both foreign and incomprehensible to them. They suffer because their neighbours capture them and sell them to the Isedu, a coastal community that trades with mysterious sea-borne traders known as the "hommes aux pieds de poule [men with chicken feet]". The real trouble, however, comes from the Bwele brothers. Despite having a long history of social and trade relations with the Mulongo, the Bwele have betrayed them, striking a deal with the Isedu to provide people in exchange for peace in their own land.

Miano's narrative examines the intricate dynamics of African relationships during this turbulent period. The betrayal of the Mulongo by their former allies, the Bwele brothers, highlights the complex network of alliances and tensions within African societies. The Bwele's deal with external powers, motivated by survival and coercion, serves as a stark example of the moral dilemmas faced by African communities caught in the grasp of the slave trade. Through this depiction, Miano reveals how the transatlantic slave trade subverted human values, replacing integrity with deceit, treachery, and dehumanisation. Just as Miano critiques the language surrounding the slave trade, her narrative in *La Saison de l'ombre* illustrates the profound impact of this

historical trauma on African societies, further challenging reductive historical narratives.

Walter Benjamin's writings, while not originally framed within trauma theory, align closely with its principles. Benjamin views the advent of modernity in the West as a profound historical catastrophe characterised by dramatic shifts in social structures and the radical transformation of traditional roles and relationships.³³⁷ Cathy Caruth draws a parallel between Benjamin's notion of historical disruption and the shell-shock experienced by World War I soldiers. She argues that Benjamin sees the aesthetic movements of the twentieth century as attempts to cope with and make sense of this fragmentation and upheaval of tradition.³³⁸ Benjamin's concept of modernity as a period marked by the traumatic reconfiguration of social roles finds a parallel in Miano's depiction of the Mulongo people. Just as modernity shattered traditional Western structures, the slave trade dismantled the intricate social and cultural fabric of African communities, causing deep trauma by upending traditional roles and relationships. Individuals who were once free became captives, established social structures were dismantled, and cultural practices were severely disrupted. This interpretation helps us to understand the profound and lasting impact of the slave trade on African societies.

Benjamin's insights into historical catastrophe and trauma resonate deeply with the literary significance of Miano's narrative of the Mulongo. Benjamin's idea that modernity represents a profound upheaval, marked by a dramatic reconfiguration of social roles and relationships, parallels the trauma experienced by the Mulongo people in Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*. In Benjamin's view, the aesthetic responses of the twentieth century were attempts to address and understand the disintegration of traditional structures caused by modernity.³³⁹ Similarly, Miano's narrative serves as a literary response to the catastrophic

³³⁷Kurtz, *Trauma and Transformation in African Literature*, 71.

³³⁸Caruth, Cathy and Thomas Keenan. 1995. "'The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over': A Conversation with Gregg Bordowitz, Douglas Crimp, and Laura Pinsky'. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, edited by Cathy Caruth, 256–271. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 238.

³³⁹*Ibid.*, 238.

impact of the transatlantic slave trade on African societies. The novel examines the intense trauma inflicted on the Mulongo people, illustrating how their traditional social fabric and cultural practices were violently disrupted. Through vivid storytelling, Miano captures the essence of this historical trauma, echoing Benjamin's notion that profound historical shifts demand new forms of expression and understanding. Miano's portrayal of the Mulongo's suffering and betrayal reflects Benjamin's concept of historical trauma as the disintegration of the known world. Just as Benjamin highlights the aesthetic efforts to grapple with modernity's disruption, Miano's narrative offers a literary examination of how the Mulongo navigate their profound loss and dislocation. The novel provides a lens through which the devastating effects of the slave trade are examined, demonstrating how literature can illuminate and make sense of the trauma experienced by societies in the wake of historical catastrophes.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano examines how the capture and enslavement of Africans led to a profound reconfiguration of social and cultural life. Families and communities were torn apart, shattering traditional roles and relationships. This trauma reverberated through generations, disrupting the transmission of cultural knowledge and practices. Just as Benjamin perceived the aesthetic developments of the twentieth century as efforts to cope with the fragmentation brought about by modernity, Miano's narrative can be viewed as an attempt to understand the fragmentation caused by the slave trade. The psychological effects were deep and lasting, leaving African societies with a profound sense of loss and dislocation. Miano portrays the capture and enslavement of Africans as a collective trauma, a historical catastrophe that shattered cultural identities and social structures. Through her novel, Miano examines how the descendants of captives grapple with this trauma, trying to make sense of and heal from the deep wounds inflicted by the slave trade. Her work becomes a means of reconstructing collective memory and confronting historical trauma. Benjamin's ideas about modernity as a traumatic experience offer a valuable perspective for understanding the impact of the transatlantic slave trade, emphasising the significant cultural and psychological shifts that accompanied this devastating historical event. Miano's narrative, much like Benjamin's view of modern aesthetics, serves as both

a reflection on and a response to a profound historical rupture, offering a sustained examination of the cultural and psychological consequences that continue to shape African identities.

5.1.1. Treason and Trauma in the African Atlantic Memory

Treason and trauma are integral to African Atlantic memory, reflecting the deep psychological and cultural scars left by the transatlantic slave trade. Through literary works and historical analysis, the examination of these themes provides a pathway towards understanding the profound impacts of this tragic period. This duality of betrayal and suffering is central to understanding the deep psychological and cultural effects experienced by African communities. In literary works such as Miano's, the depiction of treason and trauma serves as a means of processing and interpreting these historical wounds. Literature becomes a space in which the fragmentation of traditional life and the betrayal of trusted allies are examined, therefore offering a way to reconstruct collective memory and address historical trauma.

The trauma of betrayal encompasses the deep, lingering pain experienced after a profound act of treachery. This concept is particularly poignant when examining the transatlantic slave trade, where the trauma of betrayal is not solely the result of external oppression but also involves internal conflicts and responsibilities. This internal betrayal, wherein some Africans were complicit in the enslavement of their kin, adds a significant layer of complexity to the trauma experienced by enslaved Africans and their descendants. Mbembe provides a crucial lens through which to understand this phenomenon. He identifies a critical aspect of the historical narrative that remains obscured by a profound silence: the internal betrayal by Africans themselves. This silence reflects a deep-seated guilt and reluctance among African societies to confront their role in the slave trade. According to Mbembe, this internal conflict and refusal to face uncomfortable truths prevent a full understanding of trauma arising from both from external and internal sources. Mbembe also emphasises that the suffering caused by the transatlantic slave trade was not solely the result of external cruelty. He points out that internal conflicts and betrayals within African communities played a significant role in facilitating the

slave trade.³⁴⁰ These internal divisions and betrayals contributed to the fragmentation of African identity and unity. Mbembe further highlights that this internal aspect of betrayal is often hidden or erased, creating an illusion of uniform suffering on both sides of the Atlantic. This simplification overlooks the complex realities of the slave trade, including the ways in which both external forces and internal conflicts shaped the experiences of slavery and its aftermath. Mbembe argues that the trauma and loss experienced on both sides of the Atlantic are not identical, given their differing historical contexts and internal conflicts. He suggests that true solidarity and understanding will remain elusive until continental Africans fully acknowledge their role in shaping the history of the slave trade.

Miano, along with her contemporaries Alem and N'Sondé, tackles this painful history with a focus on confronting and understanding the past, recognising both the external and internal factors in order to arrive at a more honest reckoning with such a tumultuous past. Their works are not concerned with assigning blame but with acknowledging and processing this dark chapter in order to move beyond it. By reopening these historical wounds, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé help address the lingering trauma inflicted on African communities. In *La Saison de l'ombre*, *Esclaves*, and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, these authors use literature to examine the profound effects of betrayal, trauma, and the disintegration of African societies. They address the painful reality of Africans betraying their own people, highlighting the deep wounds that continue to impact the African diaspora. The sense of betrayal felt by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean often traces back to the historical memory of being sold into slavery by their own communities. This narrative of treachery is key to understanding the fragmentation of African identity. The slave trade not only displaced millions but also broke apart the bonds of trust and solidarity within African societies. By examining these themes, the authors reveal how the legacy of betrayal and disintegration persists, affecting the healing and unity of African peoples today.

³⁴⁰Mbembe, Achille. 2000. "African Modes of Self-Writing." *Public Culture* 14, no. 1: 239–273.

Through tragedy, irony, and the absurd, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé situate their works at a defining moment for African consciousness. Their writings encourage a collective reckoning with the past, urging contemporary African and diasporic communities to confront the painful truths of their history. This act of facing and confessing historical betrayals is essential for overcoming the psychological and cultural deadlock that impedes the full recovery and restoration of African identity and unity. Their literary contributions are vital in addressing the historical grievances and traumas that continue to shape the African and diasporic experience.

5.1.2. King Adandozan's Deposition and the Political Capture of the Dahomey

In *Esclaves*, the conspiracy against King Adandozan, who was a staunch opponent of the slave trade, illustrates the political and human factors that Miano also identifies as the root causes. Adandozan was betrayed by his own family member, Gankpé, in collaboration with the slave trader Chacha de Souza. This plot highlights the intricate internal betrayals and complicity among African leaders that Miano describes as central to the slave trade's dynamics. The narrative reveals how greed and ambition could destabilise regimes, leading to the capture and enslavement of countless individuals. The story of Adandozan exemplifies how political ambition, as described by Miano, facilitated the slave trade and contributed to the disintegration of African governance structures. Adandozan, the ninth king of Dahomey, ruled from 1797 until his overthrow in 1818. While historical accounts often paint him as cruel, accusing him of selling members of his rival Gankpé's family into slavery, his removal from power also reflects deeper political struggles. His name and emblem have been deliberately omitted from the official records of Dahomean kings, likely as a result of Gankpé's efforts to reshape history. Alem's novel seeks to challenge this revisionist history and restore Adandozan's legacy in Beninese memory, countering the ongoing attempts to erase his impact.³⁴¹

³⁴¹ Omuku, Sotonye. 2012. *Representations of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Francophone West African Novel*. PhD diss., University College London, 193.

Alem stages the complicity of African elites with European slave traders in *Esclaves*, exposing a devastating collaboration that profoundly impacted the African continent. Through the depiction of King Adandozan's dethronement and the tragic fate of his master of rituals, Alem examines the deep, unresolved traumas of the slave trade. Adandozan, ruler of Dahomey, is overthrown in a coup, and this internal betrayal, facilitated by external actors, highlights the role of African elites in the slave trade. This collusion left Dahomey vulnerable to the depredations of slave traders, with lasting repercussions that are still felt today. Alem's narrative choices reveal the deliberate erasure of Adandozan's memory by those in power in Dahomey, despite his efforts to abolish the slave trade and shift the economy towards agriculture. By focusing on Adandozan and his master of rituals – a fictional character symbolising local traditions and resistance – Alem depicts the collective trauma and unhealed wounds inflicted by the slave trade.

In Alem's portrayal, Adandozan emerges as a visionary humanist and abolitionist, whose endeavours were thwarted by the machinations of Gankpé and the sordid schemes of Chacha. The master of rituals, representing ancestral traditions and local spirituality, also meets a tragic end, symbolising the cultural and social destruction wrought by the slave trade. Alem contrasts these characters with Ghezo, the ambitious nephew depicted as a relentless predator, and his allies, avaricious white mercenaries and adventurers. De Souza, depicted as a catastrophe for common sense, embodies intrigue and corruption, highlighting the stark contrast with Adandozan's abolitionist values. Through this narrative, Alem questions the absurdity surrounding the obscurity of Adandozan's memory and advocates for his rehabilitation. This approach challenges colonial historiography, which often demonises resisters and glorifies collaborators, thus revealing historical manipulations and distortions introduced by colonial powers.

Esclaves serves as a powerful literary tool for probing the depths of collective trauma associated with the slave trade. By giving voice to Adandozan and depicting the tragic fate of his master of rituals, Alem examines the unresolved wounds and scars left by centuries of violence and exploitation. This act of literary remembrance is crucial for understanding the historical continuum and the enduring impact of the slave trade on contemporary African societies. Ultimately, Alem's

Esclaves is not merely a re-examination of a forgotten king but a compelling call to reclaim historical narrative, honour the true heroes of the past, and acknowledge the traumas that continue to shape the present. The novel offers a profound examination of the deep wounds inflicted by the slave trade, underscoring the necessity of revisiting and rewriting history concerning long-hidden truths.

5.1.3. The Religious Capture and Manipulation in N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*

In *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, N'Sondé addresses politics, religion, and spirituality on a broad scale, rewriting history from the purview of political stakes. The novel reveals strong political and economic relations between Africa, Europe, and America. European kingdoms are engaged in a double game with the Bakongos, presenting themselves as benevolent missionaries spreading Christianity while secretly pursuing their own economic and geopolitical agendas. Officially, European powers such as Portugal framed their missions as efforts to improve the lives of the Bakongos through spiritual enlightenment and education, building churches, and schools under the guise of religious conversion. However, this outwardly noble mission masked a far more exploitative agenda. The real goal was to establish alliances with local leaders and secure control over trade routes and resources. By converting the Bakongo elite, Europeans created a network of allies who could facilitate the slave trade and other economic transactions. This conversion often involved deals that, while publicly framed as religious agreements, included provisions for the supply of slaves to European traders. European powers portrayed themselves as protectors against rival European nations and internal conflicts, thereby gaining a moral high ground that obscured their own exploitative practices. Thus, the façade of Christian benevolence effectively concealed a strategic and ruthless agenda aimed at economic domination, leaving a legacy of manipulation and exploitation that continues to impact the historical relationship between Africa and Europe.

N'Sondé also examines how religion was manipulated during the slave trade, using a postcolonial lens to reveal how it served as a tool for colonial control. While the colonisers promoted their missions as

efforts to bring civilisation and evangelise, these claims often masked their true motives. Such religious arguments were clever strategies designed to hide the economic and political goals of the colonisers.

The narrator-character's account of the Catholic mission and King Alfonso I, which praises the supposed benefits of their work, contrasts sharply with the actual motivations behind these Christian conversions. This irony underscores the duplicity of the Europeans, who, while promoting Christianity and gaining converts among the Bakongo people, were secretly driven by their own hidden agendas. Their apparent commitment to spreading the word of Christ was, in fact, a facade that masked their true intentions.

Les hommes en robe noire venus d'Europe séduisaient en évoquant l'existence d'un être tout-puissant qui les aimait, puisqu'il avait créé une religion douce comme le ciel pour les rendre heureux. L'amour pour les hommes devait en être le premier acte, l'enfantement la plus grande des richesses. Ils professaient que la grâce de Dieu embellissait dans les cœurs ce que la nature y avait planté de rude et de néfaste, autant de valeurs que partageaient déjà les Bakongos. [The men in black robes from Europe enticed people by speaking of an all-powerful being who loved them, having created a gentle religion as serene as the sky to make them happy. Love for humanity was to be its first act, and childbirth the greatest of blessings. They professed that God's grace beautified the hearts by refining the harsh and harmful traits nature had implanted, values already shared by the Bakongos.]³⁴²

The ironic tone in this passage arises from the contrast between the seemingly benevolent message of the missionaries in black robes and the true motivations behind their actions. They present their religion as a source of love from an all-powerful being and promise a gentle, happiness-inducing faith, portraying their mission as altruistic and nurturing. However, the irony lies in the historical context of colonialism, in which missionary work often concealed intentions of control, domination, and cultural erasure. By describing childbirth as the greatest blessing and presenting harsh traits as manifestations of God's grace, the missionaries seem to align with Bakongo values. Yet, this alignment is superficial, as their true aim was to supplant and reshape those very values. The passage subtly critiques the disingenuousness of the European missionaries' message, highlighting the gap between their professed ideals and their actual impact on indigenous culture.

³⁴²N'Sondé, Wilfried. 2018. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 23–24.

This laudatory passage conceals the unspoken interests of King Dom Diogo Soares. King Alfonso I, fascinated by European luxuries and technological advancements, is quick to trade human lives for goods and weapons. N'Sondé depicts his eagerness vividly:

Il [Alfonso Ier] était impatient de découvrir [...] les [...] produits fabriqués en Europe censés remplir la cale du navire qui venait d'accoster. Il était pressé de s'approprier ces richesses, autant d'éléments de distinction, par leur rareté et par leur singularité, qui aiguisaient son appétit et celui des nobles de son royaume. [He [Alfonso I] was eager to discover the products made in Europe that were supposed to fill the hold of the ship that had just docked. He was impatient to acquire these treasures, items of distinction due to their rarity and uniqueness, which whetted his appetite and that of the nobles in his kingdom.]

This meeting goes beyond a mere commercial transaction to a poignant example of religious and cultural manipulation. Alfonso I, intoxicated by European luxury and delicacy, as well as promises of power, agrees to convert and to deliver his subjects in exchange for European products and recognition.

Le lendemain, Alfonso Ier se trouvait dans les meilleures dispositions pour la transaction. Il n'hésita pas longtemps et signa dès qu'il comprit qu'en échange des captifs qu'il devrait livrer, ses partenaires lui enverraient une trentaine d'ouvriers spécialisés dans le travail du cuivre et du bois, des pistolets, des fusils, et surtout dix pièces d'artillerie. [The next day, Alfonso I was in the best disposition for the transaction. He did not hesitate long and signed as soon as he understood that in exchange for the captives he would have to deliver, his partners would send him thirty skilled workers in copper and wood, pistols, rifles, and above all ten artillery pieces.]³⁴³

This tragic irony, in which the Christian faith is exploited to legitimise slavery, is accentuated by Alfonso I's decision to devote himself entirely to the worship of Jesus Christ in the hope of gaining supernatural powers and invincible weapons. Meanwhile, Dom Diogo Soares coldly plans the construction of a slave fort and the organisation of human trade, revealing the cruelty and opportunism of the colonisers: "De son côté, Dom Diogo Soares ordonna de bâtir un fort à esclaves non loin de la plage. [Dom Diogo Soares ordered the construction of a slave fort not far from the beach.]"³⁴⁴

³⁴³Ibid., 19.

³⁴⁴Ibid.

Thus, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* reveals the complexities and contradictions of the colonial mission, showing how religion, far from being a mere force for good, was used to legitimise and facilitate the exploitation and oppression of African peoples. The case of the Kingdom of Mbansa Kongo particularly demonstrates how Catholicism served as an instrument of conquest and control, destabilising traditional societies and paving the way for the slave trade. At the same time, the narrative also critically examines the behaviour of African elites during the slave trade. The author illustrates how African leaders, such as Alfonso I, were complicit in the proliferation of the slave trade, driven by their desire for European goods, the perceived prestige they conferred, and their thirst for power and recognition. This depiction underscores the tragic irony of African rulers embracing Christianity and aligning themselves with European powers, only to become entangled in the very systems of exploitation and oppression from which they hoped to benefit. The actions of these leaders reveal a complex dynamic of ambition, naivety, and betrayal, highlighting their role in facilitating the devastating impact of the slave trade on their own people. Through this portrayal, N'Sondé describes the complex and contradictory role of African leaders in the historical context of the slave trade, emphasising their contribution to the perpetuation of human suffering in their societies. N'Sondé further examines religious manipulation in the slave trade, revealing how religion was weaponised by slave traders. Under the guise of evangelisation and civilisation, these efforts were deceptive strategies masking economic and political motives.³⁴⁵ The novel exposes how religious doctrines were co-opted to legitimise and facilitate the exploitation of African societies, thus highlighting the ethical and cultural conflicts of the colonial era.

The novel examines the profound legacy of the slave trade, highlighting how it shaped human valuation and societal hierarchy within the Kingdom of Kongo. This hierarchical framework relegated non-natives to subordinate positions, implicitly justifying their disposability into the brutal system of slavery. Through the epistolary narrative of Nsaku né

³⁴⁵Cannon, Katie G. 2008. "Christian Imperialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 24, no. 1: 127–134. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20487919>.

Vunda, the novel offers a sustained examination of the pervasive slave mentality that permeated both precolonial and contemporary African societies, particularly in their interactions with neighbouring communities. This analysis revisits the intricate dynamics of socio-racial relations, economic structures, and identity constructs prevalent during that era. It resonates deeply with the scholarly insights of Félix Iroko, a Beninese historian, whose seminal essay offers profound perspectives on these historical complexities.³⁴⁶ His work challenges prevailing narratives and provides critical reflections on how the intersection of economics, culture, and power dynamics perpetuated the devastating impact of slavery across Africa and beyond. Iroko argues that when we assert today that a human life is priceless, we are considering contemporary moral values. In the context of that earlier era, however, human life did not hold significant value. He also notes that the commodification of Black people by Europeans often appeared to extend from their devaluation by more powerful Africans within the continent itself.³⁴⁷

The depiction of the Kingdom of Kongo in the novel highlights its hierarchical structure, which becomes central to understanding the genesis of slavery within Bakongo society and the ensuing collective trauma. Through a narrative steeped in legend, the author elucidates how social, clan-based, and economic relationships evolved into mechanisms of exploitation, thus deeply embedding this experience into collective memory.

... notre royaume s'établit en garantissant à chacun la liberté de s'installer partout à son aise. Il suffisait alors aux nouveaux arrivants, en proposant des cadeaux symboliques, de reconnaître l'autorité spirituelle des ayants droit, ceux dont l'ascendance remontait aux origines. Le besoin croissant de bras pour le travail des champs conduisit à faire d'une personne mise pour le reste de sa vie au service d'une famille le présent le plus valorisé. [In the bounded territory of our kingdom, everyone enjoyed the liberty to settle freely. Newcomers merely needed to offer symbolic gifts to recognise the spiritual authority of rightful heirs, those whose lineage traced back to the kingdom's origins. This evolving need for labour in the fields soon transformed individuals pledged for life into the most prized possessions.]³⁴⁸

³⁴⁶Iroko, Abiola Félix 2003. *La côte des esclaves et la traite atlantique: les faits et le jugement de l'histoire*. Cotonou: Nouvelle Presse Publications.

³⁴⁷Iroko, *La côte des esclaves et la traite atlantique*, 186.

³⁴⁸N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 16.

This narrative strategy provides readers with a profound sense of historical continuity, enhancing their engagement and comprehension of the traumatic past. It underscores how the initial principles of freedom and hierarchy within the Kingdom of Kongo laid the groundwork for societal structures that would later facilitate the commodification and exploitation of individuals – thus tracing how interpersonal dynamics and social hierarchies, rooted in lineage and clan affiliations, contributed to the early stages of slavery.

Des liens d'allégeance et de dépendance entre les uns et les autres virent lentement le jour, des différences inhérentes à la naissance de chacun, et même si les femmes et les hommes ainsi offerts restaient des êtres humains à part entière, leur statut dans la société demeurait inférieur. Ce furent les débuts de l'esclavage en pays kongo. [Gradually, bonds of allegiance and dependency among individuals emerged, underscored by inherent differences shaped by birth. Although women and men thus offered remained unequivocally human, their societal standing invariably remained inferior. This marked the nascent stages of slavery in the Kongo region.]³⁴⁹

The passage further highlights the complexity of African identity formation, emphasising that societal standing was determined not by superficial characteristics such as skin complexion but by entrenched cultural and ancestral ties. It established a certain hierarchical superiority based on lineage and class between the daughters and sons, “descendants from the founding mothers” and the “newcomers.” This precise portrayal deepens our understanding of how internal power dynamics and perceptions of human worth evolved within African societies, thus setting the stage for the tragic trajectory of the transatlantic slave trade.

Africa's Atlantic trauma emerges not merely from external pressures but also from intricate internal dynamics and the valuation of human life within African societies. This examination addresses the tragic origins rooted within Africa itself, which ultimately fuelled the brutality of the transatlantic slave trade. It provides profound insights into the gradual dehumanisation of Africans on their own continent. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* illustrates how this trauma is deeply intertwined with internal African dynamics and the societal perception of human worth, marking the beginning of a tragedy that

³⁴⁹N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 15.

intensified with the onset of the transatlantic slave trade. Through his literary lens, N'Sondé poignantly depicts the gradual dehumanisation of African people, which helped set the stage for the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade.

Finally, the profound historical and cultural trauma of the transatlantic slave trade and its lasting impact on African societies is highlighted in the literary works of Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem and Wilfried N'Sondé. Through their narratives, each author provides a sustained examination of how the slave trade not only disrupted African social structures but also set in motion a complex dynamic of internal and external betrayals. Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre* serves as a compelling examination of how the Mulongo people's traditional world was violently dismantled by the slave trade. Miano highlights the traumatic effects of capture and betrayal, portraying the Mulongo as emblematic of broader African disintegration. The narrative illustrates the profound psychological and social ruptures caused by the slave trade, aligning with Walter Benjamin's concept of modernity as a catastrophic historical disruption. Miano's depiction of the Mulongo's suffering and the internal betrayal by the Bwele brothers reflect Benjamin's notion of historical trauma, emphasising the disintegration of traditional roles and the deep-seated psychological scars left on the African psyche. Similarly, Alem's *Esclaves* examines the political and social complexities of the slave trade within the Kingdom of Dahomey. The novel illustrates the internal conflicts and betrayals that facilitated the slave trade, particularly through the character of King Adandozan, who was betrayed by his own nephew and collaborators. This portrayal exposes how political ambition and greed contributed to the destabilisation of African governance structures and the exploitation of African people. Alem's narrative challenges the simplistic dichotomy of victim and perpetrator, highlighting the complex nature of betrayal and complicity within African societies. N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* addresses the manipulation of religion and politics during the slave trade. N'Sondé reveals how European powers, under the guise of benevolent missionary work, exploited African leaders like King Alfonso I for economic and geopolitical gains. The novel critiques the duplicity of colonial missions, which concealed their true exploitative agendas behind a facade of religious and moral superiority. N'Sondé's

examination of the internal dynamics and hierarchical structures within the Kingdom of Kongo further elucidates the tragic origins of slavery and its dehumanising impact on African societies. The works of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé collectively underscore the intricate interplay of internal and external forces in shaping the traumatic legacy of the slave trade. They reveal how internal betrayals, political machinations, and religious manipulations exacerbated the suffering of African societies, thus complicating the historical narrative of the slave trade. Through their literary contributions, these authors offer critical insights into the collective trauma experienced by African communities, challenging traditional historiographical approaches and providing a more nuanced understanding of the profound and lasting effects of this dark chapter in history. Their work highlights the necessity of confronting and acknowledging these complex historical truths to foster a more comprehensive reckoning with the past and its continuing impacts on contemporary African and diasporic identities.

5.2. The Spatiality of the Slave Trade Experience

In literature dealing with the Atlantic slave trade, the spaces depicted in novels serve as central sites that encapsulate and crystallise the enduring trauma inflicted by this harrowing epoch in human history. These spaces, whether hinterlands, villages, coastal trading posts, or symbolic landscapes, function not merely as backdrops but as profound repositories of collective memory and historical consciousness. They embody the ruptured origins and dismembered roots of enslaved individuals, illustrating the profound impact of displacement, captivity, and commodification. This analysis examines how literary works such as Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, Alem's *Esclaves*, and N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* make use of spatiality and memory to construct narrative spaces that resonate with the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. By scrutinising these spaces through a literary lens, this section demonstrates how these authors address the complexities of representing historical traumas spatially, forging connections between past atrocities and contemporary consciousness.

The relationship between memory and space is a powerful theme that runs through both theoretical discussions and literary depictions

of historical traumas. This relationship becomes particularly striking in novels that examine the enduring impact of the Atlantic slave trade, where spaces, both physical and symbolic, become vital in shaping and conveying collective memories of suffering and resilience. Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* highlights how memory takes root in specific sites, transforming them into touchstones for collective recollection.³⁵⁰ Casey adds to this by arguing that memory is deeply tied to the places where experiences occur, suggesting that space serves as more than just a backdrop – it becomes part of the memory itself.³⁵¹ De Certeau reinforces this idea by showing how spaces acquire meaning through the ways people inhabit and engage with them, turning abstract places into lived and remembered realities.³⁵² Lowenthal takes this further, pointing out that landscapes often act as anchors for memory, providing tangible connections to the past. As Lowenthal observes, “Landscapes serve as mnemonic devices, anchoring collective memory to specific locales.”³⁵³ This underscores how physical and symbolic spaces not only preserve memories but also shape the ways in which they are recalled, processed, and transmitted.

In literary works, space often functions as a symbolic reservoir of memory and trauma. For instance, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the house at 124 Bluestone Road is not merely a setting but a living entity that embodies the characters' collective suffering and haunted pasts. This physical space becomes a locus in which memories are confronted, suggesting that places are essential to the journey of understanding and healing trauma. The house symbolises how memories of slavery and loss are inextricably tied to specific locations, emphasising the

³⁵⁰Nora, Pierre. 1989. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de mémoire.” *Representations* 26: 7–24.

³⁵¹Casey, Edward S. 1987. *Remembering: A Phenomenological Study*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

³⁵²De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press. (Orig. pub. as *L'Invention du quotidien* 1: *Arts de faire*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.)

³⁵³Lowenthal, David. 1985. *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 45.

need for spaces within which such histories can be acknowledged and processed.

Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope – referring to the interconnect-edness of time and space in narrative – provides another lens through which to view this phenomenon. Hartman's conception of trauma space views landscapes as sites deeply embedded with the historical and emotional residues of traumatic events. These landscapes, particularly those marked by historical atrocities such as slavery, are not merely physical locations but cultural and historical constructs within which collective memory and identity are inscribed. For Hartman, these spaces become repositories of inherited memory, reflecting the lived experiences and ongoing impacts of past events. This perspective emphasises that our understanding of these spaces is heavily influenced by the myths, narratives, and historical contexts projected onto them. By viewing landscapes as dynamic and culturally significant, Hartman underscores the ways in which trauma is spatially manifested and continuously interacts with the collective memory of communities. This approach allows for a deeper examination of how physical spaces are imbued with cultural meanings and how they shape, and are shaped by, the memories of traumatic events.

Hartman's trauma space aligns closely with Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*, or sites of memory. Nora contends that *lieux de mémoire* are sites, whether tangible or intangible, that crystallise collective memory and carry profound symbolic, historical, and emotional significance. They play a vital role in shaping national or communal identities by deliberately preserving historical and emotional resonance. Similarly, Hartman views trauma spaces as cultural constructs rather than natural phenomena, serving as focal points for collective remembrance and reflection on the traumatic experiences of the past. The analysis that follows will examine Nora's *lieux de mémoire* as *lieux de trauma* and elaborate on how this perspective contributes to an understanding of how spaces in slave trade novels depict the trauma of the slave trade. Nora's framework expands the discussion beyond trauma to include various types of significant sites within collective memory. This broader perspective underscores the dynamic relationship between physical and symbolic spaces and their role in shaping cultural meaning, communal identity, and memory over time. Apply-

ing Hartman's and Nora's frameworks to novels like Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, Alem's *Esclaves*, and N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* reveals the profound significance of various spaces in these narratives. These works illustrate how spaces serve as crucial elements in the process of remembering and processing trauma, showing that both physical and symbolic locations are integral to understanding and conveying historical and traumatic memories.

The emplacing of memory within the literary manipulation of place is crucial for understanding the enduring trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. Drawing from trauma studies, this approach underscores how landscapes can embody and reflect historical traumas, transforming abstract events into lived experiences.³⁵⁴ By situating narratives within specific geographies, authors evoke the visceral realities of historical atrocities, thereby preserving collective memory and fostering a deeper emotional connection to the past. The significance of this method lies in its ability to convey the complex impacts of slavery on both individual and communal levels. For instance, portraying Ouidah as a historic slave port within literary works serves as a powerful mnemonic device. Alem, N'Sondé, and Miano embrace this literary aesthetic of space to emplace the trauma of the slave trade within their respective narratives. Through their works, these authors map the physical and psychological landscapes of trauma, spanning continents and revealing the interconnectedness of spaces that transformed individuals from captives to commodities shipped to the New World. Through their unique approaches, they underscore the profound and widespread impact of the slave trade on individual experiences and collective memory.

5.2.1. Space and Trauma in Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*

In Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, space is central to representing and anchoring the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. The novel uses different locations to symbolise the lasting effects of this historic atrocity. Three main areas are examined: the land of the Mulongo, the land of the Bwéle, and the land of the Isédu. Each of these spaces contributes to constructing a precise depiction of trauma and its persistence

³⁵⁴Whitehead, Anne. 2004. *Trauma Fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

in collective memory. Miano places the trauma of the slave trade within the shadowy realms of remote hinterlands and villages, reflecting the shattered roots and severed origins of the enslaved. By focusing on the sites of initial raids and linking them with neighbouring villages and coastal trading posts, Miano uncovers the ecosystem that enabled the capture and commodification of Africans. This approach seeks to restore and reinterpret the African perspective on the slave trade, emphasising how interconnected spaces transformed individuals from captives into commodities destined for the New World. Through this manipulation of place, Miano highlights the profound and far-reaching impact of the slave trade on African communities, underscoring the significance of these locations in the collective memory of trauma.

In the novel, space operates at the intersection of the literal and the symbolic. The topographical descriptions serve an ethnographic purpose, grounding the narrative in real-time or historiography by recreating the immediate environments of the depicted communities. The succession of spaces in the novel structure both the narrative and symbolic dimensions, becoming sites of memory. These spaces in *La Saison de l'ombre* resist precise geographical identification. While an extensive knowledge base helps to identify the African referents, exact locations remain elusive. This duality in the narrative both reveals and questions its relationship with reality. The novel's temporal structure is also influenced by the cosmogonic perception of time among African peoples, particularly through the positioning of celestial bodies.

The contrast between spaces linked to city life and nature is striking. We encounter places that either represent paradises desecrated by the infernal forces of urban power or establish stark oppositions between realms. Mulongo is depicted as a space of communal harmony, deeply connected to nature. The dwellings in Mulongo, described as "earth huts topped with thatched roofs"³⁵⁵ and the absence of fences around homes reflect a social organisation based on proximity and solidarity. The architecture, featuring "a wooden pillar carved with the family totem", integrates ancestral symbols into daily life, therefore reinforcing collective identity and traditions.³⁵⁶ However, the invasion of Mulongo

³⁵⁵ Miano, Léonora. 2013. *La Saison de l'ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 40.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

by the Bwéle signifies a profound disruption, transforming this harmonious space into a scene of devastation. The initial fire and the subsequent catastrophic attack underscore the impact of external forces. These events highlight how ancestral values can be severely undermined by outside influences, revealing the vulnerability of traditional communities in the face of urban expansion.

In contrast, Bwéle represents an advanced urban civilisation, characterised by material sophistication and a structured environment that sharply contrasts with Mulongo's simplicity. The city is described as comprising "spacious buildings, whose shapes were not circular, as in Mulongo, and whose roofs were made of earth". Bwéle's urban planning, with "ornate wooden doors" and "friezes depicting the household totem", signifies individualism and architectural refinement, perceived as markers of superiority.³⁵⁷ This urban environment not only accentuates the contrast with Mulongo but also establishes a social hierarchy that contributes to the domination and exclusion of less developed communities. Bwéle's materialistic civilisation fosters a power dynamic that amplifies differences between communities, paving the way for forms of domination and exploitation that underpin dehumanising practices like human trafficking.

Bwéle's urban landscape reflects prevailing ideas of civilisation: the enclosed houses suggest individualism, the deliberate geometry indicates urbanism, and writing, with its capacity to record "message" or "important event", highlights its role in societal cohesion and historical process. Unsurprisingly, the Mulongo clan, viewed by its neighbours as inferior, is crushed by this urban structure already enmeshed in progress. This opposition between the "savage" and the "civilised" illustrates the law of the strongest.

Isédu, as the coastal capital, represents extreme moral decay and a profound weakening of human values. The depiction of cruel rituals, such as sacrificing widows in the same pit as their deceased husbands, demonstrates a complete disregard for human life. Eyabe, entering Isédu, witnesses a traditional ceremony in which widows are thrown into the same pit as their dead husbands: "Eyabe tremble, se demande si les enfants des veuves sacrifiées assistent aux évènements. La vue

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 45.

de celles qui attendent leur tour lui est intolérable. [Eyabe trembles, wondering if the children of the sacrificed widows witness the events. The sight of those waiting their turn is unbearable.]”³⁵⁸ This systemic cruelty is explained by Mukudi, the son of Ebusi, whom Eyabe meets in the coastal land:

Tu t'étonnais d'avoir pu si aisément pénétrer dans cette contrée. C'est qu'ils n'ont nul besoin de gardes. Leur cruauté est un rempart suffisant. La vie humaine ne leur est pas une chose sacrée, comme c'est le cas chez nous. Pour eux, comme pour les Bwéle d'ailleurs, si la guerre est un rituel, il s'agit d'une cérémonie macabre. [You wondered how you could so easily enter this land. It is because they have no need for guards. Their cruelty is sufficient protection. Human life is not sacred to them as it is to us. For them, as for the Bwéle, war is a ritual, a macabre ceremony.]³⁵⁹

This complete detachment from human values, combined with lack of material protection, highlight the advanced degree of dehumanisation characterising Isédu.

The evolution from Bwéle to Isédu illustrates a trajectory of moral degradation, in which extreme urbanisation can lead to horrific practices of violence and exploitation. The portrayal of Isédu, as a degenerated extension of Bwéle, epitomises the ultimate excesses of moral decay. The coastal city, marked by cruel rituals and deep contempt for human life, serves as an extreme example of social and moral degradation. The absence of human values and disdain for life facilitate violent practices such as human trafficking. Isédu thus represents the darkest consequences of value erosion and dehumanisation. This downward trajectory is further reinforced by the moral decay of the coastal land, driven by a lust for power. This depiction of a kind of Stockholm syndrome leads Étienne-Marie Lassi to argue that Miano's works suggests that Africa is less a victim of the violence of the occupier than of the cowardice and disorganisation of its own populations.³⁶⁰

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 165.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 180.

³⁶⁰ Lassi, Étienne-Marie. 2015. “Recyclage des discours sur l’Afrique et inscription de la doxa métropolitaine dans les romans de Léonora Miano.” *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines* 49, no. 3: 443–457, 447. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2014.981948>

Bwéle's power is built on the subjugation of neighbouring peoples, with "the collection of human tribute from these communities being the prerogative of the Bwéle sovereigns. They exercised this right whenever it was deemed necessary, which was often".³⁶¹ The Bwéle see themselves as "providers of prisoners",³⁶² seeking both to maintain their elevated status through conquest and to receive "new objects from Pongo via the ocean, which conferred prestige upon the coastal elite".³⁶³ Within Mukudi's account, the motivations of the Isédu people appear both trivial and amoral. The primary goal of this trade is to "eventually surpass the communities descended from the ancestor Iwiye".³⁶⁴ The coastal people are driven by ancestral grudges and a desire for revenge against their cousins. Mukudi's question – "how many men, women, and children, from how many peoples, would also be torn from their own, cast onto often unknown paths to end up here, at the edge of Wase?" – reflects the full extent of the commodification of human life: the impact on social and generational fabric is disastrous. The comparison between human life and material goods, the traditional and the new, underscores the stark and tragic contrast between what is lost and what is gained. The Isédu's performance of power highlights the superficiality of their supposed dominance, suggesting that their supposed sophistication is just a mask concealing their ultimate subjugation.

Mukudi's detailed description of Isédu and Bwéle's milieu, customs, and motivations reveals the binary opposition between the city, an inferno of moral degradation, and the natural world: a desecrated paradise. The narrative shows that Mukudi, before discussing the capture, first presents the worlds of Bwéle and Isédu. This arrangement of testimony verbalises the causal relationship embedded in these symbolic tropes. Although both spaces evoke a dead memory, either through dissolution (as with Mulongo) or denial (as with the oppressive peoples), there must be transitional spaces where memory awakens and resists forgetting. These are chronotopes that "present themselves as

³⁶¹ Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 187.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 190.

aesthetically configured categories carrying their own worldview”.³⁶⁵ Narratively, these spaces serve as crucial junctures in the characters’ journeys, where they overcome their trials. These chronotopes materialise in the village of Bebayedi and the land of water, which promise metaphorical and polysemic significance, as suggested by the title of the novel’s second chapter, “Voies d’eau”.

In considering the harrowing experiences depicted in Miano’s novel, Levi’s reflections in *If This Is a Man* are profound. Levi’s assertion that “man is fundamentally brutal, egoistic and stupid in his conduct once every civilised institution is taken away”³⁶⁶ challenges conventional understanding of human nature. He further argues instead that “what distinguishes us from other animals is our sense of shame and guilt, an awareness of ourselves as moral beings”.³⁶⁷ This notion underscores the complexity of human nature, revealing that the moral degradation in Isédu and Bwéle reflects a loss of this fundamental human attribute. The extreme violence and exploitation characterising these places are not merely by-products of urbanisation but rather indicators of a deeper erosion of ethical values. In this context, Miano’s work prompts readers to examine how historical trauma transforms both spaces and societies. The landscapes of Mulongo, Bwéle and Isédu are not just backdrops; they are active participants in the narrative of trauma and recovery. They reflect the evolution of human behaviour in response to external pressures and internal moral failings. Ultimately, Miano’s portrayal of these spaces challenges us to confront the enduring impacts of historical injustices and the complex dynamic between human nature, morality, and societal development.

5.2.2. The Spatiality of the Slave Trade in Alem’s *Esclaves*

In Alem’s novel *Esclaves*, the depiction of spaces associated with the transatlantic slave trade plays a crucial role in illustrating the profound impact and enduring legacy of slavery. Through detailed descriptions and vivid imagery, Alem transforms these geographical settings into

³⁶⁵Ibid., 187.

³⁶⁶Levi, Primo. 1987. *If This Is a Man*. London: Abacus, 82.

³⁶⁷Ibid.

powerful symbols of the collective memory of the slave trade. The reader is invited to revisit the mnemonic sites of the transatlantic slave trade, exploring the slave memory through scenes of capture in villages, the transportation of chained captives through forests and quagmires, and the trade along the slave coasts with trading posts, transit dungeons, and sophisticated, yet abhorrent ships.

Alem draws up the landscape of the transatlantic trade by representing spaces that are inexorably found in most (non-)creative works on slavery. The hinterland, with its vulnerable people and their kingdoms is separated by the forest, from the “Slave Coast”, invested by European traders. It is in the hinterland that fierce tribal wars take place, and where capture is in full swing. These wars are now motivated by an increased demand for human merchandise, to the point where kings sometimes provoke wars to supply themselves with slaves. It is from the hinterland that the abducted Africans are forced to walk for days on end through the forests to reach the “Slave Coast”, the place par excellence of the trade. The “Slave Coast” comprises the auction square, the forts, which function as microcosmic spaces that embody European presence, and structures that serve as prisons or passage huts before embarkation onto slave ships, where the crammed bodies are parked for the long traumatic voyage to the New World.

Alem’s *Esclaves* systematically allocates time and place to its three principal sections (“Anciens temps”, “Nouveaux mondes”, and “Temps mêlés”), thus emplacing the trauma of the slave trade in the novel. By detailing specific markers of the slave trade in Ouidah and across distinct temporal and spatial segments, Alem effectively maps the protagonist’s journey through different phases of enslavement and liberation. The slave ship, coastal spaces such as the Portuguese fort and Francisco de Souza’s house, and the auction square are depicted as sites impregnated with the memory of slavery, serving as critical *lieux de mémoire*.

The first episode primarily focuses on the political tragedy in Dahomey and highlights the downfall of King Adandozan and of Dahomey. Key locations include the Chacha Square, the Portuguese fort where the king’s final banquet takes place, and the royal court where the king’s deposition unfolds. In the first section of the novel, “Temps Anciens”, which takes place in Dahomey, Alem denotes the spatial

markers of the slave trade on the landscape of the trading port of Ouidah – the Portuguese fort and Francisco de Souza's house, in front of which is the Place des enchères (Slave Auction Square). These physical structures and material spaces, in which the slave trade is practised and slavery is experienced, constitute sites of memory within the novel.

The second episode follows the journey of the slave, focusing on the path of the ritual master. The narrative recounts the slave's attempt to escape the wrath of the kidnapping warriors by fleeing through the forest to a neighbouring village, only to be captured and sold to an English trader. Alem details these sites of memory in a realistic style, where the ritual master, or the slave Miguel, is involved in a ceremony marking the deposition of King Adandozan. This ceremony symbolises the trauma of the slave trade, portraying the king's fall as a reflection of the violent and inhumane conditions of the period. The scenes of capture and transportation, marked by violence and horror, illustrate the degradation of human dignity and identity during the deportation process, culminating in the loss of identity upon arrival in the New World.

In the third episode, the narrative shifts back to the slave coast, examining a society fundamentally altered by the impact of slavery. This region, once a vibrant and diverse community, is now characterised by a complete inversion of its traditional values. Slavery has become a central economic activity, reshaping the social fabric and, through deportation and re-migration, leading to the creation of new communities – the Afro-Brazilians – whose identity is a complex weaving of both heroic and harrowing chapters of slave history. In this episode, Alem reveals the paradoxes of the slave trade, inviting readers to adopt a more nuanced perspective on the history of the slave trade, often presented in a static, oversimplified manner, shaped by ideological conflicts that obscure its true complexity.

Alem opens his novel with a striking image: a ship used for slave trading expeditions, managed by Francisco de Souza, the Brazilian director of the Portuguese fort and later Viceroy of Ouidah, also known as Chacha. Alem does not emphasise the voyage to the New World or the ship's role in abolitionist propaganda. Instead, he focuses on how the memory of slavery is embodied in historical spaces associated with the trade, such as the slave ship. The shipwreck of the *St. Matthew*

in the prologue sets the tone for the misfortunes that will permeate the entire novel. While the slave ship *Brooks* symbolises the trauma of the slave trade, Alem's primary concern here is the intangible space of the curse. In the first chapter, set in the kingdom of Dahomey, the narrative reveals a realm plagued by the curse of the slave trade. This curse manifests across various locations. The duality observed in attempts to memorialise the slave trade in Ouidah, where both slavery and Vodun worship are commemorated, also appears in Alem's novel. Just as modern-day Ouidah commemorates both slavery and Vodun, the novel's spaces associated with slavery are marked by the wrath of Vodun deities. In *Esclaves*, memory is depicted as a curse, with its manifestation through divine Vodun powers.³⁶⁸ Beyond the incident with the *St. Matthew*, where the gods of the sea and sky alter the course of the *Don Francisco*, the curse of the Vodun deities manifests in two other crucial locations: the Place des enchères and within de Souza's own house. At the Place des enchères, in front of de Souza's house, a young man is wrongly accused of having an affair with Chacha's wife. This wrongful accusation and the resulting violence highlight how the curse permeates the space of Chacha's court, transforming ordinary events into expressions of the curse's power. Later, within de Souza's house during a banquet organised to poison King Adandozan, the curse becomes evident once more. The ritual master, coerced by Chacha and Gankpé, participates in the poisoning of the king. By invoking the curse of smallpox, Chacha orchestrates a series of events that lead to the king's deposition. This scene illustrates how the curse is used not only as a political tool but also to manipulate Vodun beliefs and practices. The ritual master, who betrays his king, becomes a victim of the same curse, symbolising how it can turn against those who wield it. Alem thus portrays a society deeply influenced by the perceived omnipotence of the Vodun deities, where memory is inseparable from ritual, and thus burdened with religious significance. This is comparable to the memorials in Ouidah dedicated to the legacy of slavery. In the novel, the memory of the slave trade is depicted as a curse. For the central character, the ritual master, who is

³⁶⁸Omuku, Sotonye. 2012. *Representations of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Francophone West African Novel*. PhD diss., University College London, 196.

later sold into slavery by Gankpé's amazons, the memory of Dahomey, and specifically Ouidah, becomes synonymous with guilt and shame. These events, which appear to be the wrath of the gods, are the result of Francisco de Souza's manipulation of both Vodun beliefs and the Vodun ritual master. In the novel, the curse is not just a supernatural force but also a tool of manipulation and a reflection of the historical realities of the slave trade. Alem uses the motif of the curse to illustrate a desire to forget and obscure the horrors of the slave trade and slavery. In this context, remembering becomes an act of reawakening the curse associated with those enslaved and transported across the Atlantic by African merchants, warriors, kings, and European slave traders.

In the chapter "Temps anciens VIII: Les sandales de Huégbadja", Alem crystallises the collective curse at the heart of the Kingdom of Abomey, a renowned historical site of the transatlantic slave trade. Alem employs a powerful theatrical metaphor to depict the tearing apart and dismemberment of Africa. The deposition of King Adandozan and the rise of Ghezo and Chacha de Souza illustrate the collective trauma of the slave trade and reveal how African elites colluded with foreign slave traders. The deposition ceremony transforms the sacred space of the king's sandals into one of disgrace and humiliation. The symbolic space of the sandals, initially associated with the king's grandeur and authority, becomes a site of loss and the erosion of power. The removal of the sandals and their transfer to Ghezo represents the disintegration of authority and the trauma of a political transition marked by shame and loss. The royal court, where this scene unfolds, becomes a stage for the collective trauma. The palace, once a symbol of power and prestige, turns into a place of decline and despair for the deposed king. This transformation signifies a break from the kingdom's glorious past and a painful shift towards a new reality fraught with uncertainty, occupation, and enslavement.

... inexorablement ce pays livré à l'esclavage et aux superstitions vers un trou noir qui a pour nom le démembrement du royaume et l'abdication de toute souveraineté au profit de l'étranger. [... removing him would further weaken their power and inevitably lead the country, beset by slavery and superstitions, into a black hole of dismemberment and the abdication of sovereignty in favour of foreign interests.]³⁶⁹

³⁶⁹ Alem, Kangni. 2009. *Esclaves*. Paris: JC Lattès, 106–107.

The deposition ceremony not only represents the individual trauma of the deposed king but also that of a society confronted with disintegration and fragmentation. The collective traumatic memory, as conceptualised by Ngũgĩ, is embodied here in the loss of a traditional system and the collaboration of elites with foreign forces. This memory is marked by the lasting effects of the slave trade on contemporary African societies. The rise of Ghezo and Chacha de Souza, with Ghezo assuming the royal power and Chacha becoming viceroy, exemplifies the complicity between African elites and European slave traders. Their alliance represents the collusion of local and foreign interests in seizing power through the slave trade. Agbomé is portrayed as a central hub of the trade and, by extension, of the dismemberment of the African continent. Symbolic spaces such as Huégbadja's sandals, the public square, and the king's palace become witnesses to and reflections of, the political and psychological shock caused by the deposition and loss of power. The spatial elements in the text illustrate how physical environments can embody the memory of historical upheavals and individual traumas, providing a profound reflection on the devastating impacts of the slave trade and the power dynamics within the Kingdom of Agbomé.

In the chapters *Nouveaux mondes I* and *II*, spatiality is examined through the journey of the ritual master. This analysis highlights the geographical and historical dimensions of the journey, echoing the Slave Route. From Gléhué, his native village, to Porto Seguro, in search of his captured family, the ritual master traverses "the gallery forest bordering the marshes of Guésin, where he had spotted footprints in the half-dry mud of the trail",³⁷⁰ illustrating the physical rigour and challenges of the journey. The four-day trek, intensified by extreme weather conditions, functions as a metaphor for the trials experienced by slaves and captives. While this journey is geographically accurate, it is also imbued with historical significance. By retracing the route through specific places such as the Bas-Mono plain, the town of Corné, the village of Agoué, Lake Togo, and the hinterlands of Aného, Alem's realism connects to the historical reality of the slave trade. Each stage of the journey from Gléhué reflects the constraints and dif-

³⁷⁰Ibid., 115.

ficulties faced by slaves during their forced displacement. Through this journey, the reader gains insight into “the slave-trading nations of the coast” and the rivalries that drive them.³⁷¹

In *Esclaves* by Alem, Porto Seguro emerges as the quintessential representation of the slave trade, embodying the dehumanisation and brutality inherent in this historical atrocity. The port serves as a potent symbol of the intersection between human suffering and economic exploitation. Upon arrival at Porto Seguro, captives undergo a dehumanising inspection process. Agents scrutinise their health and physical attributes with invasive methods, reducing them to mere commodities rather than recognising their inherent human dignity. As Alem describes: “On lui renifla la bouche, le tâta sur tout le corps; un des hommes lui lécha même le contour du menton avant de crier, ‘il n’a pas de barbe’.”³⁷² This examination reflects a broader pattern of commodification in which individuals are stripped of their identities and valued solely for their market potential. The transformation of captives, such as the ritual master who is shaved and coated in palm oil, further symbolises the erasure of personal and cultural identities. This act of preparation underscores their reduced status as goods to be sold rather than as individuals with unique stories and worth. Porto Seguro’s clandestine nature, where ships anchor offshore to avoid detection, highlights the moral corruption and hidden brutality of the slave trade. This secrecy contrasts sharply with the often-public façade of legality and respectability, exposing the illicit and inhumane practices underlying the trade. The mistreatment of Miguel by Nansica serves as a microcosm of the broader violence faced by captives. Nansica’s actions, including sexual violence and psychological torment, reflect the extreme abuse and humiliation imposed on enslaved individuals. As Nansica asserts: “Si je te tuais, j’aurais tué un homme, un vrai.”³⁷³ Sensory details, such as the oppressive humidity and relentless buzzing, enhance the portrayal of Porto Seguro as a site of intense suffering. These elements evoke the harsh conditions endured by captives, rein-

³⁷¹ Ibid., 116.

³⁷² Ibid., 124.

³⁷³ Ibid.

forcing the port's role as a symbol of dehumanisation and exploitation in the slave trade.

Alem's *Esclaves* employs a diverse array of motifs and spatial markers to memorialise the slave trade, offering a complex examination of memory and trauma. By intertwining physical spaces with spiritual dimensions, Alem creates a layered depiction of the impact of slavery on individuals and communities. The novel's detailed portrayals of both tangible and intangible spaces invite readers to confront the enduring effects of historical trauma and engage deeply with the complexities of collective memory. Through close readings of key scenes and spatial descriptions, Alem's work not only honours the victims of the slave trade but also fosters a deeper understanding of the historical and cultural legacies that continue to shape contemporary consciousness.

5.2.3. Charting the Atlantic in N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*

In *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, the primacy of space is evident from the title, which itself functions as a profound symbol of space and trauma. N'Sondé's novel traverses various geographical spaces, from the African kingdom of Kongo to Europe, showcasing the wide-ranging impact of the slave trade. N'Sondé depicts the physical landscapes, capturing both the beauty of the African continent and the stark realities of the transatlantic voyage. He portrays the contrasting spaces of power, such as the opulence of the Vatican and the brutality of slave ships, highlighting the stark disparities between different social and cultural environments. The geographic spaces become stages where the protagonist confronts the injustices and complexities of the slave trade, while the temporal shifts provide a broader understanding of the historical forces at play.

N'Sondé's novel evokes the Middle Passage and delineates the geography of the triangular trade, underscoring the elements of water and land where the trauma of the slave trade unfolds. This traversal is not merely a geographical journey but a traumatic passage marked by suffering, loss, and dehumanisation. The title's reference to oceans, seas, and continents encapsulates the global scale of the slave trade.

The African homeland, through the Kingdom of Kongo, and Europe, through Rome and the Vatican, emerge as significant spaces in the novel. The Kingdom of Kongo represents the protagonist's ancestral homeland and the initial site of enslavement, depicted as culturally rich and vibrant, thus ensuring that the memory of the Kongo people endures despite the atrocities they faced. In contrast, Rome and the Vatican symbolise the seat of power and moral authority that the protagonist comes to challenge, with N'Sondé juxtaposing their grandeur against the hypocrisy and corruption of the Catholic Church during the slave trade, therefore critiquing the exploitation and dehumanisation masked by religion. The Middle Passage, vividly portrayed, serves as a prominent site of memory, reminding readers of the inhumane conditions, suffering, and loss endured during the transatlantic journey. Through these significant *lieux communs*, N'Sondé memorialises the slave trade, evoking historical resonance, commemorating the victims, and challenging prevailing narratives, thereby deepening the examination of its legacy and fostering a collective remembrance of this dark chapter in human history. Central to this narrative is the slave ship, the connecting and floating space that crystallises the trauma, serving as a harrowing microcosm of the larger atrocities of the slave trade.

The role of the slave ship in *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* is central to understanding the representation of trauma related to slavery. The ship serves as a microcosm of the early capitalist societies of the sixteenth century, when international trade based on exploitation and slavery was taking shape. Much of the narrative unfolds aboard the *Vent Paraclet*, which emerges as an interstitial space linking the Atlantic Ocean, seas and continents, from the shores of the Kongo to Brazil and Portugal, drawing the Atlantic triangle. In N'Sondé's novel, the slave ship can be analysed through Foucault's heterotopias.

In his reflection on the relationships between space, power, and knowledge, Foucault uses the ship as a metaphor to examine how spaces function as devices of control and social organisation. For him, the ship is exemplary of what he calls a "heterotopia par excellence", an 'other' space, different from ordinary spaces but operating according to distinct rules and logic:

the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel, it goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens.³⁷⁴

Foucault defines heterotopias as real places that are simultaneously unreal or opposed to the ordinary spaces of society. They function as spaces of reflection upon, or contestation of, everyday space. The slave ship in N'Sondé's text can be analysed as a heterotopia in that it is a space where normal terrestrial spatial relations are inverted and suspended. In this sense, the slave ship operates as a heterotopia of deviation and crisis. It is both a space of transit and one of confinement, contradicting and reflecting society.

In this configuration, the ship is a heterotopic space, a place that reflects the tensions between order and chaos, civilisation and savagery. It is both a symbol of progress and domination and a site of unspeakable suffering. The living conditions of the slaves, their treatment, and their despair reveal a collective and individual trauma, a memory of violence that permeates the very space of the ship.

The *Vent Paraclet* represents a heterotopic space that is at once real and symbolic, where a parallel reality marked by violence and suffering unfolds. The contrast between the ship's apparent majesty and the atrocious conditions aboard underscores the illusion of innocence and prestige attributed to these vessels by the society of the time. The narrator is initially impressed by the grandeur and external beauty of the ship, but this admiration is quickly overshadowed by the grim reality beneath the surface.

Constructions humaines flottant sur l'eau. Dans ces immenses coques bombées, j'imaginai des merveilles et consacrai de longues minutes à admirer les pavillons multicolores et leurs élégants claquements sous le souffle du vent. J'oubliai pour un instant la puanteur qui planait dans l'air et les malheureux traînant leurs chaînes ça et là sur les docks, tant me fascina l'intensité de l'activité. [Human constructions floating on water. In these immense, rounded hulls, I imagined wonders and spent long minutes admiring the multicoloured flags and their elegant flapping in the wind. For a moment, I forgot the stench in the air and the unfortunate ones dragging their chains around the docks, so fascinated was I by the intensity of the activity.]³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ Foucault, Michel. 1984. "Des espaces autres." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité*, no. 5 (October): 46–49, 49.

³⁷⁵ N'Sondé, Wilfried. 2018. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 53.

Aboard the *Vent Paraclet*, the hold, where slaves are packed is described as a “sonic nightmare”, a space of continuous suffering where cries and lamentations echo. This microcosm of capitalism is marked by a rigid hierarchy:

Mâîtres, esclaves, ecclésiastique, sentinelles, marchandises, nous naviguions, liés les uns aux autres selon une échelle de subordination, chacun cherchant à écraser les plus faibles que lui. Nous croulions sous le poids de la soumission, personne ne pouvait imaginer une manière différente d'être ensemble, tous ignoraient qu'il pût exister une autre forme d'organisation. [Masters, slaves, clergy, sentinels, goods, we sailed, bound to each other by a scale of subordination, each one trying to crush those weaker than themselves. We were weighed down by the burden of submission, no one could imagine a different way of being together, everyone was unaware that another form of organisation could exist.]³⁷⁶

Indeed, the *Vent Paraclet* resembles a societal ecotone, a transitional zone between two very distinct societies. Captain Louis de Mayenne and his men embody a cynical and utilitarian view of the slave trade. Despite his façade of respectability, Louis de Mayenne is depicted as both “ruthless and pragmatic”. His treatment of the slaves and crew reveals his indifference to human suffering. When confronted with the slaves’ distress, he reacts with marked “coldness and indifference”, demonstrating his emotional and moral disconnect from the brutality of the slave trade.

The most analytically charged moment in this sequence is the branding scene:

Des négociants bakongos, secondés par des soldats, procédaient au marquage avant de renvoyer les prisonniers dans les cachots. Ceux qui résistaient étaient battus, entraînés de force par des gardes qui les plaquaient au sol, puis l'un d'eux appliquait un sceau de fer rougi par les flammes sur leur épaule. Le tout se passait dans un vacarme de cris atroces, d'insultes, de bruits de coups, de supplications et de pleurs. [Bakongo traders, assisted by soldiers, performed the branding before sending the prisoners back to the dungeons. Those who resisted were beaten, dragged forcefully by guards who threw them to the ground, and then one of them applied a red-hot iron seal to their shoulder. All this occurred amidst a cacophony of agonised screams, insults, blows, pleas, and tears.]³⁷⁷

³⁷⁶ N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 102.

³⁷⁷ N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 51.

The layering of sensory information, heat, sound, physical contact, and the body's resistance, is not incidental to the prose style but constitutive of its traumatomimetic effect. N'Sondé refuses the distancing conventions of historical narration. The enumeration of cries, atrocities, insults, sounds of blows, pleas, and weeping overwhelms the capacity for neutral description. Traumatic testimony overwhelms the capacity for coherent narrative ordering. The body being branded is simultaneously an individual body and a synecdoche for all bodies passing through this system, a formal enactment of the collective dimension of slave trade violence that cannot be conveyed by historical documentation alone. This is where historiopoesis, as Gröning defines it, departs from historiography: not in claiming access to what the archive cannot provide, but in producing a reading experience that the archive structurally forecloses.

The slave ship reveals itself as a deeply traumatic place, a floating space where men are stripped of their humanity through systematic processes of identity erosion. This vessel is not just a means of transport; it embodies a place of disintegration of identities and radical dehumanisation. *Le Vent Paraclet* is more than a slave ship; it is a microcosm of the injustices and horrors of the slave trade. The narrator's initial fascination with the ship is soon overshadowed by a realisation of the slaves' suffering, revealing a sharp critique of the slave system and the dehumanisation it entails. The text condemns not only the inhumane conditions aboard but also how these conditions are accepted and normalised by those who profit from them. This juxtaposition of realities directly reflects the brutality and complexity of colonial exchanges. The slave ship is the locus where deviations from human and moral norms are concentrated and perpetuated.

5.3. The Corporeality of Capture

This section examines the corporeal and psychological trauma experienced by enslaved individuals as represented in Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, Alem's *Esclaves*, and N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*. Utilising theoretical frameworks that address the depiction of violence, subjugation, and resistance, this analysis examines how these narratives inscribe the trauma of the slave trade onto the

bodies and psyches of the enslaved. Mbembe's concept of the Black body as a site of grotesque and fantastic embodiment serves as a foundational framework for this analysis. Mbembe argues that the Black body is often depicted in literature as reduced to its physicality, to its organs, colour, smell, flesh, and meat.³⁷⁸ This reduction to a state of brute, excessive physicality underscores a dehumanising perception that negates the intellectual and emotional depth of Black individuals. Mbembe's perspective highlights how narratives represent the Black body through a lens of violence and subjugation, thus illustrating the corporeal aspect of trauma. Michel de Certeau's idea of the body as a surface of writing provides a critical lens through which to examine how violence is inscribed upon the body.³⁷⁹ According to de Certeau, the body is not merely a passive recipient but an active site where norms, collective experiences, and personal traumas are inscribed. This framework emphasises that both physical and psychological subjugation manifest through literal and figurative markings on the body, aligning with ways in which narratives depict the lived experiences of the enslaved. Bazié's examination of the brutal conditions endured by African slaves further elucidates the body as a locus of trauma.³⁸⁰ Bazié illustrates how the dehumanising social codes on slave ships reduce enslaved individuals to mere objects of suffering. His analysis underscores the body as "lexicon of violence";³⁸¹ a readable surface, where atrocities are inscribed, thus transforming it into a symbol of violence and pain. This perspective complements the depiction of the enslaved body in literature as a site of profound suffering and dislocation.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano portrays the psychological impact of capture on the mothers of the enslaved and the traumatic journey of

³⁷⁸ Mbembe, Achille. 2017. *Critique of Black Reason*. Translated by Laurent Dubois. Durham: Duke University Press, 39. (Orig. pub. as *Critique de la raison nègre*. Paris: La Découverte, 2013.)

³⁷⁹ De Certeau, Michel. 1979. "Des outils pour écrire le corps." *Traverses* 14–15: 3–14.

³⁸⁰ Bazié, Isaac N. 2020. "Violences de l'englobement et expériences du lieu originel dans le roman africain." *Caietele Echinox* 38: 297–308.

³⁸¹ Bazié, Isaac N. 2020. "Violences de l'englobement et expériences du lieu originel dans le roman africain", 306.

the captives. The narrative emphasises their emotional disintegration, insomnia, and unsettling dreams, reflecting their deep-seated grief and existential crisis. Miano's depiction aligns with Mbembe's and de Certeau's frameworks, illustrating how trauma is embodied and inscribed on the captives' and their families' psyches. Similarly, Alem's *Esclaves* and N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* depict the physical and psychological violence inflicted upon enslaved individuals. Alem's narrative examines the inhumane treatment and commodification of slaves, while N'Sondé's portrayal of Nsaku né Vunda's journey depicts the corporeal and psychological trauma experienced by the enslaved. N'Sondé's work exemplifies the body as a vessel of historical and cultural memory. This section argues that the psychological trauma depicted in these narratives is deeply rooted in the processes of dismemberment, dehumanisation, and commodification. Through a close reading of Miano's, Alem's, and N'Sondé's texts, the section contends that the profound psychological and existential impacts of these experiences underscore the enduring legacy of trauma inflicted by the capture and enslavement of individuals. The analysis highlights the complex dynamic between memory, loss, and survival, offering a comprehensive understanding of how slave trade trauma is inscribed on the bodies and psyches of the enslaved.

Toivanen analyses how Alem's *Esclaves* and N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* address the Middle Passage and its horrors, employing the figure of the zombie as a metaphor for the enslaved African captives.³⁸² Toivanen argues that, compared to African American and Caribbean literature, African literature has not engaged as extensively with the memory of transatlantic slavery. However, these two novels stand out as rare African literary examinations of the Middle Passage. Toivanen highlights that both novels depict the process of enslaved Africans being dehumanised and reduced to a state like that of zombies, living beings deprived of their identity, humanity, and agency. She draws attention to the concept of "zombified mobilities", in which the captives' physical movement, their forced march to slave

³⁸²Toivanen, Anna-Leena. 2021. "Zombie Travels: Middle Passage Journeys and Clandestine Migrant Mobilities in Contemporary Francophone African and Afrodiasporic Fiction." In *Cultural Mobilities Between Africa and the Caribbean*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003152248-8>.

ports, and their journey across the ocean are likened to the mindless, stumbling movement of the living dead. For example, the text notes how the enslaved were treated as faceless, objectified bodies, similar to the treatment of the protagonist in *Esclaves*, who is inspected like livestock before being sold. The zombification process culminates during the Middle Passage, where enslaved individuals are transported in dehumanising conditions among the dead and dying, echoing the metaphor of the slave ship as a site of zombification.

The analysis also examines the narrative strategy used in these novels to depict the unbearable horror of slavery and the Middle Passage. In both *Esclaves* and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, the captives are described in vague, indistinct terms, reflecting the incomprehensible scale of human suffering and the inability to fully represent the trauma of slavery. In N'Sondé's novel, the slaves are referred to as "vague human forms" and "broken silhouettes", reinforcing their loss of individuality and humanity. This strategy, Toivanen suggests, not only portrays the captives' dehumanisation but also acts as a metanarrative device that underscores the difficulty of representing the trauma of slavery.

In Alem's *Esclaves*, the protagonist experiences dehumanisation described through the process of objectification. Before being sold, he is inspected like a commodity, forced to perform demeaning acts, such as singing and doing somersaults, for the amusement of others. The novel captures the physical humiliation endured by the enslaved and emphasises how this process reduces them to mere bodies, devoid of agency and individuality. The zombification metaphor is evident, as the captives are treated as "living dead", having lost their identity and will, their humanity stripped away as they are prepared for their journey across the ocean. In N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, the protagonist, Nsaku né Vunda, is a historical figure sent as the ambassador of the Kingdom of Kongo to the Vatican in the early seventeenth century. While travelling on a slave ship, the narrative captures the horrific conditions of the Middle Passage. Although Nsaku né Vunda is not himself a captive, the novel still portrays the dehumanisation of the enslaved, describing them as "vague human forms" and "broken silhouettes", reflecting their reduced status as non-individuals. The novel also examines the unimaginable proximity of

life and death on the slave ship, where captives are forced to lie next to decaying corpses, symbolising their transformation into zombie-like figures. These depictions highlight the abjection and physical degradation that enslaved Africans endured, illustrating how the Middle Passage turned them into “living dead”. Both novels use the concept of zombification as a metaphor for the dehumanisation and objectification inherent in the transatlantic slave trade, emphasising the traumatic transformation of the enslaved from living individuals to mere commodities.³⁸³

5.3.1. The Psychotraumatic Effect of Capture

The psychological trauma experienced by the mothers of the captives in the first chapter of Miano’s *La Saison de l’ombre* is poignantly depicted through their actions, dreams, and isolation. Miano conveys the depth of their anguish and the haunting presence of their missing sons. Initially, the text highlights the mothers’ futile attempts to cope with their grief:

Celles dont les fils n’ont pas été retrouvés ont fermé les yeux, au bout de plusieurs nuits sans sommeil. Les cases n’ont pas toutes été rebâties après le grand incendie. Regroupées dans une habitation distante des autres, elles combattent de leur mieux le chagrin. [Those whose sons have not been found have closed their eyes, after several sleepless nights. The huts have not all been rebuilt after the great fire. Gathered in a dwelling distant from the others, they fight their grief as best they can.]³⁸⁴

This passage illustrates their insomnia and the physical dislocation they suffer, thus emphasising their emotional and social disintegration. Their shared sorrow is profound, yet it isolates them, pushing them to the margins of the community. Their trauma is further illustrated through their dreams, which blur the line between reality and the supernatural. As night turns to day, their collective dream brings an unsettling presence:

Dans leur sommeil, il leur arrive une chose étrange... Une présence ombreuse vient à elles... L’obscurité, cependant, est épaisse. Elles ne distinguent rien. Il n’y a que cette parole: Mère, ouvre-moi, afin que je puisse rendre. [In their sleep, something

³⁸³Toivanen, “Zombie Travels.”

³⁸⁴Miano, Léonora. 2013. *La Saison de l’ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 11.

strange happens to them ... A shadowy presence comes to them ... The darkness, however, is thick. They cannot distinguish anything. There is only this word: Mother, open to me, so that I may return.]³⁸⁵

This recurring dream, in which an indistinct voice urges them to act before dawn, symbolises their deep-seated guilt and fear. The mothers recognise the voices as those of their sons, yet the ambiguity of the vision leaves them in a state of perpetual anxiety.

D'un même mouvement, les femmes se retournent ... Les paupières closes laissent filtrer des larmes, tandis qu'elles glissent une main entre les jambes, plient les genoux. Elles ne peuvent s'ouvrir comme cela. Se laisser pénétrer par une ombre. Elles pleurent. Cela leur arrive à toutes. [In unison, the women turn around ... Their closed eyelids let tears filter through, while they slide a hand between their legs, bend their knees. They cannot open themselves like this. To let themselves be penetrated by a shadow. They cry. This happens to all of them.]³⁸⁶

This description reveals their physical and emotional reactions to the dreams, highlighting their profound grief and the violation they feel from these spectral encounters. Their shared yet unspoken experiences emphasise the communal yet isolating nature of their suffering. The physical reactions of the mothers to their dreams – tears filtering through closed eyelids, hands sliding between their legs, bending their knees – can be seen as inscriptions of their psychological turmoil onto their bodies. These actions are not just responses to their dreams but also manifestations of their internal suffering, making their bodies a canvas for their emotional and psychological states. The mothers' bodies are not just passive recipients of trauma but active participants in the process of inscribing and expressing grief.

The mothers' reluctance to speak of their dreams or their missing sons underscores their fear and the taboo surrounding their loss: "Aucune ne parlera de ce rêve. Aucune ne prendra une soeur à part pour lui chuchoter: Il est venu. Mon premier-né. Il m'a demandé ... Elles ne prononceront pas les noms de ces fils dont on ignore le sort."³⁸⁷ Their silence is a protective mechanism, a way to prevent the "Mal" (evil) from exploiting their vulnerability. The constant, internalised pres-

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 14.

³⁸⁶ Ibid.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

ence of their sons' names, never spoken aloud, illustrates their unending mourning and the enduring connection they feel to their missing children.

The final passages depict the mothers' struggle with the remnants of their daily lives, juxtaposing their grief with mundane details:

Elles ouvrent les yeux ... Leur regard erre dans l'obscurité. Certaines croient distinguer les motifs de la natte d'esoko sur laquelle elles sont étendues ... Les mères de ceux qui n'ont pas été retrouvés songent, un instant, qu'il est heureux que la case du maître sculpteur n'ait pas été entièrement détruite. [They open their eyes... Their gaze wanders through the darkness. Some think they can make out the patterns of the esoko mat on which they lie stretched out... The mothers of those who were never found allow themselves, for a fleeting moment, to feel grateful that the master sculptor's hut was not entirely destroyed.]³⁸⁸

This focus on small, salvaged elements of their existence highlights their attempts to find solace in the familiar amidst their overwhelming loss. Miano's depiction of the mothers' psychotraumatic experiences reveals the depth of their suffering and the complex interplay between memory, loss, and survival. Their dreams, silence, and fleeting interactions with the physical world around them illustrate the profound psychotraumatic impact of their sons' capture, casting a shadow over their lives that they cannot escape. The mothers' collective yet solitary grief underscores the enduring trauma inflicted by the capture of their children.

Trauma is further manifested in the treatment inflicted upon the captives during their journey from the hinterland to the horrific Atlantic coasts. Miano gives voice to the captives, enabling them to express the suffering and affliction they endure while crossing the forest en route to the slave port. Mukudi's testimony provides a harrowing account of their inhumane treatment, painting a vivid picture of the cruelty and brutality they faced. Mukudi begins by highlighting the constant presence and vigilance of their captors: "Nos agresseurs étaient nombreux, armés, en permanence sur notre dos. Impossible de nous parler, de nous faire un signe, sans éveiller les soupçons. [Our aggressors were numerous, armed, and constantly on our backs. It was impossible to talk to each other or make a sign without arousing

³⁸⁸Ibid., 15–16.

suspicion.]”³⁸⁹ This description underscores the oppressive environment, in which any attempt at communication or solidarity among the captives was met with suspicion and potential violence. The captives were thus not only physically restrained but also psychologically oppressed, stripped of their basic human rights and dignity.

The brutality of their treatment is further illustrated when Mukudi recounts the fate of their uncle Mutimbo: “Lorsque, le troisième ou le quatrième jour, je ne sais plus, notre oncle Mutimbo s’est arrêté de marcher. Un guerrier bwele lui a planté une flèche dans l’aîne. Il s’est écroulé. Nous l’avons laissé derrière. [On the third or fourth day, I’m not sure anymore, our uncle Mutimbo stopped walking. A Bwéle warrior shot an arrow into his groin. He collapsed. We left him behind.]”³⁹⁰ This moment of sheer cruelty, in which a captor mercilessly kills a weakened man emphasises the dehumanising nature of their journey. The captives were forced to witness and endure such acts of violence, therefore deepening their trauma and sense of helplessness. The relentless physical strain is evident in Mukudi’s weakening state: “Les jours passant, je m’affaiblissais. La colonne ralentissait par ma faute, sans s’arrêter, toutefois. [As the days went by, I was getting weaker. The column slowed down because of me, but it did not stop.]”³⁹¹ Despite his deteriorating condition, the march continued without pause, reflecting the captors’ complete disregard for the captives’ well-being.

Upon reaching the coast, the captives faced another layer of dehumanisation: “On nous a examinés, comptés. Nous devions être douze, il manquait donc un homme. De plus, j’étais trop faible, notre oncle Mundene trop âgé. [We were examined, counted. There were supposed to be twelve of us, so one man was missing. Furthermore, I was too weak, and our uncle Mundene was too old.]”³⁹² This moment of being inspected and counted like livestock strips them of any remaining sense of humanity. Mukudi and the others are reduced to mere numbers, evaluated for their physical worth rather than being recognised as human beings with inherent dignity.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 178.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 179.

³⁹² Ibid., 180.

Their imprisonment in the white building further intensified their suffering: “Au fond de notre geôle, nous traînions maintenant des liens de métal aux chevilles. Si nous avions voulu nous échapper, nous ne l’aurions pas pu. [At the back of our cell, we now dragged metal chains around our ankles. Even if we had wanted to escape, we wouldn’t have been able to.]”³⁹³ The metal restraints further restricted their movement and freedom, making escape impossible and reinforcing their status as captives. Mukudi’s account also addresses the psychological torment they endured: “L’océan rugissait en se jetant sur le sable, y déversant une mousse dont nous craignons qu’elle nous touche les pieds. Nous bondissions sur le côté. [The ocean roared as it crashed onto the sand, spilling foam we feared would touch our feet. We jumped to the side.]”³⁹⁴ The fear of the unknown and of the surrounding natural elements heightened their terror. The ocean, an unfamiliar and intimidating force, became another symbol of their captivity and powerlessness.

Finally, Mukudi recounts brief moments of respite that were still filled with humiliation: “Un jour, on nous a fait sortir du cachot, pour marcher, respirer le grand air. Ils profitaient de ces moments pour nous verser de l’eau sur le corps. [One day, they took us out of the dungeon to walk and breathe fresh air. They used these moments to pour water over our bodies.]”³⁹⁵ Even in moments meant for basic needs like fresh air and water, the captives were treated as objects, their humanity ignored. Through Mukudi’s testimony, Miano depicts the inhumane treatment of the captives, from constant surveillance and brutal violence to psychological torment and dehumanisation. Each detail serves to highlight the immense suffering and trauma endured by the captives on their journey to the slave port, a journey marked by relentless cruelty and a complete disregard for their humanity.

Mukudi declares: “Ne prononce plus ce nom en ma présence... Je n’irai pas avec toi. Je ne pourrais plus vivre parmi vous, à présent. Peu importe ce qu’il me faudra encore subir, en demeurant ici. [Do not say that name in my presence... I will not go with you. I can no

³⁹³ Ibid., 181.

³⁹⁴ Ibid.

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 182.

longer live among you. No matter what I still have to endure by staying here.]”³⁹⁶ The psychotraumatic effects of his capture are starkly illustrated through his refusal to reintegrate into his former life. Mukudi’s command to “Ne prononce plus ce nom en ma présence [Do not say that name in my presence]” signifies a deep rupture from his past self. Names hold significant personal and cultural value, often encapsulating identity, heritage, and connections to family and community. By rejecting his name, Mukudi symbolically severs ties with his previous identity and the life he once knew. This act of renunciation underscores the extent of his trauma, indicating a desire to distance himself from memories associated with that name and the person he was before his capture. His declaration, “Je ne pourrais plus vivre parmi vous, à présent [I can no longer live among you now]”, reveals an irreversible change in his sense of self and his place within his community. The psychological toll of his experiences has rendered him incapable of returning to his former life, indicating a profound sense of alienation.

When Eyabe attempts to reach out, calling “Mukudi”, he cuts her off with: “Ne m’appelle plus ainsi... Ce nom était le mien dans un autre monde. [Do not call me that anymore... That name was mine in another world.]”³⁹⁷ This repetition reinforces his rejection of his former identity. By stating “Dans celui-ci, je ne suis ni un fils, ni un frère [In this one, I am neither a son nor a brother]”, Mukudi articulates a complete disassociation from his roles within the family and community. His assertion that “La solitude est mon logis et mon seul horizon [Solitude is my dwelling and my only horizon]” poignantly encapsulates his internal isolation. This metaphor conveys that his sense of belonging and connection has been entirely replaced by loneliness, and that his future prospects are confined to this solitude. Mukudi’s words reveal the profound psychotraumatic effects of his capture. His rejection of his name and identity, refusal to return to his community, acceptance of continued suffering, and embrace of solitude all underscore the deep psychological scars left by his experiences. His trauma has fundamentally altered his sense of self and his place in the world, illustrating the devastating and lasting impact of his ordeal.

³⁹⁶Ibid., 183.

³⁹⁷Ibid., 184.

Mukudi's traumatic experiences can be interpreted through Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of dismemberment, which entails the severing individuals from their cultural roots and community. Mukudi's rejection of his name and identity – "Ne prononce plus ce nom en ma présence ... [Do not utter that name in my presence ...]" – signifies a symbolic severing from his cultural and personal identity. This reflects the dismemberment from his lineage and heritage, illustrating how trauma has forced him to disconnect from his past. His inability to reintegrate into his community – "Je ne pourrais plus vivre parmi vous, à présent [I could no longer live among you now]" – highlights psychological dislocation and alienation. Mukudi's acceptance of further suffering – "Peu importe ce qu'il me faudra encore subir, en demeurant ici [No matter what I may still have to endure by staying here]" – indicates an internalisation of his fragmented state. Finally, his embrace of solitude – "La solitude est mon logis et mon seul horizon [Solitude is my dwelling and my only horizon]" – underscores the outcome of dismemberment, where isolation becomes his new norm. Mukudi's experiences vividly illustrate Ngũgĩ's concept of dismemberment, showcasing how trauma can irreparably sever individuals from their cultural foundations and lead to profound psychological and existential dislocation.

5.3.2. Dismembering: Renaming the African Body

The act of renaming enslaved Africans represents one of the most insidious tools of colonial domination, severing individuals from their cultural and communal roots. In Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of dismemberment, renaming is not a superficial change but a symbolic and material act of identity erasure. It transforms the African body from a bearer of history, memory, and cultural identity into a fragmented entity, stripped of its original significance and redefined within the economic and ideological systems of enslavement. By assigning new names, colonisers and slave traders imposed a forced reinvention of the self, where the individual was reconstructed as an object of exploitation. This process of renaming not only erased linguistic and cultural identities but also enacted a broader cultural violence, severing enslaved individuals from their ancestral lineages and communal bonds. The replacement of a name steeped in meaning with one dictated by

the oppressor symbolised the stripping away of humanity and the imposition of a commodified identity. The new name, often reflecting the cultural framework of the enslavers, became a marker of subjugation and alienation.

A passage from Alem's *Esclaves* exemplifies Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's concept of dismemberment through the phenomenon of renaming African captives. Renaming is a powerful act of identity erasure and cultural severance: "À présent, il était devenu un esclave, un vrai. On lui avait même donné un nouveau nom, Miguel. [Now, he had become a slave, a real one. They had even given him a new name, Miguel.]"³⁹⁸

The force of Alem's formulation lies in the adverb *vrai* (truly), which implies that there exists a gradation of enslavement and that the imposition of a new name, Miguel, marks the threshold of a fully realised subjugation. This is not the same as Ngũgĩ's dismemberment concept applied to colonialism in the abstract; it is the textual instantiation of the moment when a proper name, as a repository of ancestry and communal belonging, is formally annihilated and replaced by a signifier belonging entirely to the oppressor's linguistic order. The subsequent description cataloguing Miguel's physical attributes completes this operation by constituting the renamed body as a commodity, legible only through the economic logic of the slave trade. Crucially, Alem's prose here enacts what Kanor would call a *corps-fossile* in reverse: rather than a body that sediments and transmits memory, this is a body from which memory is being actively stripped, layer by layer, renamed into amnesia. The literary gesture of naming this violence is itself the counter-memorial act that animates the novel's historiopoetic project.

The subsequent description – "a civilised negro of the Fon nation, very black, beardless, tall and lean, large eyes, good teeth, intelligent and very skilful" – extends this violence by reducing the individual to a series of physical and functional characteristics. Such a portrayal reflects the commodifying gaze of the slave trade, which systematically dehumanises individuals by framing them as objects of economic value. The cataloguing of traits reveals a chilling transactional logic, in which identity is erased and replaced with an inventory of attributes,

³⁹⁸ Alem, *Esclaves*, 126.

rendering the captive as a tradable asset devoid of personal or cultural significance.

Ngũgĩ's notion of dismemberment finds powerful resonance in this context. The loss of the captive's original name, steeped in cultural memory and collective meaning, symbolises the erasure of their identity as part of a shared history. Simultaneously, the imposition of a new name enacts a reconstruction of the self, defined entirely through the lens of the oppressor. This dual process of erasure and imposition, does not simply create a subjugated individual, rather, it produces a fragmented subject, alienated from their origins yet unable to fully assimilate into the imposed identity. Renaming is thus emblematic of a deeper ontological violence, one that transforms the individual into both an object of possession and a site of existential conflict.

Alem's narrative underscores the profound psychological and cultural consequences of this process. While the renaming of the protagonist as "Miguel" signifies his forced incorporation into a new social order, it also reveals the tensions inherent in this transformation. Beneath the surface of assimilation persists a residual connection to the individual's original identity, a connection that resists complete erasure. This tension, between the obliteration of identity and the persistence of memory, embodies the tragic dimension of the dismemberment process. Through this lens, Alem's text not only reflects the mechanics of the transatlantic slave trade but also interrogates the enduring struggle for the restoration and reclamation of fractured identities.

Je vous remercie de m'avoir nourri, c'est vrai je suis très fatigué, et je ne sais plus mon nom. Les larmes coulèrent alors le long de ses joues, avant que les sanglots ne lui nouent la gorge... Miguel complètement dépassé par sa perte de mémoire. [Thank you for feeding me, it's true I am very tired, and I no longer know my name. Tears then flowed down his cheeks, before sobs choked his throat... Miguel completely overwhelmed by his loss of memory.]³⁹⁹

The most striking aspect of this passage lies in Miguel's anguished confession: "et je ne sais plus mon nom." This statement embodies the ultimate loss of identity, signalling a profound disconnection from his past and his sense of self. The inability to remember his name is not

³⁹⁹Ibid., 148–150.

merely an expression of forgetfulness but a symbolic articulation of the violence of dismemberment. As previously discussed, renaming functions as a mechanism for severing the individual from both cultural and personal roots, leaving them unmoored from their heritage and communal identity. Miguel's loss of his name signifies the obliteration of his selfhood, rendering him a fractured being defined only by the labels imposed upon him by his oppressors.

The emotional gravity of this loss is underscored by the visceral imagery of tears and uncontrollable sobbing: "Les larmes coulèrent alors le long de ses joues, avant que les sanglots ne lui nouent la gorge." These physical manifestations of anguish reveal the depth of the psychological torment endured by Miguel, who is overwhelmed by the weight of his alienation. The description of his tears and choked sobs humanises the enslaved subject, confronting the reader with the emotional and existential costs of the dehumanising processes of enslavement and renaming.

This moment in the narrative not only highlights the personal impact of dismemberment but also serves as a broader commentary on the erasure of African identities within the context of enslavement. By focusing on Miguel's psychological suffering, Alem brings to the forefront the enduring pain and fragmentation that accompany the loss of identity, thus making visible the human cost of a system that sought to obliterate individuality and cultural memory.

The preceding analysis of identity erasure and psychological dismemberment in *Esclaves* lays a critical foundation for understanding the broader spectrum of violence and dehumanisation depicted in Alem's narrative. While the renaming of enslaved individuals underscores the systematic obliteration of identity, the barbaric acts of physical violence committed by the Dahomey Amazons illustrate the visceral realities of this dismemberment. Together, these acts of erasure – both psychological and corporeal – serve to emphasise the extent to which human lives were fractured, commodified, and destroyed within the structures of the transatlantic slave trade. This transition from identity dismemberment to the ritualistic and physical violence inflicted by the Amazons further reveals the layers of dehumanisation that underpin the narrative and provides a lens through which to examine the inhumanity that permeated this historical context.

5.3.3. The Body as Text: Inscribing Trauma and Dismemberment

In *Esclaves*, the harrowing scene of the ritual master's wife's decapitation resonates as more than a mere act of violence; it emerges as an inscription of trauma onto the body, a metaphor for the dismemberment of identity and community during the transatlantic slave trade. Through this act, Alem constructs the body as a text – fragmented, manipulated, and consumed – to reflect the profound cultural and psychological ruptures of this era. In the scene, the entire village is taken into captivity, including women and children, except for the ritual master's young wife, who is kept by the Amazons to serve as a test subject for the initiation of the young Amazon Nansica. The latter, holding the sword firmly with both hands, strikes the condemned woman three times, severing the last pieces of flesh connecting the head to the body: “Elle frappa une première fois, puis une seconde et une troisième, après quoi elle coupa tranquillement les dernières chairs qui rattachaient la tête au tronc. [She struck once, then a second time, and a third, before calmly severing the remaining flesh that connected the head to the body.]”⁴⁰⁰ In a solemn silence, despite the presence of other warriors, she wipes the blood from her sword with her hand and drinks it. After completing her bloody task, the new Amazon, in a state of delirium, waves her blood-soaked weapon before the applauding crowd.⁴⁰¹

The decapitation is laden with ritualistic significance. Nansica, the young Amazon initiate, strikes with a ceremonial sword, severing flesh in deliberate, repetitive movements. The scene operates on multiple symbolic registers. The young woman's body, suspended and inverted, transcends its physical form to become an emblem of sacrificial submission, her humanity stripped away by the spectacle of ritual. Her mutilation encapsulates the violent fragmentation of African societies, torn apart by internal conflicts and by the external forces of the slave trade. The blade, wielded with precision, reinforces the duality of destruction and performance. The act of decapitation is not merely an execution but a carefully choreographed ritual, transforming the victim into an object of ceremonial display. Nansica's stoic demeanour as

⁴⁰⁰Ibid., 90.

⁴⁰¹Ibid., 91.

she wipes blood from her blade and drinks it amplifies the grotesque theatricality of the scene. The crowd's applause punctuates the act with a chilling affirmation of violence as communal celebration, underscoring the desensitisation to brutality cultivated by systemic oppression.

Alem's portrayal of the ritual master, forced to witness his wife's fate, adds a psychological dimension to the narrative. His silent anguish becomes a cipher for collective trauma, in which individual suffering mirrors communal dismemberment. The silent yet omnipresent weight of his gaze recalls Caruth's theory of trauma as a recursive phenomenon, experienced not only in the moment of violence but also as something that reverberates across time, rupturing the continuity of memory and identity.⁴⁰² His wife's death becomes a synecdoche for the broader cultural and familial destruction wrought by the slave trade. Nansica's initiation ritual intertwines violence with commodification, as reflected in the ceremonial chants: "He purchase mothers and children." The lyrics, with their transactional language, juxtapose the human body's sacredness with its reduction to an object of trade. Kristeva's notion of abjection provides a compelling lens here: the victim's body becomes a site of horror and disgust, expelled from the realm of humanity in order to uphold a fragile social order.⁴⁰³ The chanting, performed in unison, transforms violence into spectacle, embedding it within the collective psyche as a necessary affirmation of social hierarchies. The blood, central to this grotesque display, serves as a powerful motif. When Nansica drinks the blood of her victim and parades her blade, the act transcends its immediate context, echoing historical rituals of consumption and domination. Mignolo describes colonial consumption as a dual process: the literal consumption of bodies and the figurative erasure of identity.⁴⁰⁴ Here, blood operates as both a symbol of vitality and an object of appropriation, marking the ultimate dismemberment – not only of the body but also of the humanity it once embodied.

⁴⁰²Caruth, Cathy. 1996. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

⁴⁰³Kristeva, Julia. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.

⁴⁰⁴Mignolo, Walter D. 2005. *The Idea of Latin America*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

The layered brutality in Alem's narrative, while stark and unrelenting, compels readers to interrogate the intersections of violence, ritual, and power. The execution is not an isolated act but a performance inscribed with cultural and historical significance. The victim's dismembered body, subjected to ritualistic degradation, mirrors the fragmentation of African societies caught in the machinery of slavery. In Alem's hands, the body becomes a text, scarred, severed, and erased, yet insistently present as a haunting reminder of historical trauma. This portrayal resists reduction to voyeuristic horror. Instead, it demands a reckoning with the ways in which violence has been institutionalised and rendered invisible within the structures of power. By reimagining the body as a site of inscription, Alem evokes the persistent echoes of trauma, urging readers to confront the lingering wounds of a fragmented past and their reverberations in the present.

Miguel's treatment and transformation into a commodity provide a stark illustration of how enslaved individuals are dehumanised and commodified. Alem's narrative dissects the corporeal manipulation and economic valuation of enslaved individuals, creating a chilling commentary on the systemic erasure of identity and humanity during this period. In the chapter entitled "Nouveaux mondes IV: La case de gavage ou la vie triste et monotone de l'esclave Miguel [New Worlds IV: The Fattening Hut or the Sad and Monotonous Life of the Slave Miguel]", Miguel's transformation emerges as a multi-layered narrative of physical, symbolic, and economic rupture.

The transient and exploitative nature of his treatment is mirrored in the description of the *case de gavage* – a "bâtiment précaire [precarious building]" constructed with the intention of vanishing at the slightest threat. This physical instability mirrors the precariousness of Miguel's existence as he transitions from personhood to property. In the fattening hut, Miguel undergoes a brutal regime of forced feeding and grooming. The passage's clinical enumeration of his diet – "viande séchée, poisson sec, farine de manioc, bananes et oranges [dried meat, dried fish, cassava flour, bananas and oranges]"⁴⁰⁵ – reduces nourishment to a utilitarian act, aimed solely at restoring his physical market value. Alem underscores the grotesque irony: Miguel's life

⁴⁰⁵ Alem, *Esclaves*, 141.

becomes important to his captors only to the extent that his body can be monetised. This utilitarian care culminates in the grotesque image of Miguel's mouth being cleaned and deodorised with "racines astringents [astringent roots]", a scene emblematic of his reduction to an object that must meet the aesthetic expectations of the market. His improved appearance, marked by the disappearance of his "atrophie musculaire" and the sanitisation of his body, renders him a palatable product, ready for display and sale.

The text's economic detailing further dehumanises Miguel by converting his body into a ledger of costs and profits. The financial breakdown spanning the costs of transportation, feeding, medical care, and commissions, reduces his humanity to a transactional equation. The inclusion of his baptismal cost adds a layer of religious hypocrisy, as the sacrament becomes yet another line item in the commodification process. The ultimate sale price of 110,000 réaux crystallises the complete transformation of Miguel's identity: he is no longer a man but a sum of market forces. Miguel's eventual sale further emphasises his objectification. The impassivity of his purchaser, described as more monk-like than mercantile, contrasts sharply with the profound violence implicit in the transaction. The buyer's lack of emotional engagement underscores the normalised brutality of the system, where enslaved individuals are stripped of any claim to humanity or individuality. Even the orchestrated atmosphere of the sale, marked by a lack of competition and an air of predetermined agreement, suggests a controlled and complicit economy, in which the mechanisms of slavery are deliberately sanitised to obscure their inherent violence.

Through Miguel's experience, the dismemberment operates on multiple levels: physically, Miguel's body is manipulated and prepared for sale; economically, he is reduced to a series of transactions; and symbolically, his identity and humanity are obliterated. The renaming of Miguel during his baptism encapsulates this severance, representing a final act of erasure, disconnecting him from his cultural and personal origins.

Miguel and the other newly arrived slaves are immediately thrust into gruelling labour, with no time to rest or acclimatise. They are put to work in the cultivation of sugar cane, a physically demanding task made even more difficult by the language barrier. The overseers shout

orders in Portuguese, a language none of the slaves understand. This lack of comprehension exacerbates their sense of isolation and helplessness. The use of language as a tool of oppression is highlighted here: although the Portuguese words are incomprehensible, their harsh, demeaning tone inflicts psychological violence. The language serves not only as a means of communication but as a weapon that reinforces the slaves' subjugation and alienation.

Miguel's unfamiliarity with the language contributes to his vulnerability. The overseers' commands are described as "violentaient" Miguel, suggesting that the commands, though not understood, are perceived as attacks on his dignity. The physical violence is evident in the scene where Miguel accidentally drops a sharp tool, injuring another slave, Julie. The overseer's reaction – a whip cracking over Miguel's head – adds a layer of physical intimidation and punishment. The injury to Julie, and the subsequent lack of medical care, reflects the disregard for the slaves' well-being. The focus on Miguel's task, while Julie's wound is hastily bandaged, underscores the system's prioritisation of productivity over humanity. Miguel's workday is described as relentless, extending until nightfall. The passage emphasises the unending nature of the labour, with Miguel only finding respite when it is completely dark. This unremitting work schedule highlights the exploitation and exhaustion experienced by the enslaved. The depiction of the work environment – marked by the overseers' shouting and the sounds of their horses – further conveys a scene of oppressive and chaotic control.

In *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, N'Sondé employs evocative imagery and a deeply personal narrative perspective to depict the corporeality of capture, centring on the brutal forced march of enslaved individuals to the coast. This transportation, as Miano terms it, becomes a visceral and harrowing journey, etched in the physicality and suffering of the captives. N'Sondé's literary strategies immerse the reader in this trauma, not only as a historical phenomenon but as a lived corporeality.

The passage describing an "endless column of vague human shapes"⁴⁰⁶ moving through mist is laden with symbolic meaning. The mist, formed by rain on warm earth, evokes a sense of blurred percep-

⁴⁰⁶N'Sondé, Wilfried. 2018. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 55.

tion and disorientation, paralleling the narrator's initial disbelief and the incomprehensibility of such a profound human atrocity. The description then shifts from this dreamlike imagery to an acute and unsettling focus on the captives' physical degradation: "naked", "chained together", and "their forearms curled against their chests". These details heighten the reader's awareness of their vulnerability and the dehumanising conditions imposed on them. Their constrained movements, "laborious" and "staggering", reflect both their physical exhaustion and the psychological weight of their captivity.

N'Sondé's narrator, Nsaku né Vunda, embodies the tension between observer and reluctant participant. As the only African among the ship's crew, he is positioned uncomfortably between the captors and the captives, unable to intervene yet deeply affected by the brutality he witnesses. His visceral reactions – "I flinched at every crack of the whip"⁴⁰⁷ – are a testament to the author's ability to evoke an emotional resonance in the reader. The narrator's recollection of "horrificed accounts" of raids transforms into a painful confrontation with their immediate reality, underscoring the emotional and moral burden of bearing witness to such suffering.

The passage further examines the narrator's internal conflict between an idealised conception of his people and the harsh reality of their actions. He admits to having previously "blinded" himself to any evidence that might fracture this ideal, and this moment of recognition constitutes a profound epistemic rupture. Confrontation with the brutal realities of slavery thus represents a painful and jarring awakening for him. The text concludes with the narrator reflecting on how the images and sounds of suffering have become an enduring part of his consciousness, travelling "across oceans, seas, and centuries". The captives are remembered as "brothers and sisters", indicating a deep, lasting connection to their plight. This reflection demonstrates the enduring impact of witnessing such suffering on both the individuals involved and those who observe it.

The narrator, Nsaku ne Vunda, is the only African among the crew members on deck. He cannot go below deck and witnesses the abuse without being able to intervene. His sense of isolation and powerless-

⁴⁰⁷Ibid., 55.

ness is palpable as he observes the brutality without being able to act. The juxtaposition of his own comfort and the slaves' distress accentuates his feeling of degradation and frustration. His state of mind and feelings contrast with the indifference and brutality of those around him. His initial fascination with the ship is abruptly replaced by profound distress upon discovering the conditions of the slaves. This emotional transition highlights the dissonance between the outward appearance and the internal reality of the transatlantic slave trade.

The priest narrates his divided feelings about the slave port, between amazement and disgust. For the moment, fascination prevails:

Une vision saisissante: je fus impressionné par la dimension des navires, ces imposantes constructions humaines flottant sur l'eau. Dans ces immenses coques bombées, j'imaginai des merveilles et consacrai de longues minutes à admirer les pavillons multicolores et leurs élégants claquements sous le souffle du vent. J'oubliai pour un instant la puanteur qui planait dans l'air et les malheureux traînant leurs chaînes çà et là sur les docks, tant me fascina l'intensité de l'activité. [A striking sight: I was impressed by the size of the ships, these imposing human constructions floating on water. In these immense, rounded hulls, I imagined wonders and spent long minutes admiring the multicoloured flags and their elegant flapping in the wind. For a moment, I forgot the stench in the air and the unfortunate ones dragging their chains around the docks, so fascinated was I by the intensity of the activity.]⁴⁰⁸

This passage is divided into two parts. In the first, the priest is awed by the dazzling sight of the ships and envisions an enchanted world. He uses many positive adjectives. This qualitative description is significant as it reflects his different perspective and position compared to the slaves. In the second part, he reveals that he had forgotten the chained slaves who are caught in the machinery of this massive and well-organised activity orchestrated by wealthy Europeans. A person who sees this grand display overlooks the harsh reality hidden behind it. *Nsaku né Vunda* discovers the African slaves on the slave ship.

Ils étaient là, les paysans disparus, partis un matin travailler au champ sans jamais revenir, ceux dont on racontait les histoires autour du feu, le soir, à Boko. [They were there, the missing peasants, who had left one morning to work in the fields and never returned, those whose stories were told around the fire in the evening, at Boko.]⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁸Ibid., 53.

⁴⁰⁹Ibid., 50.

The priest sees the numerous slaves from afar, like a herd of humans walking toward hell. This represents the organisation of a social order based on hierarchy and domination, oppression, and the harshest forms of discrimination. The priest details the dramatic and successive actions. Nsaku né Vunda frames his narrative with astonishment. Nonetheless, as he waits for his embarkation aboard the ship *Le Vent Paraclet* bound for Brazil, he witnesses the atrocity of human servitude. In the following excerpt, he describes the bodies and the duality present between the oppressors and the victims:

Nous nous tenions là, assis sur d'immenses racines, à patienter, lorsqu'une interminable colonne de vagues formes humaines passa à une cinquantaine de mètres, une ligne d'ombres qui se détachait à peine du flou de la brume engendrée par la fraîcheur de l'averse sur la terre chaude. [...] Les contours des femmes, d'hommes et d'enfants nus, attachés les uns aux autres par le cou avec des fourches de bambous, progressant sous la trombe torride, se précisèrent. Ils se déplaçaient laborieusement, les avant-bras recroquevillés contre la poitrine, les poings liés. Je m'attardai sur les mouvements de leurs pieds entravés par des liens qui donnaient à leur démarche une allure lourde de grande fatigue. Ils titubaient pour arriver à suivre la cadence imposée par les sentinelles armées. [We were sitting there, resting on immense roots, when an endless column of wavering human forms passed about fifty meters away, a line of shadows barely discernible through the mist created by the chill of the downpour on the hot earth. [...] The outlines of naked women, men, and children, tied together by the neck with bamboo forks, moving under the torrid storm, became clearer. They moved laboriously, their forearms curled against their chests, their hands bound. I focused on the movements of their feet, hindered by ties that gave their gait a heavy, weary appearance. They staggered to keep up with the pace set by the armed sentinels.]⁴¹⁰

Confronted with the fatality of his position aboard the *Vent Paraclet*, he becomes a witness who gives voice to the captives and their suffering, using metaphorical language to express the loss of identity and dehumanisation experienced by the captives. Nsaku né Vunda recounts what he hears from the hold of the slave ship, as a spectator of these tortured bodies:

⁴¹⁰ Ibid.

je remarquai des mélodies dissonantes qui remontaient de la cale du Vent Paraclet, des plaintes, des râles de douleur et de désespoir, un chœur lancinant de fin du monde pleuré par des esclaves dans le fond de la fosse. [I noticed dissonant melodies rising from the hold of the Vent Paraclet, groans, cries of pain and despair, a mournful choir of the end of the world lamented by slaves in the bottom of the hold.]⁴¹¹

Slavery is represented not only as a loss of freedom but also as a radical erasure of the captured individuals' cultural and personal identity. Nsaku né Vunda describes the dehumanisation of the slaves and how their culture and history are obliterated. In one passage, he observes the slaves as "shadows" moving laboriously, tied together, a figure that condenses the destruction of both their humanity and their historical continuity.

Being a slave means not only being subjected to an oppressor's authority and becoming property, but also renouncing one's identity and traditions by being forcibly stripped of one's freedom as well as any ties of belonging, whether familial or religious. In other words, it means being compelled to detach from one's past and to cease maintaining one's knowledge and identity. This loss of identity is described through a brutal rupture from one's former life:

Nous avions vogué ensemble, murés dans la violence, sans jamais nous regarder ou nous sourire. Vous étiez partis sans que je connaisse vos noms ou le fil de vos vies. Je tournais en rond et ruminais l'amertume en silence. [We had sailed together, walled in violence, never looking at or smiling at each other. You had left without me knowing your names or the thread of your lives. I turned in circles and brooded silently over the bitterness.]⁴¹²

Through Nsaku né Vunda's evolving perspective, N'Sondé examines the loss of identity that accompanies enslavement. The captives' transformation into "shadows" underscores their forced detachment from their past, their culture, and their sense of self. The narrator's reflections on their suffering – "dissonant melodies rising from the hold" and the "mournful choir" lamenting an "end of the world" – extend this corporeal imagery to an auditory realm, allowing the reader to feel the weight of their despair.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., 62.

⁴¹² Ibid., 142.

6. Mourning, African Renaissance and the Slave Trade in Francophone Africa

This chapter demonstrates how these authors give voice to the victims, subvert institutionalised historical narratives, and leverage the aesthetic potential of literature to orchestrate collective re-membering and identity renaissance. It examines the therapeutic function of the literary transfiguration of trauma, offering a reflection on the psychological and cultural healing mechanisms that these works facilitate. In this context, it is essential to consider the framework of mourning as a lever for renaissance. Indeed, the works of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé do not merely recount past sufferings; they also construct a space in which mourning enables the processing of the historical wounds of the slave trade, and illuminate how this past has fragmented African identities, cultures, and histories. Within the context of slave trade trauma, the literary imagination becomes a crucial instrument for this reclamation. By resurrecting silenced voices and marginalised histories, authors such as Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé participate in a broader project of cultural renaissance. Their works exemplify how literature can transform mourning into a generative act, where the past is neither forgotten nor immobilising but serves as a catalyst for envisioning alternative futures.

The notion of memory, intimately linked to mourning, emerges as a fundamental element in these works. The act of re-membering becomes an act of resistance and resilience, providing the strength to move beyond mourning and fostering a sense of hope. The capacity to re-member and to grieve for the losses endured is a necessary act for constructing a renewed identity. The three authors resurrect fragments and characters of history and, through this very act, restore memory, which is the quintessential illustration of a renaissance. The literary text thus becomes a therapeutic act that counters forgetfulness, reopening the wounds of the past to eventually heal the accompanying pain. Thus, mourning, far from being a passive state, reveals itself as a dynamic process that catalyses renaissance.

6.1. Trauma Healing, Mourning, and African Renaissance

Postcolonial Africa has yet to adequately grieve the immense human suffering caused by two of the most catastrophic events in its history: the transatlantic slave trade and colonialism.⁴¹³ The forced displacement of millions of Africans, ripped from their homeland, their families, and their cultures, has left a deep and unresolved scar. On slave ships crossing treacherous seas, thousands died, while in the brutal conditions of foreign plantations, countless others perished. The violence extended further into the heart of Africa through colonial regimes, from the rubber plantations of the Belgian Congo to the diamond and gold mines of South Africa. Millions more lost their lives resisting this dehumanising trade in flesh and the oppressive yoke of colonial rule.

Yet, despite the scale of this trauma, Africa has never fully mourned. The pain of these events has been buried, leaving a void in the continent's collective memory. The repercussions of failing to mourn are dire, as outlined by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. They argue that individuals or communities who do not engage in mourning effectively entomb their trauma, creating "psychic tombs meant to stay sealed off from self".⁴¹⁴ Such neglect of the dead leads to a collective amnesia, where the memories of those who suffered remain unacknowledged. The unburied dead haunt the present, and the absence of proper mourning rituals means that their lamentations echo through generations, contributing to a dislocated national psyche. Without remembering the past, there are no inherited ideals by which to measure contemporary excesses. To understand the aesthetics and political distance African literature has travelled between the earlier and current generations of writers, one must think of it in terms of mourning, consciousness, and the melancholic unconscious,

⁴¹³Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2009. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. New York: Basic Civitas, 59.

⁴¹⁴Ibid., 58.

of inherited traumas and memories that define the new African literary generation.⁴¹⁵

For Freud, “Mourning is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”⁴¹⁶ Freud highlights the idea that grief extends beyond the physical loss of a person to encompass the emotional and psychological loss of intangible concepts. In this view, mourning is not limited to death but can also be triggered by the loss of deeply held values, beliefs, or cultural symbols that hold personal or collective significance. He acknowledges that certain abstractions, like one’s homeland, freedom, or ideals, can assume the same emotional importance as a loved one. When these abstractions are lost, they evoke a profound sense of grief because they are integral to an individual’s or community’s identity and sense of purpose. For instance, when a person loses their country through exile or colonisation, it can provoke a deep mourning similar to that experienced when losing a close family member. Similarly, the loss of liberty, whether through oppression or political disenfranchisement, can generate feelings of helplessness, grief, and disorientation.

In contrast, for Freud, melancholia describes a state in which “one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost”, and “is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious”.⁴¹⁷ Melancholia is characterised by an inability to fully recognise or understand what has been lost. Freud suggests that in melancholia, the object of loss – whether a person or an abstraction – is somehow withdrawn from consciousness, meaning that the person experiencing melancholia cannot clearly identify or articulate the source of their grief. This hidden or unconscious aspect of the loss complicates the grieving process, leading to a kind of emotional paralysis or a prolonged state of suffering. The person may feel

⁴¹⁵ Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ. 2014. “Beauty, Mourning, and Melancholy in Africa39.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/beauty-mourning-melancholy-africa39/>.

⁴¹⁶ Freud, Sigmund. 1917. “Mourning and Melancholia.”

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

an overwhelming sadness, but without a clear sense of what has been lost, they are unable to fully engage with or resolve their grief. Unlike mourning, where the individual can consciously process their grief and eventually find resolution, melancholia traps the individual in a state of unresolved loss because the object or nature of the loss remains unconscious or unclear.

The concept of *melancholia africana* closely mirrors Freud's idea of melancholia, particularly in its articulation of collective, unresolved grief arising from the historical traumas of slavery, colonisation, and systemic oppression. As Etoke describes, the enduring trauma faced by Sub-Saharan Africans and Afro-descendants manifests as an "aesthetic of misfortune and suffering confronted by the refusal to die".⁴¹⁸ This concept examines how these communities manage loss, mourning, and survival in a present that is perpetually contaminated by a past marked by slavery, colonisation, and postcolonial challenges. Far from paralysing these populations in victimhood, *melancholia Africana* compels them to act, reinvent themselves, and rise from the ashes of their history.⁴¹⁹ Etoke's critique of Freud's definition of melancholia illuminates several key insights into the nature of mourning and grief. By framing melancholia as a dynamic and active process, rather than a pathological state leading to stagnation and despair, she emphasises its potential as a source of resilience and strength. This perspective suggests that mourning is not solely an individual psychological experience but a fundamentally collective one, shaped by shared legacies of trauma. Melancholia thus emerges as a mechanism of resistance, enabling individuals and communities to confront their pain and engage with the present, rather than succumbing to self-destructive behaviour. This reframing acknowledges that effective mourning involves integrating loss into one's identity, allowing grief to coexist with resilience and agency.

Etoke's redefinition of melancholia aligns closely with Fanon's notion of a "new humanity", which emphasizes the necessity of proactive engagement with trauma and loss as a condition for transformative

⁴¹⁸Etoke, Nathalie Etoke. 2010. *Melancholia africana: L'indispensable dépassement de la condition noire*. Paris: Éditions du Cygne, 27.

⁴¹⁹*Ibid.*, 28.

possibilities. For Fanon, the emergence of this new humanity requires action, driven by the efforts of new creators who can envision and cultivate alternative futures. In this context, Etoke emerges as one of these new creators, utilising her conceptualisation of melancholia to facilitate a process of for/giving, an act that liberates individuals from the burdens of debt and the psychological impulses stemming from victimhood and aggression. This approach acknowledges the vulnerability of both victim and aggressor, fostering mutual recognition and healing by reframing melancholia as an active process of mourning. In this way, melancholia becomes a conduit for the creation of new possibilities, aligning with Fanon's vision that meaningful change arises from collective action and the imaginative endeavours of those willing to confront their histories and transform them into sources of strength and resilience.

The African Renaissance, as envisioned by thinkers such as Cheikh Anta Diop in 1948, is a powerful call for the revival and reclamation of African identity, culture, and agency.⁴²⁰ Diop emphasised the need to recognise the "African idea"⁴²¹ as a self-defined representation formed through historical struggles. In today's context, the African Renaissance restoration call resonates with the ideals of Pan-Africanism. This vision of rebirth and renewal is linked to the wealth of imagination and the cultural heritage of the African people, especially "Africa's keepers of memory".⁴²² Central to this renaissance is the recovery and reintegration of cultural artefacts, literary works, and traditions that have been displaced, described as "stolen gems",⁴²³ into the societies that created them. This process of restoration is not merely nostalgic but essential for enabling a "monumental historical shift" in Africa's future.⁴²⁴ The flowering of African intellectual and artistic output is thus perceived as a harbinger of a profound transformation. At the heart of the African Renaissance lies the imperative to re-member Africa. This concept of re-membering aligns with Ngũgĩ's emphasis on

⁴²⁰Ibid., 69.

⁴²¹Ibid., 72.

⁴²²Ibid., 124.

⁴²³Ibid., 128.

⁴²⁴Ibid., 70.

language as a repository of culture and history. Ngũgĩ argues that the decolonisation of the mind is a prerequisite for genuine liberation, asserting that the African peoples must reclaim their languages and narratives from colonial subjugation. This reclamation is essential for the renaissance to flourish, as it restores not only the voices of the past but also enables contemporary and future generations to articulate their own identities. Rather than remaining trapped in cycles of grief and dislocation, the renaissance calls for the active reclamation of African culture, agency, and self-consciousness. It integrates the mourning process with a forward-looking vision where past trauma becomes a catalyst for the reinvention of African identities and societies.

What, then, can literary imagination achieve in the restoration of history? In examining contemporary African literature, particularly slave trade trauma novels, such as those by Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N'Sondé, it becomes evident that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's vision of African renaissance informs their narratives. These authors confront the legacies of slavery, offering a means of mourning and remembrance that is vital for the collective regeneration of African societies. Through their literary examinations, they not only recount the pain and suffering endured during the slave trade but also highlight the resilience and agency of African peoples. For instance, Miano's portrayal of women searching for their lost loved ones in the aftermath of trauma exemplifies the act of collective mourning that is essential for healing. This narrative reflects a re-membering of the past, allowing characters to confront their grief and reclaim their history. Alem's restoration of the figure of King Adandozan within the context of the Kingdom of Dahomey underscores the importance of historical figures in the African struggle against slavery, providing a framework for understanding resistance and resilience. N'Sondé's reimagining of Nsaku né Vunda breathes life into the historical narrative, giving voice to the struggles of the enslaved and emphasising the necessity of acknowledging these past injustices.

By engaging with the African experience and perspective of the slave trade, these novels contribute to a broader discourse on African Renaissance, wherein the process of re-membering and mourning becomes a pathway to regeneration. Ngũgĩ emphasises the need for self-representation, cultural reclamation, and the recognition of col-

lective trauma. Out of fragments of the past, and through observing proper mourning rites, emerges the wholeness of a body re-membered with itself, and its spirit speaks to the heart of this literary endeavour. Through the act of re-membering, these authors reclaim Africa's narrative and contribute to the larger project of the African Renaissance through the act of mourning.

In this context, it is imperative to conceptualise mourning as a catalyst for renaissance. The works of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé extend beyond mere documentation of historical suffering; they create a space in which mourning functions as both an act of resistance and a means of re-membering. The concept of memory, intricately intertwined with the act of mourning, emerges as a critical component within these narratives. The capacity to remember and grieve for the losses endured is essential for the reconstruction of a renewed identity. Through their literary examinations, these authors resurrect significant historical figures and moments, engaging in a process that simultaneously restores memory, an act that stands as a profound illustration of renaissance. Consequently, the literary text transforms into a therapeutic mechanism, actively resisting the forces of forgetfulness and reopening the wounds of the past as a pathway toward healing the associated pain. Thus, mourning transcends its often-perceived passive connotation, revealing itself as a dynamic and transformative process that serves to catalyse renaissance. This framework not only underscores the significance of collective memory in the healing journey but also emphasises the vital role of literature in facilitating this complex dynamic between mourning and rebirth.

Ngũgĩ emphasises the indispensable role that literature plays, and must continue to play, in the process of reconstituting or "re-membering" the cultural and historical fragments dispersed by colonialism. The concept of "re-membering" can be interpreted in two profound dimensions. First, it signifies the necessity of retrospection, an imperative to revisit and engage with suppressed chapters of African history in order to confront and heal the wounds and traumas buried under the weight of exploitation, greed, or the reticence to voice past suffering. Secondly, it denotes reconciliation. Reuniting Africa involves a symbolic and literal reunification of its sons and daughters, who were torn apart by the slave trade and the enduring legacy of slavery. This

act of re-membering thus becomes both a historical reckoning and a pathway towards the restoration of communal and cultural wholeness across the diaspora.

The act of writing about the transatlantic slave trade and its aftermath becomes a powerful form of mourning, constituting a deliberate engagement with the traumatic past that seeks to break the silence and confront historical amnesia. The impulse to write for Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N'Sondé arises from a deep-seated desire to confront the painful legacy of the transatlantic slave trade and its enduring impact on African identity. As Mbembe suggests, memory in African contexts often operates at the intersection of violence and resilience, foregrounding the tension between collective forgetting and the imperative to remember.⁴²⁵ In their respective novels, these authors create spaces where mourning becomes both a cathartic process and a subversive act of historical reclamation.

In *La Saison de l'ombre*, Miano writes the allegorical mourning of the Mulongo people, narrating the devastation wrought upon them following the capture of their young men in a brutal slave raid. The novel's narrative structure, fragmented and evocative, mirrors the disorientation of a community grappling with loss and the opacity of its historical moment. Miano's choice to centre the narrative on the women of the village, particularly Eyabe and Ebeise, subverts the traditional focus on male heroism in historical narratives. Through their journey, the novel becomes a poignant examination of what Derrida terms "the work of mourning", a process that resists closure and instead embraces the incompleteness of memory.⁴²⁶ The village's collective silence is striking, functioning both as a symptom of trauma and as a metaphor for the enforced silences surrounding the slave trade in global histories. Miano's prose is replete with sensory details that evoke absence – empty hearths, quiet landscapes, and shadows that linger as spectral reminders of the missing. Yet, the women's determination to uncover the truth signals resilience, transforming their mourning into a quest for agency and knowledge. This shift underscores Miano's

⁴²⁵Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*.

⁴²⁶Derrida, Jacques. 2001. *The Work of Mourning*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

broader project: to inscribe African women's strength and resistance into the historical narrative of the transatlantic slave trade.

Similarly, *Esclaves* by Kangni Alem is a journey into the personal and collective mourning of African societies fractured by slavery. Through the life of the protagonist Miguel/Sule, a man torn between his African roots and the new identity imposed upon him by slavery, the novel illustrates the deep psychic toll of enslavement. Alem's text acts as a lament for the dislocation of identity, as the protagonist's forced transformation from a free African into a slave symbolises the broader disintegration of African identity. The inclusion of historical figures such as King Adandozan and the documentation of the *Révolte des Malês* anchor Alem's work in the historical specificity of African resistance. By juxtaposing the personal and the collective, Alem's narrative becomes both a dirge for those lost and a testament to those who fought against the dehumanising forces of slavery. The novel's language, rooted in oral traditions and idiomatic expressions, reflects what Ngũgĩ advocates for: the reclamation of African modes of storytelling as a counter-hegemonic act. In Alem's hands, the historical novel becomes a vehicle for mourning that simultaneously celebrates the indomitable spirit of African resistance.⁴²⁷

In *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, N'Sondé tells the story of Nsaku né Vunda, a Kongo priest sent as an ambassador to the Pope, whose journey becomes a metaphor for the African diaspora's enduring trauma. The novel is both a historical reimagining and a meditation on the cost of Africa's encounter with European powers. Nsaku's voyage across continents mirrors the painful journey of millions of enslaved Africans. N'Sondé, through his literary translation of Nsaku né Vunda, seeks to express the universal human spirit amidst despair and inhumanity. He employs a polyphonic narrative style, blending Nsaku's voice with those of other characters and historical documents, thus creating a textual palimpsest that underscores the multiplicity of perspectives necessary to grapple with such a vast historical trauma. The voyage, marked by brutality and resilience, echoes the Middle Passage, transforming Nsaku into a symbol of both suffering and hope.

⁴²⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey.

Nsaku's unwavering faith and commitment to his mission foreground the novel's examination of spirituality as a site of resistance. N'Sondé's poetic language, imbued with spiritual and philosophical reflections, elevates the narrative into what Glissant might describe as a poetics of relation, one that connects disparate histories into a cohesive act of remembrance.⁴²⁸

Across these texts, writing emerges as a deliberate ritual of mourning, confronting the traumatic legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and reclaiming a silenced past. Each narrative becomes a space in which African voices lament historical injustices and reclaim their rightful place in history. Through these literary acts, the authors challenge the silence, transforming their stories into powerful spaces of healing and remembrance. Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé engage deeply with the emotional and historical dimensions of loss, crafting narratives that serve as collective acts of "re-membering". This process involves piecing together fragmented histories to reconstruct a shared memory capable of addressing both personal and communal trauma. By challenging the imposed silences of colonial histories, these acts of mourning evolve into expressions of defiance and resilience. By centring African voices and experiences, the authors fulfil the duty of memory while reimagining literature as a space for historical reckoning and cultural restoration. In their hands, mourning transcends traditional boundaries, becoming a potent medium for resistance and renewal, a testament to the enduring strength of African societies in the face of historical devastation.

6.2. Mourning, Forgetting, and Re-memberment

To counter oblivion, Nsaku né Vunda clarifies the modalities for preserving the past: "Il ne restait que nos mémoires pour témoigner de ce qui s'était passé. Mais l'heure n'était pas aux souvenirs. [It was only our memories that remained to testify to what had happened. But the

⁴²⁸Glissant, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. (Orig. pub. as *Poétique de la Relation*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.)

time was not for reminiscing.]”⁴²⁹ This passage illustrates the urgency of memory in a context where forgetfulness threatens to dissolve collective history. According to Nsaku, memory is the only means of preserving the narratives of a people whose suffering and struggles could easily be erased by indifference. The statement “l’heure n’était pas aux souvenirs [It was not the time for reminiscing]”⁴³⁰ resonates as a cry of alarm, underscoring that the present demands immediate action rather than mere reflection on the past. N’Sondé examines the ramifications of this memory through the priest’s consciousness, who feels the weight of oblivion. By stating: “Les mois passés sur l’océan m’avaient plongé dans l’oubli. Dans la ville sainte, plus personne ne m’attendait [The months spent on the ocean had plunged me into oblivion. In the holy city, no one was waiting for me anymore]”⁴³¹ he highlights the consequences of the absence of memory in the construction of identity. Forgetfulness, both personal and collective, acts as an obstacle to recognising historical struggles, and N’Sondé’s characters confront the devastating effects of this amnesia. Time, as a concept, is also central to this reflection. Nsaku, having evolved from a human being into a statue, offers a unique perspective: “Le temps ne va nulle part, il ne s’arrête pas. Le présent reste un instant qui s’échappe, un point en mouvement continu. [Time goes nowhere, it doesn’t stop. The present remains a fleeting moment, a point in continuous motion.]”⁴³² This conception of time challenges the notion of linear progression, emphasising that the past, far from being over, continues to influence the present. The lives of enslaved individuals, often drowned in historical omissions, testify to the necessity of reintegrating these narratives into the fabric of collective memory.

N’Sondé situates literature within a framework of resistance against oblivion. The priest expresses an intense desire: “J’aurais aimé exister sans corps, au moins pour un instant, prendre de l’altitude ... afin qu’aucune d’elles ne se perde dans l’abîme du temps et ne disparaisse

⁴²⁹N’Sondé, Wilfried. 2018. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*. Paris: Actes Sud, 157.

⁴³⁰N’Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 157.

⁴³¹Ibid., 179.

⁴³²Ibid., 147.

dans l'oubli. [I would have liked to exist without a body, if only for a moment, to gain altitude ... so that none of them would be lost in the abyss of time and disappear into oblivion.]"⁴³³ This desire for ascension symbolises an aspiration to transcend physical limits to gather and preserve past sufferings. Ultimately, Nsaku né Vunda's journey underscores that the act of memory is intrinsically linked to human dignity. Through his words, he hopes that "quelqu'un reprendrait les mots qui avaient voulu mettre un terme à l'esclavage [Someone would take up the words that had sought to put an end to slavery]"⁴³⁴ thus reaffirming the responsibility of future generations to carry this memory. The goal of keeping in mind the horrors endured by enslaved people and ensuring their blessing in the afterlife becomes a sacred mission, a quest to restore justice and dignity to those historically silenced. N'Sondé does not merely evoke the past; he urges his readers to actively engage in preserving memory, transforming pain into narrative and silence into voice. This endeavour constitutes not only an act of resistance but also a call to action, insisting that memory is a duty that shapes identity and forges the future. By giving voice to the marble statue, the lyrical and poetic tone of Father Nsaku illuminates the scenes throughout the book with his faith and kindness. This style, reminiscent of the finest classical French literature, provides a form of expiation for the horrors endured. Through his articulate and expressive narration, N'Sondé captures the suffering of his characters and also evokes a sense of shared humanity that transcends time.

By resurrecting the historical figure of Nsaku né Vunda and allowing him to narrate life in a context marked by the denial of humanity, N'Sondé crafts a powerful testimony that speaks to the collective trauma of the enslaved. The priest, much like a messianic figure, ultimately dies at the feet of the Pope, symbolising the weight of sacrifice. His perilous journey and revelations serve to confess humanity's sins, exposing the complicity of elites and the insatiable greed of human traffickers. In this act of dying, Nsaku becomes a vessel for a new consciousness that seeks to liberate not just the individual but also the collective memory of those oppressed. His death is not an end but rather

⁴³³Ibid., 225–226.

⁴³⁴Ibid., 235.

a catalyst for awakening, urging readers to confront the past and acknowledge the injustices that have long been buried under the weight of indifference. Through Nsaku's story, N'Sondé emphasises that the act of testimony is an essential part of mourning, allowing for healing and the reclamation of dignity for those who have been silenced. This narrative not only honours the memory of the forgotten but also fosters a commitment to justice and remembrance in the face of oblivion.

In Miano's examination of memory, the transition from "mémoire oubliée" to "mémoire de l'oubli" is a critical theme that reflects the intricate relationship between personal narratives and collective history. As noted by Etoke,

Miano passe de la mémoire oubliée à la mémoire de l'oubli. La mémoire de l'oubli conjugue l'histoire intime et de l'Histoire collective. Les personnages sont confrontés aux troubles de leur conscience. [Miano moves from forgotten memory to the memory of forgetting. The memory of forgetting brings together intimate history and collective History. The characters are confronted with the turmoil of their conscience.]⁴³⁵

This highlights how "mémoire de l'oubli" intertwines intimate stories with larger historical truths, enabling Miano to confront the complexities of identity as shaped by both individual and communal experiences. The notion of "mémoire de l'oubli" implies that forgetting is an active process that affects identity formation. Miano's characters grapple with their pasts, burdened by historical traumas that resonate throughout their lives. This internal struggle reveals the "troubles de leur conscience" that emerge when personal memory collides with the broader, painful narratives of the collective. By emphasising the necessity of remembering, Miano counters the erasure of both individual and collective histories. The characters' journeys reflect a deep need to reclaim their identities and agency, acknowledging the past's influence on their present. Through "mémoire de l'oubli", Miano underscores that remembering is vital not just for personal healing but also for cultivating a collective memory that honours the experiences of those who came before. Miano's storytelling invites readers to engage with uncomfortable aspects of history. Her emphasis on the memory

⁴³⁵ Etoke, Nathalie. 2010. *Melancholia africana: L'indispensable dépassement de la condition noire*. Paris: Éditions du Cygne, 61.

of oblivion serves as a powerful reminder of the consequences of forgetting, urging a collective acknowledgement of the past.

In Alem's novel, the figure of King Adandozan emerges as a complex character whose bravery and leadership stand in stark contrast to the treachery represented by figures like Chacha and Gankpé. This juxtaposition not only highlights Adandozan's resolve against the backdrop of the slave trade but also serves to challenge and break taboos surrounding African history and leadership. Adandozan, often portrayed as a protector of his people, resists the encroachment of European powers and the devastating effects of the slave trade. His unwavering stance against the commodification of human lives represents a significant act of defiance in a context where many were willing to collaborate with foreign traders for personal gain. In contrast, Chacha embodies *filouterie* – deception and cunning often associated with opportunism, while Gankpé's betrayal further complicates the narrative, showcasing how internal divisions can undermine collective resistance. Through these contrasting figures, Alem crafts a narrative that underscores the moral complexities of survival during a time of existential threat. The bravery of King Adandozan serves as a call to remembrance, urging contemporary readers to reconsider the historical narrative that often casts African leaders in a negative light. His story emphasises the need to acknowledge the sacrifices made by those who fought against slavery and colonisation, shifting the focus from shame to honour. Adandozan's legacy, grounded in a commitment to his people, challenges the dominant narratives that seek to erase or diminish the contributions of African leaders in the fight against oppression. In doing so, Alem not only restores the memory of King Adandozan but also reframes the conversation around leadership and resistance in African history. By illuminating the bravery of Adandozan alongside the treachery of figures like Chacha and Gankpé, Alem breaks the taboos that often silence these narratives. In a world where narratives are often simplified, the text invites readers to engage more deeply with the complexities of identity, loyalty, and resistance, reminding us that the fight against oblivion is not just about remembering the past but also about shaping the future.

The use of polyphony and Bakhtinian dialogism to give voice to the victims in these novels is characterised by testimonies, typically pre-

sented in italics, that directly convey the words of the captives. In the novels of Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N'Sondé, giving voice to the victims of the slave trade transcends mere representation of the past; it becomes an aesthetic and literary act that restores the dignity of the forgotten while exposing mechanisms of oppression. Each author, through a unique narrative approach, serves as a spokesperson for these marginalised figures – whether it's the grieving and healing women in Miano's work, the betrayed and erased king in Alem's narrative, or the humanistic priest witnessing inhumanity in N'Sondé's story.

What the preceding analyses of Miano's *mémoire de l'oubli*, Alem's rehabilitation of Adandozan, and N'Sondé's resurrection of Nsaku né Vunda have demonstrated individually now demands to be read together: the three novels do not merely give voice to separate victims of the slave trade – they constitute a single, polyphonic act of mourning. Each author has chosen a figure positioned at the margins of official memory – the grieving woman, the erased king, the silenced priest – not because these figures are interchangeable archetypes, but because their convergence enacts the very re-memberment that Ngũgĩ describes as the reconstitution of a dismembered body with its spirit. Eyabe and Ebeise mourn at the level of kinship and community; Adandozan mourns at the level of sovereignty and political betrayal; Nsaku né Vunda mourns at the level of faith and civilisational encounter. Together, they cover the full range of what the transatlantic slave trade destroyed: family, state, and spirit.

What distinguishes this literary mourning from mere commemoration is its refusal to resolve. None of the three novels closes on reconciliation in any simple sense. *La Saison de l'ombre* ends in the ambiguous sanctuary of Bebayedi – a space of possible renewal, not of closure. *Esclaves* restores Adandozan's name to history but cannot undo his defeat. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* gives Nsaku a posthumous voice from inside a marble statue – the ultimate image of a memory petrified rather than set free. In this shared aesthetic of irresolution, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé signal that mourning, in the context of the slave trade, is not a stage to be completed but a permanent ethical posture – what Etoke terms the refusal to die in the face of an aesthetics of

misfortune.⁴³⁶ Literature, for these three authors, does not heal trauma so much as hold it open long enough for it to be properly seen – and, in being seen, to become the foundation for an African Renaissance that is conscious, rather than amnesiac, of what it carries.

Through these three works, the authors present a plurality of voices that, in their own way, embody memory and mourning. Whether it is the women in Miano's novels, the king in Alem's narrative, or the priest in N'Sondé's story, each carries a piece of this fractured memory, contributing to the reconstruction of a dismembered African history. Through their writing, these authors restore the dignity of the victims while transforming literature into a space of healing and resistance.

The profound capacity of storytelling to heal is particularly evident in the works of contemporary African authors such as Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé. Their narratives not only address the trauma stemming from the Atlantic slave trade but also highlight the resilience and resistance of their protagonists. Trauma theory provides a framework for understanding the healing processes within these stories, often articulated through three essential criteria for overcoming trauma: (1) establishing a safe and grounded space for individuals affected by trauma, (2) acknowledging the losses experienced by trauma victims while understanding the roots of their suffering, and (3) forging new connections that lead to a transformed sense of identity and purpose.

The compelling force of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé lies in their shared quest for wholeness – an endeavour that has been central to African struggles since the onset of the slave trade. Through their storytelling, these authors foreground the struggles of individuals and communities, ensuring that the memories of those who suffered are preserved and honoured. Miano's narratives often centre on the bravery of women who, despite the trauma they endure, seek to uncover the fates of their loved ones. In works such as *La Saison de l'ombre*, she showcases the vital roles these women play in the healing process, emphasising their strength and agency in the face of loss. Similarly, Alem's portrayal of King Adandozan reinstates this emblematic figure within the context of the African struggle against the slave trade. By documenting the tragic fate of this Dahomean leader and the revolts

⁴³⁶Ibid., 28.

of enslaved Africans, Alem reveals the untold stories of courage and resistance that emerged amidst barbaric subjugation. His narrative serves not only as a historical account but also as a poetic testament to the heroic efforts of those who dared to fight for their freedom. N'Sondé, through his character Nsaku né Vunda, breathes life and hope into the narrative of despair. His storytelling transcends the mere recounting of trauma, acting as an act of re-membering that seeks to reconstruct fragmented histories and restore dignity to those silenced by oppression. Nsaku's journey reflects a broader human experience, illuminating the collective suffering endured during the slave trade while simultaneously offering a vision of hope and resilience.

Together, the works of these three authors constitute a chorus of melancholic cries for lost memory, a reclamation of the past that is crucial for the reconstruction of African self-consciousness. Rather than dwelling solely on the culpability of African actors in the slave trade, their narratives engage with the intimate and collective experiences of capture, deportation, and enslavement. They challenge the silence surrounding these histories and confront the taboos that have long obscured the complexities of African identities.

In this context, mourning becomes a vital pathway for reintegration and healing. The observance of proper mourning rites allows individuals and communities to reclaim what has been taken from them, facilitating a process of wholeness and reconnection with their spirits. As Ngũgĩ posits, "Out of the fragments and the observance of proper mourning rites comes the wholeness of a body re-membered with itself and with its spirit". Through their powerful storytelling, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé not only document the pain of their ancestors but also pave the way for future generations to embrace their histories and identities with dignity and pride.⁴³⁷

La Saison de l'ombre opens in a profound state of mourning, where Miano paints a shadowy picture of women cloaked in grief and fear, rejected by their own communities and haunted by the voices of their disappeared sons. The march of an elderly woman over the dead bodies in a devastated village symbolises the painful yet necessary ritual

⁴³⁷Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 2009. *Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 64.

of burial, a rite of passage that honours the victims of the brutal slave trade. In this poignant scene, Miano enacts “collective mourning for the millions whose souls still cry for proper burial and accordance of proper mourning rites”.⁴³⁸ This collective grief is not merely an abstract concept; it is already a reality in places like Ouidah, where Africans and Afro-descendants participate in marches, prayers, and rituals to ensure that the martyrs of the slave trade receive the dignified passing they deserve. Through this narrative, Miano underscores the importance of acknowledging loss and engaging in mourning practices as essential steps toward healing and reclaiming identity.

These writers open new frontiers and revisit familiar themes of slavery and resistance, as well as the relationships between the African elite and the West, doing so with refreshing twists and turns. In *La Saison de l'ombre*, resistance is carried by the strength of female characters. Eyabe, the main character, embodies this resistance through her revolt and desire for freedom. From the very first pages, she stands out among the ten battered and isolated women during the interrogation, where she challenges the imposed isolation.⁴³⁹ She defies the accusatory gazes of her community and disregards the decision of the Mulongo notables. Eyabe's capacity for indignation drives her actions of resistance.

Upon learning of the cruelty inflicted by the coastal “sons of the water”, through the testimony of Mutimbo, one of the survivors of the harrowing journey to the ocean,⁴⁴⁰ she reacts with strong indignation against the injustice: “But why these abductions?” Eyabe gasps, struggling to believe her ears. “This is beyond what my mind could conceive.”⁴⁴¹ Eyabe is portrayed as a woman with a big heart and extraordinary courage. Out of love and solidarity, she seeks the missing where others have failed, a determination acknowledged by the elder Eleke, who compares her to the village's founding figure: “This woman

⁴³⁸Ibid.

⁴³⁹Achour, Christiane Chaulet. 2014. “La force du féminin.” In Delphine Tang (ed.), *L'œuvre romanesque de Léonora Miano: Fiction, mémoire et enjeux identitaires*. Paris: L'Harmattan, 20.

⁴⁴⁰Miano, Léonora. 2013. *La Saison de l'ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 131.

⁴⁴¹Ibid., 132.

is courageous, a worthy daughter of Emene, a valiant representative of Inyi ... She will march in our name." Within this narrative of capture and loss, Eyabe's solidarity, Ebeise's ritual homage to the dead, and the survival of figures such as Eyabe, Ebusi, and Ebeise gesture towards possibilities of renewal, suggesting redemptive pathways for an Africa still marked by both voluntary and imposed amnesia.

The aesthetic of resistance in the king's speech in *Esclaves* encapsulates a profound opposition to the deportation of his people. By intertwining personal grief with collective action, the king articulates a vision of resilience that not only mourns the past but also actively seeks to reshape the future. This act of verbal defiance against the slave trade illustrates a powerful narrative of resistance that honours the agency and dignity of those who have been silenced. The king's speech to the slave traders, first encountered in Chapter 4 as a narratological demonstration of Alem's omniscient counter-historical narrator, returns here in a different analytical frame. Where its earlier reading foregrounded the text's historiographic function, its relevance to the aesthetics of resistance becomes apparent only when read alongside the novel's closing movement. "Cela fait vingt et un ans [...] qu'il essaye d'expliquer aux Portugais de fermer le fort négrier [It has been twenty-one years [...] that he has tried to explain to the Portuguese to close the slave fort]:⁴⁴² the temporal marker transforms what might otherwise read as individual frustration into a collective wound. The king's speech is not a moment of catharsis but of accumulation: every repetition of the failed demand inscribes the resistance deeper into the novel's texture, until refusal itself becomes the primary form of testimony. This is the aesthetic of resistance that Alem's novel ultimately proposes, not heroic rupture but the unglamorous, iterative act of bearing witness to an injustice that neither yields nor disappears.

The speech further critiques the superficial allure of "les artifices et les colifichets de la civilisation des Blancs [the artifices and trinkets of the civilisation of the Whites]", highlighting how these trivial goods cannot compensate for the profound loss of identity and humanity. This juxtaposition elevates the king's resistance from mere verbal opposition to a philosophical rejection of the values imposed by the

⁴⁴² Alem, Kangni. 2009. *Esclaves*. Paris: JC Lattès, 55.

colonisers. By denouncing the notion that slavery benefits his people or fosters development, the king positions himself as both a defender of his culture and a critic of colonial exploitation. The rhetorical structure of the speech, marked by direct appeals and vivid imagery, culminates in a call to action: “propose à tous de l’aider à convaincre les autorités. [proposes to everyone to help him convince the authorities.]” This plea signifies a mobilisation of agency, transforming grief into a unified front against oppression. The king’s insistence on the shared environmental conditions of “les terres du Brésil et celles des Amériques [the lands of Brazil and those of the Americas]” serves to emphasise a sense of belonging and mutual responsibility, calling for a collaborative effort to dismantle the systems that perpetuate suffering.

In the examination of resilience in the novels of slavery, spiritual resistance aboard slave ships emerges as a profound theme. The chapter detailing the tumultuous journey of Don Francisco illustrates this resistance through the character of Miguel, an enslaved man who vows to “respond with a greater evil” to the suffering inflicted by his captors. His act of bathing, likened to a “bain lustral [purification bath]”, symbolises a spiritual preparation, while his dance – a call to the gods – unites the enslaved individuals, fostering a collective fervour. The moment when several slaves “entered into a trance, their eyes rolled back”, signifies their shared defiance and unity in the face of oppression.⁴⁴³ The *révolte des Malès* [“revolt of the Malès”] serves as a central symbol of resistance and healing, allowing literature to express the potential for recovery. When Sule returns to Agoué, he feels as though he never left: “Il s’agenouilla et d’un geste hésitant prit dans la main une poignée de la terre que ses pieds venaient de fouler. [He knelt down and, with a hesitant gesture, took a handful of the earth that his feet had just touched.]”⁴⁴⁴ This moment of reconnection with the land evokes deep aesthetic and symbolic resonance, emphasising the significance of home and origin in the process of healing.

N’Sondé’s reflections on the nature of revolt emphasise that true insurrections often arise when individuals realise they have nothing left to lose. The role of women and children in such uprisings is crucial, as

⁴⁴³Ibid., 135–136.

⁴⁴⁴Ibid., 238.

they often possess greater mobility and the ability to orchestrate resistance. Nsaku né Vunda poignantly describes this liberating struggle: “La révolte naquit d’abord au creux des poitrines ... et finit par irradier les yeux en feu. [The revolt first arose in the depths of the chest ... and eventually radiated from the eyes aflame.]”⁴⁴⁵ This imagery renders revolt as an embodied and affective force, emerging internally before manifesting as collective action.

The theme of re-membling is further encapsulated in Sulé’s re-naming as Sulé Djibril, symbolising a rejection of the imposed and dehumanising identity of “Miguel”. This rebirth serves as a powerful act of reclaiming his heritage and seeking to “retrouver la terre de ses origines [to find one’s ancestral land]”. Through this journey, the act of re-membling becomes a crucial pathway toward healing and the reclamation of identity. These narratives illustrate the complex dynamic of resilience and re-membling, emphasising how the physical and spiritual acts of resistance serve not only as means of survival but also as crucial steps toward healing and reclaiming dignity within the historical context of slavery. The collective memory forged in these moments of struggle stands as a testament to the enduring spirit of those who fought against their oppression, underscoring the power of storytelling in the quest for identity and liberation.

6.3. Aesthetic and Language of Mourning

Ngũgĩ’s examination of memory and language reveals a deep connection between the two, asserting that “Memory and consciousness are inseparable. But language is the means of memory”.⁴⁴⁶ This concept is particularly relevant in the context of mourning, where the act of remembering serves as a vital tool for confronting trauma. Mourning acknowledges loss, enabling both individuals and communities to purge lingering negative effects. Ngũgĩ elaborates that mourning transcends simple grief; it represents a “sombre celebration of a rite of pas-

⁴⁴⁵N’Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 111.

⁴⁴⁶Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New*, 40.

sage in the journey of the trinity”.⁴⁴⁷ In this sense, mourning operates as both commemoration and transformation, honouring ancestors while re-establishing connections between past and present, a process essential for continuity and renewal.

The reconnection with the past is further materialised through traditions and ancestral beliefs, as seen in the incorporation of African languages in literary texts. Alem emphasises the necessity of local languages, while N’Sondé employs legend and epistolary poetry to create a documentary style that enhances the narrative’s emotional depth.

Miano’s work, as noted by Ndour, positions the language of the novel within a deterritorialised perspective, blending Douala words and expressions into French to create a unique heterotopia. This “natural language”, ritualised through poetic recitation, embodies a performative quality that evokes the animist cosmogony of Africa, as seen in references to maloba and Nyambe.⁴⁴⁸ Miano’s use of italics to emphasise key character dialogues reinforces the polyphonic nature of the narrative, revealing an unfinished language that is always in motion and opening new possibilities for narrative expression.⁴⁴⁹

N’Sondé’s poetic style, characterised by intricate imagery and metaphor, further illustrates how language can establish a new aesthetic cartography. Through this lens, a different existential methodology emerges, signifying a new interpretation of African history that underscores the urgency for a collective memory and an “identity of alterity”. The metaphor of shadow, particularly in a seasonal context, symbolises the clan’s movement toward a more harmonious future. The intersection of shadow and light becomes a metaphorical frontier where new existential territories are reconstituted: “L’accoucheuse s’arrête à l’endroit exact où le jour rencontre la nuit. [The midwife stops at the exact place where day meets night.]”⁴⁵⁰ In N’Sondé’s reflections, the nostalgia for one’s homeland transforms into a vibrant memory: “Le souvenir de ma terre natale restait vif, une tendre mélancolie, mais

⁴⁴⁷Ibid., 57.

⁴⁴⁸Ndour, Emmanuel Mbégane. 2015. “La Saison de l’ombre de Léonora Miano: «ré-citation» d’une Afropéenne.” *Études Littéraires* 46, no. 1: 95-104, 96.

⁴⁴⁹Ibid., 97.

⁴⁵⁰Miano, Léonora. 2013. *La Saison de l’ombre*. Paris: Grasset, 20.

il ne fut plus une déchirure. [The memory of my homeland remained vivid, a tender melancholy, but it was no longer a wound.]⁴⁵¹ This transition from nostalgia to appreciation illustrates how experiences, even those perceived as exilic, contribute to personal growth and understanding. Through encounters with virtuous individuals, the narrator discovers the warmth and joy of human connection, echoing the sentiment that love transcends earthly existence, creating a sublime experience that endures beyond life itself. The aesthetic of mourning in these literary works is related to language, memory, and identity. The authors use local languages and poetic expressions to facilitate a profound examination of grief, resistance, and healing. This deepens the narrative, allowing for a re-membering of the past that fosters resilience and a collective identity rooted in shared experiences and ancestral connections.

N'Sondé employs a therapeutic poesis that transforms pain, loss, and exile into opportunities for emotional healing. Language in the text does not merely convey suffering; it actively reworks and reframes it, rendering the narrative itself a process of emotional redemption. The narrator reflects on the change in his feelings towards his homeland. The shift from “une déchirure [a tear]” to “une tendre mélancolie [tender melancholy]” signifies a transition from traumatic pain to a more manageable, bittersweet emotion. This transformation demonstrates how memory, when revisited with a new perspective, can be reframed from a source of suffering into an opportunity for healing. Movement forward is central to this therapeutic approach. The narrator contrasts forward motion with the stagnation of retreat into nostalgia, implying that growth and emotional healing come from embracing change and new experiences rather than being trapped in the past. This reframing of exile as the most extraordinary of adventures illustrates how N'Sondé uses language to transform trauma into a redemptive journey. Human connection further plays a vital role in the healing process. The memory of Thérèse, symbolising tenderness and compassion, offers emotional solace and teaches the narrator about the warmth of shared love. This connection transcends physical ab-

⁴⁵¹ N'Sondé, Wilfried. 2018. *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*. Paris: Actes Sud, 268.

sence, providing comfort and spiritual growth. Through these poetic strategies, N'Sondé not only conveys pain but also enacts emotional and spiritual healing, demonstrating the transformative power of language.

Across the slave trade trauma novels under study, spirituality emerges as a key tool for resilience, resistance, and healing. In *Esclaves*, *La Saison de l'ombre*, and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, religion and spiritual practices offer characters a means to cope with the trauma of slavery. Vodun, Islam, and Christianity not only sustain individuals in conditions of extreme violence but also provide pathways for personal and collective rebirth. These narratives demonstrate how spiritual practice becomes a foundation for resistance and resilience, a means of processing grief, and a tool of reconstructing consciousness in the aftermath of historical devastation.

In Alem's *Esclaves*, the protagonist's journey toward resilience and strength is rooted in their encounter with spiritual traditions, particularly Vodun and Islam. These faiths become central to their capacity to endure and resist the dehumanising experience of slavery. Alem's narrative positions Islam as a transformative force, particularly through the character Djibril Sule, who introduces Miguel to a new religion that ultimately becomes the foundation for revolt. The story of the *Révolte des Malês* in Salvador da Bahia underscores the importance of spirituality as both a tool for resistance and a means of survival. By revisiting this forgotten episode, Alem not only restores the memory of the enslaved in the Americas but also highlights how spirituality and religion serve as vital elements in the collective and individual rebirth of those subjected to the horrors of slavery. Miguel, originally a Vodun priest, undergoes a personal rebirth through his conversion to Islam, which gives him access to reading and writing in Arabic and Portuguese, the language of the oppressor. The novel's portrayal of the *Révolte des Malês* emphasises religion's role in the liberation struggles of Black people in the Americas, mirroring historical examples like Malcolm X's embrace of Islam as a path to empowerment and resistance.

In Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*, African ancestral beliefs and philosophical perspectives provide a moral and ideological framework that serves as a therapeutic response to trauma. The oral traditions of the

Mulongo people, their spiritual values, and the sayings of wisdom form the foundation of their resilience. The rejection of suicide as a means of escape is a powerful affirmation of life, even in the face of unimaginable suffering. Ebeise asserts: "La vie est la première obligation. [Life is the foremost obligation.]"⁴⁵² This is a guiding principle of the Mulongo that several members of the clan, even in captivity, uphold. They forbid themselves from causing death, thus expressing the high value that life represents.

N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* is deeply imbued with themes of religion and spirituality, centred on the figure of Nsaku né Vunda, who embodies both Bakongo spirituality and Christian belief. As he traverses a world marred by the slave trade, Nsaku's spiritual convictions offer him a pathway to reclaim his humanity amidst the atrocities he witnesses. His journey from the Congo to the Vatican becomes a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. Nsaku's faith sustains him and also enables him to bear witness to the brutality of the slave trade, providing a voice for the enslaved, the mocked and the wretched of all continents and races. Through his faith, he is able to perceive humanity within structures of violence, transcending the suffering of the body through a reorientation towards the spiritual and the eternal. His challenge to the Vatican, where he critiques its complicity in the slave trade, becomes a space for purging the trauma inflicted by such violence. In bridging the divides between enslaved, the European ship workers, and the marginalised Jews in the Vatican, Nsaku articulates a vision of humanity that resists the fragmentations imposed by the slave trade. His journey symbolises a call to recognise and celebrate the dignity of human life despite the horrors inflicted by this historical atrocity. In each of these narratives, literature functions as a cathartic medium through which trauma is acknowledged, processed, and ultimately transcended, using spirituality as a tool for healing and renewal.

Vodun emerges as a central element in shaping the imagery and symbolism of the slave trade within Alem's novel. The protagonist, proficient in Vodun rituals, embodies spirituality and resistance against oppression. Alem adeptly intertwines the commemoration of slavery

⁴⁵² Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 207.

with Vodun worship, mirroring present-day Ouidah. Throughout the narrative, spaces historically associated with slavery bear witness to the wrath of Vodun deities, depicting memory as a curse wielded by divine powers. This is poignantly depicted in the prologue through the curse cast upon the *James Matthew* by an unnamed Vodun priest. Despite its proclamation in 1818, the curse endures, culminating in the tragic fate of the ship off the coast of Australia twenty-three years later.

Pendant la traversée, dit-on, un des esclaves que l'on suppose être un prêtre d'une religion obscure nommé Vodun, aurait provoqué la furie des éléments et jeté un sort au bateau. Les marins l'auraient entendu se lamenter ou chanter toute une nuit dans la cale, puis le ciel se serait couvert avant que ne surgisse de l'océan un promontoire rocheux qui abîma salement la coque du navire. L'homme aurait ensuite été déporté au Brésil, mais sa malédiction pèserait encore sur le *James Matthew*. [During the crossing, it is said, one of the slaves, believed to be a priest of an obscure religion called Vodun, would have provoked the fury of the elements and cast a spell on the ship. The sailors would have heard him lamenting or singing all night in the hold, then the sky would have darkened before a rocky promontory rose from the ocean and badly damaged the hull of the ship. The man was later deported to Brazil, but his curse would still weigh on the *James Matthew*.]⁴⁵³

The narrative underscores the significant influence of Vodun, particularly through the curse cast upon the *James Matthew*, highlighting its symbolic power. However, despite igniting sparks of resistance, Vodun ultimately struggles to fully overcome the tragedy of the slave trade, as the Vodun master's powers frequently face formidable obstacles. This dynamic reflects the intricate complexities inherent in historical struggles against oppression.

The integration of Vodun aesthetics and motifs in the commemoration of the slave trade in Africa deepens Alem's novel with profound cultural depth and authenticity. By seamlessly weaving Vodun into the narrative fabric, Alem not only underscores the spiritual dimensions of resistance against oppression but also amplifies the voices of marginalised historical perspectives often overlooked in mainstream discourse. Through the portrayal of Vodun rituals and the invocation of divine powers, the novel humanises enslaved individuals, depicting them not merely as victims of exploitation but as agents of spiritual defiance and resilience. By intertwining Vodun with the historical narrative, Alem

⁴⁵³ Alem, *Esclaves*, 17.

highlights the enduring legacy of African cultural traditions and their central role in shaping collective memory. This approach challenges conventional narratives that tend to portray Africans solely as passive victims of slavery, instead emphasising their agency and cultural heritage in the face of adversity. Thus, the use of Vodun aesthetics and motifs offers a complex perspective on the complexities of historical struggles against oppression.

Religion emerges as a central narrative element, serving as a catalyst for resistance and liberation among the enslaved individuals. Islam is portrayed as a vehicle for culture and emancipation, offering characters a path to dignity and freedom. The conversion of the slave Miguel into Sulé Djibril symbolises the restoration of identity and human dignity through a new religious affiliation. The interactions between Miguel and Sulé depict the process of initiation into Islam, as well as the transmission of linguistic knowledge enabling integration into the Muslim community and participation in resistance movements like the Malè revolt. The author draws parallels between Islam and other Black liberation movements, such as those led by Malcolm X and the Black Panthers, underscoring the significance of religion in the struggle against slavery and oppression. By examining Islam's role in these resistance movements, Alem provides readers with fresh perspectives on understanding the history of the slave trade and reshapes the collective imagination surrounding this dark period in history.

In N'Sondé's *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, spirituality and religion take centre stage, illuminating the deep connection between our physical existence and the possibility of spiritual liberation. The imagery of the priest receiving giant wings to soar over the earth symbolises a yearning to cover the world in beauty, thereby washing away its inherent ugliness. This aspiration is closely tied to the idea that death is not just an ending; rather, it represents a transformative journey from the depths of despair to a more ideal existence. The narrative highlights the priest's observations as he watches young Jewish boys racing in front of his palace, contrasting their vitality with his own physical decline. His eventual disappearance signifies a return to a universal existence, where body, spirit, and soul are intricately linked. N'Sondé suggests that as physical bodies fade, our essence – the spirit and soul – can detach from the organic matter, transcending the limi-

tations of mere existence. The arrival of ancient spirits reinforces the notion of continuity beyond physical life, inviting a sense of connection that spans time.⁴⁵⁴ This reveals that it is indeed possible to separate these three dimensions of being: one can be physically enslaved while still possessing a free spirit. In death, the body may decompose, yet the spirit and soul might linger, reflecting a resilience that outlasts suffering. The priest's temporary return to life during the narrative allows him to share his experiences, expressing a sense of being caught between the physical realm and the spiritual beyond. When he states, "Dom Antonio Manuel vivait encore, j'existais en sursis [Dom Antonio Manuel was still alive, I was existing on borrowed time]",⁴⁵⁵ we feel his poignant acknowledgement of his transient state, trapped within flesh and emotion while yearning for liberation to the invisible spaces beyond. This contemplation leads to a blending of life and death into two sides of the same coin. The priest's mission – to convey the brutal stories of enslaved individuals to the Pope – underscores the urgency of his purpose. Even as his physical form weakens, his voice remains crucial for sharing these vital truths.

Through this lens, N'Sondé powerfully illustrates that the body, though fragile, is not just a vessel; it actively participates in the struggle for liberation. The priest's goal is to ensure that the horrors of the inhumane slave trade are recognised and remembered. This intertwining of body, spirit, and narrative not only critiques slavery but also portrays death as a potential liberation, where the essence of one's being can transcend suffering and injustice.

The process of mourning emerges as a powerful pathway to symbolic healing for both characters and their communities in the works of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé. These authors employ narratives of grief not just to examine the deep suffering experienced by their characters, but also to propose visions of healing and resilience. Through their stories, characters undergo mourning processes that reaffirm their identities and cultural legacies. By confronting the horrors of their past and honouring the victims of the slave trade, the novels present a form of healing that is both personal and collective. As Ngũgĩ articulates,

⁴⁵⁴N'Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 202.

⁴⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 202.

"Mourning, then, is a somber celebration of a rite of passage in the journey of the trinity, but it is also a memory, a re-membling of the ancestors, an honouring of the heritage they have left to the living".⁴⁵⁶ This perspective highlights how mourning can facilitate closure while simultaneously opening avenues for new relationships with existence. The importance of honouring the dead is echoed throughout the narratives. For example, in *La Saison de l'ombre*, the matron's mourning emphasises the necessity of grieving: "La femme dit qu'il faut pleurer les morts. [The woman says that the dead must be mourned.]"⁴⁵⁷ That imperative underscores the idea that honouring those who have passed is not merely an emotional act but a vital cultural obligation. The text further emphasises this with the reflection that "Ne pas accomplir les rites est une faute. Comme une embûche laissée sur le passage. [Failing to perform the rites is a fault. Like a trap left in someone's path.]"⁴⁵⁸ Here, performing mourning rituals is depicted as crucial to maintaining communal integrity.

Similarly, in *Esclaves*, the protagonist's commitment to honour the deceased reflects this cultural imperative: "Il s'était promis d'aller sur sa tombe se recueillir, demander pardon et réciter des sourates pour le repos de son âme. [He had promised himself to go to his tomb, to collect himself, ask forgiveness and recite suras for the repose of his soul.]"⁴⁵⁹ This act of remembrance becomes a form of personal redemption, linking the individual's healing to broader cultural practices. Alem illustrates the profound connections between memory and ritual through the character who yearns to visit the grave of his fallen king, Adandozan. This desire to pay homage illustrates the deep ties between personal mourning and collective remembrance. Returning to one's roots becomes a significant part of the healing process, as seen when Miguel, now Sule, arrives back at his homeland. He instinctively engages in ancient mourning practices: "Instinctivement, il défit ses sandales, demanda de la cendre, et s'en badigeonna le visage en signe de deuil. [Instinctively, he took off his sandals, asked for ashes, and

⁴⁵⁶ Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New*, 57–58.

⁴⁵⁷ Miano, *La Saison de l'ombre*, 228.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 128–129.

⁴⁵⁹ Alem, *Esclaves*, 232.

daubed his face with them as a sign of mourning.]”⁴⁶⁰ This ritual serves to honour the past and reconnects him with his identity as a ritual master.

The homage paid to the victims is poignant and expansive. N’Sondé encapsulates this in a deeply emotional passage: “Dans mes yeux coulèrent les larmes de Linda, celles de son fils vendu par son père, et les derniers sanglots de Simon Dansiger. [In my eyes flowed the tears of Linda, those of her son sold by his father, and the last sobs of Simon Dansiger.]”⁴⁶¹ Here, the narrator’s tears symbolise a collective mourning that embraces not only personal grief but also the shared suffering of the community. The poetic tone N’Sondé employs as he reflects on these losses amplifies the emotional weight of his narrative, emphasising the enduring power of memory.

Through these mourning rituals, Miano, Alem, and N’Sondé craft a narrative that underscores the importance of memory and identity in the healing process. Their novels advocate for resilience, inviting readers to recognise the healing potential that lies within the collective act of remembering and honouring those who have suffered. By weaving personal and communal grief together, these authors highlight how mourning can become a transformative act, paving the way for renewal and hope in the face of historical trauma.

The conclusion of Miano’s novel presents a hopeful vision with the protagonists’ arrival in Bebayedi. This land symbolises rebirth, where the memories of ancestors intertwine with the lives of the living to create a new narrative. Miano evokes a sense of communion and belonging, emphasising that memory must be both active and creative to alleviate present sufferings.

Bebayedi, described as “le pays que se sont donné ceux qui ont échappé à la capture [the land given to themselves by those who escaped capture]”⁴⁶² is a lake city of stilted homes that serves as a refuge for the survivors of capture. This imagined space embodies a reconstructed Africa and also aligns with Édouard Glissant’s concept of the “tout-monde”, reflecting demographic, linguistic, and cultural diver-

⁴⁶⁰ Alem, *Esclaves*, 239.

⁴⁶¹ N’Sondé, *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, 267.

⁴⁶² Miano, Léonora. 2016. *L’Impératif transgressif*. Paris: L’Arche, 226.

sity without hierarchy. In this democratic village, everyone plays a role in maintaining harmony. Miano writes, “Ici les gens n’ont pas de mémoire commune. Leur clan n’a ni fondateur ni ancêtres tutélaires. [Here, the people have no common memory. Their clan has neither a founder nor ancestral guardians.]”⁴⁶³ This passage highlights the community’s unique identity, built from individual contributions of totems, beliefs, and healing practices, coalescing into a shared spirituality.

In Bebayedí, hope and refuge are found through the embrace of cultural diversity. Spiritual practices – songs, rituals, and ceremonies – allow the living to mourn their losses, facilitating a connection to the ancestral realm. The burial of Mutimbo, the spiritual leader, becomes a defining moment, embodying the therapeutic role of spirituality in navigating grief. The matron’s final words, filled with hope for the future, further illustrate how these rituals not only honour the dead but also ensure cultural continuity.

Through Bebayedí, Miano crafts a narrative that transforms trauma into a foundation for a vibrant community. It is here that the past is acknowledged, and a new life is envisioned, allowing the characters – and by extension, the readers – to find solace in the resilience of culture and the power of collective memory.

Mourning, within this framework, serves as a vital process of acknowledging and accepting trauma, particularly the profound trauma associated with death. As Ngũgĩ observes, “To mourn is to acknowledge the loss, to purge oneself of the negative effects of trauma.”⁴⁶⁴ This act of mourning, whether experienced individually or collectively, allows individuals and communities to confront their grief and begin to heal. The matron’s poignant last words, “Sachons accueillir le jour lorsqu’il se présente. La nuit aussi [Let us know how to welcome the day when it comes. And the night too]”⁴⁶⁵ encapsulate this duality of experience. She encourages acceptance of both light and darkness, suggesting that mourning involves embracing the full spectrum of emotions associated with loss.

⁴⁶³ Miano, *La Saison de l’ombre*, 131.

⁴⁶⁴ Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New*, 57.

⁴⁶⁵ Miano, *La Saison de l’ombre*, 229.

Mourning also functions as a powerful catalyst for creativity and resilience. The ancestors are not merely reminders of the past; they represent a living legacy that calls for innovation and survival. Miano emphasises this idea: “Ils ont conçu un monde. Tel est leur legs le plus précieux: l’obligation d’inventer pour survivre. [They conceived a world. This is their most precious legacy: the duty to invent in order to survive.]”⁴⁶⁶ This perspective shifts mourning from a state of grief to a proactive engagement with the possibilities of life, urging the living to honour the memories of those who have passed by forging new paths.

In this light, the act of dying with dignity becomes intertwined with the potential for resurrection, not just in a spiritual sense but also in the cultural and communal spheres. Through mourning, the characters in Miano’s narrative are invited to resurrect their identities, create new futures, and continue the legacies of their ancestors. This process transforms grief into a source of strength and inspiration, fostering a communal resilience that speaks to the enduring power of memory and identity.

Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N’Sondé each engage with these themes in their works, creating narratives that serve as acts of re-membering. Miano stages powerful stories of brave women who, in the face of trauma, seek to uncover the fates of their loved ones. These women’s journeys become emblematic of a broader quest for healing and truth. Miano’s portrayal of these women’s resilience reflects Ngũgĩ’s emphasis on the importance of memory in mourning. Through their struggles, these characters not only confront their personal losses but also engage in the collective act of re-membering the past. In a similar vein, Alem utilises the figure of King Adandozan to restore an emblematic symbol of African resistance against the slave trade. Adandozan’s narrative reflects the larger struggle against oppression, while Alem’s documentation and poeticisation of the revolt of the Malès unearths the courageous stories of enslaved Africans who fought against barbaric subjugation. By highlighting these acts of resistance, Alem transforms forgotten histories into powerful narratives of reclamation and hope, aligning with Ngũgĩ’s assertion that mourning can pave the way for reconstitution.

⁴⁶⁶Ibid., 228.

N'Sondé's refiguration of Nsaku né Vunda provides another compelling example of re-membering. By giving voice to a silenced historical figure, N'Sondé breathes life into narratives steeped in despair. Nsaku's story embodies the essence of human resilience and defiance in the face of adversity. N'Sondé's work transcends mere narration of trauma, emerging as a testament to the enduring spirit of those who fought for their dignity amidst unimaginable suffering. Through their creative writing, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé grapple with the fragmented history of Africa, assembling the scattered pieces into a cohesive narrative that challenges the shame and guilt surrounding the memories of slavery and colonialism. These authors confront the collective crypt that has silenced the past, advocating for the remembrance of those who suffered and died without proper mourning. They illuminate the importance of acknowledging the legacy of trauma, asserting that this acknowledgement is vital for healing and reconstituting African identity.

These texts contribute to a broader intellectual and cultural dialogue on the necessity of mourning as a pathway to re-integration and healing. Ngũgĩ articulates that neglecting the dead creates a "dislocation of the national psyche".⁴⁶⁷ Without addressing the traumas of the past, there can be no healing or wholeness. Mourning becomes an act of reclamation, allowing communities to confront their histories and the pain associated with them. As Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé weave their narratives, they create a space for collective mourning – a necessary step toward reconciling Africa with itself. These literary works stand as melancholic cries for the lost memory and the urgency of reclaiming a past that has been obscured by silence and complicity. By doing so, they challenge the amnesia that has characterised postcolonial discourse, calling for a renewed commitment to honour the memories of those who suffered.

In conclusion, Ngũgĩ's examination of mourning in *Something Torn and New* resonates deeply within the works of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé. Together, they illuminate the imperative of mourning as a vital step toward healing and restoration in postcolonial Africa. Their narratives embody the act of re-membering – bringing forth the frag-

⁴⁶⁷Ngũgĩ, *Something Torn and New*, 61.

mented pieces of history, allowing for the acknowledgement of loss, and creating pathways to reconstitute a collective identity. As Africa grapples with its painful past, these authors remind us that mourning is not merely an act of grief but a powerful reclamation of memory that can facilitate healing, unity, and the possibility of a renewed future. Through their sustained examinations of mourning, memory, and identity, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé illustrate how literature functions as both a site of resistance and a medium for healing. By engaging with the historical trauma of the slave trade, these authors not only honour the memories of the lost but also contribute to the ongoing project of African renaissance. Their narratives affirm that mourning, when coupled with the act of re-membering, can transcend the limitations of loss, transforming historical wounds into sources of resilience and renewal. This dynamic relationship of grief and hope underscores the power of literature to shape collective identities and envision transformative possibilities.

7. Conclusion: Towards the Emergence of a Francophone African Slave Trade Novel

This book embarked on an ambitious examination of the narrative and aesthetic strategies employed by three contemporary Francophone African authors – Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N’Sondé – to reimagine and engage with the traumatic legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. The works in question, *La Saison de l’ombre* (2013), *Esclaves* (2009), and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* (2018), do not merely revisit this historical trauma but reconstruct it through a complex conjunction of historiopoetic techniques, polyphonic narratives, and aesthetic innovations. By situating these novels within the broader context of African literary traditions and memory studies, this study illuminates their unique contributions to Francophone literature and the ongoing dialogue about Africa’s past and its ramifications for contemporary identity and culture.

The central inquiries guiding this study sought to understand how these novels serve as both “treatises on history” and “reflections of trauma” (traumatomimesis). By addressing these dual functions, the research unveiled the mechanisms through which literature mediates the cultural memory of slavery, challenges dominant historical narratives, and facilitates a process of mourning and healing. The overarching framework combined postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and historiopoetic analysis, allowing for a precise examination of how these texts reconstitute the fragmented and silenced narratives of the slave trade.

Across the six chapters of this book, the analysis has demonstrated that Miano, Alem, and N’Sondé engage the transatlantic slave trade not as a fixed historical object but as an open and unfinished wound, one that demands a mode of literary response distinct from both conventional historiography and the dominant frameworks of Western trauma theory. That response has been theorised throughout this study as traumatomimesis: a formal and aesthetic practice in which the text’s own fragmentation, polyphony, and resistance to resolution perform the work of a trauma that cannot be adequately contained in a single narrative voice or a stable historical account. The historiopoetic structures through which these three novels are organised, the

omniscient but ethically constrained narrator of *Esclaves*, the autobiographical pact of *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents*, the investigative narrative of *La Saison de l'ombre*, are not merely different formal choices but constitute different answers to the same question: what does it mean to bear witness, in literary form, to a historical violence whose victims were systematically denied the capacity to speak?

What this study has also sought to establish is that these novels participate in a specifically African critical conversation, one that cannot be read as simply applying Western trauma frameworks to a postcolonial object. Mbembe's diagnosis of the persistent silence surrounding the slave trade in Francophone African creative production, invoked at the study's outset, is not merely a contextualising claim but a structural condition that shapes the novels themselves. The silences within these narratives, the women who cannot find their missing, the king whose demands go unanswered for twenty-one years, the priest whose name history has reduced to a colour, are not failures of literary imagination but formal responses to the archive's own silences. In this sense, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé practise what might be understood as an African re-membering in Ngũgĩ's sense, a reconstruction that is also a resistance, a literary act of cultural and historical reconstitution that transforms mourning from a terminal state into a generative one.

The broader stakes of this argument concern the future of postcolonial trauma studies as a field. By situating these novels within an African literary tradition that has its own memorial protocols, ritual practices, and philosophical frameworks for processing historical loss, rather than subordinating them to a Eurocentric trauma theory that privileges individual psychic injury over collective cultural wound, his thesis proposes that the field must reckon with the specificity of what Etoke calls *melancholia africana*, that is the capacity of grief, when properly inhabited rather than avoided, to produce not paralysis but renaissance. The three works examined here are not, in the end, novels about slavery; they are novels about what it means to begin, belatedly but deliberately, to mourn, and in mourning, to reconstruct.

Emerging from the analysis of the three novels is what might cautiously be termed the "Francophone African slave trade novel," characterised by key elements that distinguish it from other forms of

historical narration: a profound historiopoetic engagement, a sensitive examination of trauma, complex narrative polyphony, strong symbolic aesthetics, a decolonial ambition, and a commitment to African self-awareness. While there are clear thematic and stylistic similarities between Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé, there are also significant differences in their approaches. Miano's fragmented polyphony, Alem's historical fresco and political intrigue, and N'Sondé's introspective and ethically inflected narration suggest that the Francophone African slave trade novel is not a monolithic genre but rather a diverse and evolving literary form driven by a commonality to confront the legacies of slavery and examine the complexities of this traumatic history. These novels share a commitment to a redemptive transfiguration of the memory of the slave trade. Whether through polyphony, historical reconstruction, or personal history, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé seek not only to document the trauma of the past but also to create a space for healing and reconciliation. In this sense, their work can be seen as part of a broader movement within African literature that grapples with the legacies of colonialism, the slave trade, and the postcolonial present.

These novels do not merely recount historical facts; they engage in a constant dialogue between rigorous historical research and creative freedom. The authors, drawing on historical sources and archives, allow themselves the freedom to imagine, fill in silences, and reconstruct the lives and experiences of those silenced by official history. As Alem highlights in the preface to his novel *Esclaves*, his approach is, above all, aesthetic, guided by the desire to create a work of art that transcends the mere restitution of facts. This creative liberty enables the authors to bring historical figures to life, examine their motivations, fears, and aspirations, and reveal the contradictions inherent in dominant discourses on slavery.

Historiopoesis, as a theoretical concept, enables an analysis of how these novels revisit the past and reconstruct memory. The authors anchor their narratives in factual reality by drawing on historical sources, archives, and testimonies. The *treatise on history* dimension is also evident in the depiction of historical figures, the integration of dates and real events, and the reconstruction of places and sociocultural practices of the time. This commitment to accurately portray the histori-

cal context lends the narratives a didactic and informative dimension. Simultaneously, traumatomimesis unfolds in the way these novels represent the subjective experience of trauma. Narrative fragmentation, the use of flashbacks, changes in points of view, and the examination of characters' psyches convey the psychological and emotional impact of the trade. The inexpressible suffering is articulated through stylistic devices such as metaphor, symbolism, and allegory. The combination of historiopoesis and traumatomimesis allows the authors to transcend the mere restitution of the past to examine the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of the trauma of the trade. Writing becomes an act of memory and testimony, giving voice to victims and interrogating the impact of the past on the present.

The three novels offer a critical rereading of the past, highlighting aspects often overlooked by traditional historiography. They engage in a deconstruction of colonial narratives and restitution of a more complex vision of the history of the slave trade. As examples of traumatomimesis, these novels contribute to a deeper understanding of the psychological mechanisms and aftereffects of trauma. They reveal how traumatic memory is inscribed in bodies and minds and how it continues to haunt individuals and communities, even centuries later.

The novels of Alem, N'Sondé, and Miano move away from linear and chronological narration to embrace the complexity of traumatic memory. They weave a narrative mosaic where different temporalities, voices, and perspectives intersect, creating a layered effect that reflects the fragmentation inherent in the experience of the trade.

One of the most striking techniques across these novels is the deployment of fragmented and non-linear narratives. Shattered chronologies, punctuated by flashbacks, ellipses, and prolepses, convey the difficulty of reconstructing a past marked by violence and oblivion. Narrative polyphony is another crucial element of these works. The authors give voice to many characters, offering a varied vision of the transatlantic slave trade. The integration of African orality lends the narratives a poetic and symbolic dimension while anchoring the memory within a rich and heterogeneous cultural heritage. These oral elements function as counter-narratives that resist oblivion and the domination of colonial accounts.

The authors further deploy innovative stylistic devices to transcend the limits of language and express the unspeakable. Metaphor, symbolism, allegory, and prosopopoeia are tools used to represent the horror of the trade without falling into the trap of misery or voyeurism. For instance, Miano employs the metaphor of “shadow” to evoke the collective trauma haunting African communities.

Historiopoesis, as a hybrid mode of writing, combines historical rigour with creative freedom. The authors draw on documentary sources, archival materials, and testimonies while allowing themselves narrative inventions and reinterpretations of the past. This freedom is essential for bringing forgotten events and characters to life and for offering an alternative vision of history. A key aspect of this historiopoetic approach is the notion of “intertextuality” and the transgressive use of historical figures and events. The novels incorporate elements of history in ways that do not seek to simply recreate the past, but instead, they challenge conventional historical narratives. In doing so, these authors allow for the emergence of new identities and histories, engaging with the past to reclaim what was lost. By confronting the pain of enslavement, they offer the possibility of healing, even as they remain acutely aware of the impossibility of fully reclaiming the past. These narratives show that the African historical experience cannot be reduced to a singular, linear story; instead, they call for a broader understanding of history that embraces multiplicity, contradiction, and the ongoing process of cultural restoration. The constant dialogue between history and fiction, as examined in the works of Miano, Alem, and N’Sondé, challenges our understanding of history and the present, urging readers to consider how history continues to shape contemporary identities.

This study demonstrates that Francophone African literature, particularly that which addresses the legacy of the slave trade, is a site of continuous historical negotiation and cultural reimagining. It is not simply a reflection of the past, but an active process of engaging with the complexities of memory, identity, and the possibility of regeneration. The historiopoetic techniques employed by Miano, Alem, and N’Sondé provide a critical framework through which literature operates simultaneously as critique, testimony, and a medium of rec-

conciliation, offering renewed perspectives on the histories of African peoples and their diasporas.

As such, these works exemplify the capacity of literature to engage with historical trauma in a way that is both aesthetically and ethically transformative. In rewriting history, these authors do not just narrate the past, but actively participate in its reconstruction, offering new pathways for healing and understanding in the present. The literary space they create is one in which the fragmented past can be examined. Through this examination, a new vision for the future can emerge, rooted in the complexity, depth, and resilience of African identity and culture.

A comparative analysis of *La Saison de l'ombre*, *Esclaves* and *Un Océan, deux mers, trois continents* demonstrates that the French-language African novel of the slave trade is a literary genre in full maturation. It is characterised by a narrative hybridity that combines historical, fictional and autobiographical elements, reflecting the complexity of the memory and trauma of the slave trade. These literary works contribute to the reconstruction of a collective African memory and offer a space for dialogue and reflection on a painful past, paving the way for reconciliation and the rebirth of African societies.

These novels witness an important movement in contemporary French-language African literature: a desire to reappropriate the history of the slave trade and build a collective memory that transcends borders. They invite critical reflection on the past and its repercussions on the present, while offering a message of hope and resilience. The works of Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N'Sondé represent a new and vital wave of African literature that directly addresses the traumatic legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. These authors use historiopoesis to challenge conventional historical narratives, offering a more intimate and precise examination of trauma, memory, and identity. Their works remind us that the trauma of slavery is not simply a historical event, but a living legacy that continues to shape African societies in profound ways. As Miano asserts, "Que chacun prenne ses responsabilités. Et nous, Africains, devons affronter nos propres ombres et réfléchir à notre histoire. [Let everyone take their responsibilities. And we, Africans, must confront our own shadows and reflect

on our history.]”⁴⁶⁸ The task of confronting the shadows of the past is a necessary part of Africa’s ongoing journey toward recovery, healing, and renewal.

This dissertation has foregrounded the contributions of Miano, Alem, and N’Sondé to the broader fields of memory and trauma studies. Their works exemplify how literature can serve as a medium for both personal and collective catharsis. By rendering the intangible effects of trauma visible, these novels bridge the gap between historical documentation and lived experience. They underscore the necessity of integrating African perspectives into global discourses on trauma and memory, challenging the dominance of Western-centric frameworks. These texts illustrate the intergenerational transmission of trauma, showing how the legacies of slavery continue to shape African identities and diasporic consciousness. Their historiopoetic narratives provide a template for understanding how cultural memory operates in postcolonial contexts, revealing the link between history, identity, and resilience.

The study reaffirms the transformative power of literature in addressing historical injustices and fostering healing. By intertwining aesthetic form with ethical imperatives, Miano, Alem, and N’Sondé demonstrate that literature is not merely a vehicle for recounting history but an active participant in its reconstruction. Their works resist the erasure of African voices and assert the agency of African narratives in shaping global histories. In engaging with the slave trade, these authors redefine the role of literature in postcolonial societies. They position it as a space for dialogue, reflection, and transformation, where past traumas can be confronted, and new futures envisioned. This dual function of literature – as both a critique of historical amnesia and a tool for resilience – underscores its enduring relevance in contemporary African contexts.

The works of Léonora Miano, Kangni Alem, and Wilfried N’Sondé represent a defining moment in the evolution of Francophone African literature. Their novels challenge conventional historical narratives, foreground trauma’s psychological and cultural dimensions, and propose new ways of engaging with Africa’s past. In doing so, they

⁴⁶⁸Miano, Léonora. 2016. *L’Impératif transgressif*. Paris: L’Arche, 65.

contribute to a broader reimagining of African identity and history, rooted in resilience, creativity, and the reclamation of silenced voices. As this study has demonstrated, the Francophone African slave trade novel is not a static or monolithic genre but a dynamic and evolving literary form. Its practitioners continue to push the boundaries of narrative and aesthetics, offering profound insights into the complexities of memory, identity, and historical justice. By engaging with these texts, we are reminded of the power of literature to reflect the past and actively shape the present and future. Through their historiopoetic and traumamimetic innovations, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé exemplify the potential of literature to heal, resist, and transform. Their works stand as a testament to the enduring capacity of storytelling to confront the shadows of history and illuminate pathways toward understanding, reconciliation, and renewal.

The significance of these novels extends beyond their portrayal of slavery as a historical event. They represent a broader historiopoetic endeavour – an effort to reimagine and reconstruct African history through the prism of literature. Historiopoesis, as articulated by Sarah Gröning, recognises literature as a *traité d'histoire*, a site where history is told and actively reinterpreted and critiqued. Through their narratives, Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé engage in a creative historiography, offering alternative perspectives that counter the dominant Eurocentric historical narratives that have long shaped the African experience. These works do not simply recount the past; they interrogate the emotional and cultural effects of slavery, creating space for collective healing and acknowledgement of this traumatic chapter in African history.

One crucial question from this examination is whether a distinct Francophone African slave trade novel has emerged in contemporary literature. Earlier works in the Francophone African literary canon, such as those by Aimé Césaire and Ousmane Sembène, often dealt with slavery obliquely, treating it as part of broader postcolonial struggles or social critiques. While these authors acknowledged the legacy of slavery, they did not centre it as the focus of their narratives. The novels of Miano, Alem, and N'Sondé, however, position the transatlantic slave trade as the core theme, foregrounding its trauma and its enduring impact on African memory and identity. This shift marks a significant transformation in how slavery is addressed in

African literature, turning it from a peripheral concern to a central focus in the narratives of the contemporary moment. Their works remind us that the trauma of slavery is not simply a historical event, but a living legacy that continues to shape African societies in profound ways. As Miano asserts, “Que chacun prenne ses responsabilités. Et nous, Africains, devons affronter nos propres ombres et réfléchir à notre histoire”.⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁹ Miano, Léonora. 2013. ‘Léonora Miano: ce que l’esclavage a fait à l’Afrique’. Interview by Didier Jacob. *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 23 October 2013. <https://www.nouvelobs.com/romans/20131023.OBS2280/leonora-miano-ce-que-l-esclavage-a-fait-a-l-afrique.html>.

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