Editor's Column

Other Afterlives

It was a fortunate coincidence that while I was reading the exquisite and devastating oeuvre of Abdulrazak Gurnah and editing the cluster of articles on his fiction that appears in this issue, I was also preparing to give a talk at a conference on Toni Morrison at Princeton University (sitesofmemorysymposium.org/), held in conjunction with the opening of a small but revelatory exhibition of papers and artifacts drawn from her personal archive.[1] Fortunate not because they happen to be fellow winners of the Nobel Prize for literature—even if Morrison was one of the previous awardees Gurnah said he admired as he jokingly told an interviewer at the Swedish Academy in April 2022 that "it's great to join this team" ("Abdulrazak Gurnah, Nobel Prize in Literature")—but because it provided an opportunity to take account of the unexpected parallels between their bodies of work. While upon first glance there might appear to be an ocean of difference between their styles as novelists, an infinite distance between the "small patch[es] of ground" they cover ("Abdulrazak Gurnah with Susheila Nasta" 354), they might be said to share a determination to "translate the historical into the personal," as Morrison once phrased it ("Toni Morrison" 103), shifting our attention from the large-scale forces of slavery, war, colonialism, and migration to the intimacies of individual lives.

There are methodological similarities too. Both start with memory, but not because their novels are driven by an autobiographical impulse. Morrison's insistence on what she calls "the ruse of memory" in writing fiction is not meant to grant some absolute authority to the recollection of personal experience. Instead for her the term *memory* signals "a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was—that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way" ("Memory" 385). Likewise, Gurnah notes that for the migrant writer "it's memory that becomes the source and your subject," but "you don't always remember accurately and you begin to recall things you didn't even know you remembered," with the result that "the stories take on a

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life of their own; they develop their own logic and coherence" ("Abdulrazak Gurnah with Susheila Nasta" 353).

As capacious as their novels can be, Gurnah and Morrison both insist on what Delali Kumavie, in her piece in this issue, calls "substantive gaps": narratives that do not provide wholeness or resolution but instead convey the "story of a shattered, fractured perception resulting from a shattered, splintered life" (Morrison, "Memory" 388). While they do not provide the solace of redemption, their novels also refuse simply to rehearse trauma, instead emphasizing the "resourcefulness" of common folk (Gurnah, "'Arriving'" 2)—people "apparently small in stature," as Gurnah wryly puts it in his Nobel Prize lecture ("Nobel Lecture")—in the face of rupture, dislocation, and suffering. Describing her novel *Beloved*, Morrison explained that her aim was

> to explore how a people—in this case one individual or a small group of individuals—absorbs and rejects information on a very personal level about something that is undigestible and unabsorbable, completely. . . . Those people could not live without value. They had prices, but no value in the white world, so they made their own, and they decided what was valuable. It was usually eleemosynary, usually something they were doing for somebody else. ("Talk" 235)

In Gurnah, too, the "resilience of the human spirit" has everything to do with "our capacity for kindness," in spite of—and, at times, in the midst of—the "monstrous dimension" of our "enormous capacity for cruelty and unkindness" (Gurnah, "Abdulrazak Gurnah, Nobel Prize in Literature").

With Morrison in mind, it was impossible for me to read Gurnah's most recent novel, the harrowing and luminous *Afterlives*, without considering its resonances with the historiography of slavery in the New World context. Could this multilayered narrative of the devastating impact of German colonialism on a cast of merchants, clerks, slaves, and askari soldiers on the east coast of Africa in the first decades of the twentieth century be read in counterpoint to the problematic that has come in the past decade to be encapsulated by the powerful concept that Saidiya Hartman has called "the afterlife of slavery"?

Although Hartman's phrase has been invoked in contemporary scholarship so often that it has taken on the flavor of a shorthand formulation, it is worth recalling that in fact it originates in a few brief, almost oracular passages in her work, instead of being elaborated as a comprehensive analytic. In her 2007 memoir, *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman defines it in an early paragraph:

> Slavery had established a measure of man and a ranking of life and worth that has yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (6)

In other words, the phrase signals what she later terms "the structural hold of racial slavery" on American life even after the advent of formal emancipation (*Scenes* xxxv). It means that the depravations and dispossessions codified and normalized by a culture of racial slavery continue to hold sway, not dissipating but actually becoming in many ways all the more pernicious in other forms. "I, too, live in the time of slavery," Hartman writes, "by which I mean I am living in the future created by it" (*Lose* 133). This recognition imposes an ethical imperative, she suggests, to approach the history of slavery as inevitably a "history of the present," an endeavor shaped and compelled by

> the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence. As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine

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> a free state, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing. ("Venus" 4)

The phrase "the afterlife of slavery" has come to seem to index a groundswell of influential recent scholarship elaborating this argument across a number of spheres from mass incarceration to reproductive politics to police violence.

It is striking that as "the afterlife of slavery" has come to serve as a shorthand, a number of its provocative connotations have remained largely unexplored. One wonders, for instance, whether it is possible to invoke the phrase without hinting at the haze of eschatological implications commonly associated with the notion of the afterlife in religious discourse. In a number of fields where the term *afterlife* has been taken up, the concept of an afterlife retains this eschatological implication, as when Walter Benjamin argues that a translation is the "afterlife" (*Überleben*) or "continuing life" (*Fortleben*) of the original ("Translator's Task" 76). Benjamin also uses the German word *Nachreife* ("Die Aufgabe" 12), which Steven Rendall translates as "post-maturation" (Benjamin, "Translator's Task" 77). The implication is that an afterlife is not the ongoing life of the same old thing but instead "a looking back on a process of maturity that is finished" (De Man 85): something that has outlived its own trajectory of growth, even something that has withered only to be cast into another form, with new "immanent tendencies" (77). In a different vein, Emily Wilson has pointed out that in contrast to terms such as "tradition," "legacy," "preservation," and "reception," *afterlife* can be taken to imply the decentering or dislodging of human agency, opening up "the possibility that cultural artifacts might have their own autonomy, an active way of being in the world." If *afterlife* is meant to describe the historical resilience and even the mutation of that racial calculus and political arithmetic, it is crucial to explore the full implications of the term not as a static concept but instead as what Alys Eve Weinbaum calls a shifting "thought system"—an "episteme [that] produces material effects over time" (1).

In a way, "the afterlife of slavery" is simply a new phrase for an old insight. It adapts the conundrum so forcefully articulated in Frederick Douglass's second narrative, the 1855 *My Bondage and My Freedom*, taking "the precarious life of the ex-slave" not only as Douglass's individual situation but also as the African American condition. In describing the aftermath of his escape from slavery, Douglass makes an effort to explain the reasons that the plantation, even as the paradigmatic site of terror and "brutification" (187), is also paradoxically "home" to the slave. The slave, writes Douglass, "is a fixture; he has no choice, no goal, no destination; but is pegged down to a single spot, and must take root here, or nowhere. The idea of removal elsewhere, comes generally, in the shape of a threat, and in punishment of crime. It is, therefore, attended with fear and dread" (138–39). The very notion of mobility—not even escape, but the prospect of movement in general—comes to seem terrifying. In his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Douglass had famously written that his victory in his fight with the "slave-breaker" Covey represented "a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (69). But ten years later, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he deliberately inverts the metaphor, writing that the slave's "going out into the world, is like a living man going into the tomb, who, with open eyes, sees himself buried out of sight and hearing of wife, children and friends of kindred tie" (139).

After his escape, Douglass finds himself in New York City. It should be a moment of triumph: the long-sought achievement of liberty. But instead, he writes, "A man, homeless, shelterless, breadless, friendless, and moneyless, is not in a condition to assume a very proud or joyous tone; and in just this condition was I, while wandering about the streets of New York city and lodging, at least one night, among the barrels of one of its wharves. I was not only free from slavery, but I was free from home, as well" (254). It is a stunning deflation, even if his nuanced depiction of what he calls "a doubtful freedom" does not in any way muddle the stakes of the moment. As Douglass writes in describing his first, failed attempt to run away,

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although the "inequality" between slavery and freedom "was as great as that between certainty and uncertainty," any fugitive would choose to be "shot down" in the pursuit of liberty rather than "pass away life in hopeless bondage" (213). But the distinction between these states is thrown into ambiguity. Escaping slavery can also mean losing home. There can be freedom in the midst of bondage, and new forms of bondage even in freedom.[2]

Revisiting the bondage/freedom double bind in Douglass should serve to clarify the political stakes of the claim that a history of the present must grapple with the afterlife of slavery. There is a crucial difference between the ironic and pained recognition that liberation means being "free from home" and the flawed extrapolation that therefore the situation of the ex-slave can only be one of existential homelessness or irremediable kinlessness.[3]

In his criticism, Gurnah has elaborated an argument that the history of the present in Africa can only be a matter of confronting the afterlives of European colonialism:[4] "For many people in Africa, European colonialism and its aftermath are urgent contemporary events. I want to put the emphasis there not so much on colonialism but on the contemporaneity of its consequences. . . . For many African states, though not for all, colonialism is the constitutive past and its significant present" (Gurnah, "Idea"). Hartman tends to conjoin the question of the afterlife of slavery and that of "the future of the ex-slave" (by which she means the Western descendants of formerly enslaved populations): "What was the afterlife of slavery and when might it be eradicated? What was the future of the ex-slave?" (*Lose* 45; see also 107). To approach this problematic through the lens of Gurnah's work means first of all to confront the necessary pluralization of both key terms, *afterlives* and *ex-slaves*. The two main protagonists of *Afterlives*, Hamza and Afiya, are both survivors of enslavement in Tanganyika (now mainland Tanzania). Here slavery is only one of the rampant and accepted "cruelties" that characterized the labile, fragile, heterogeneous societies scattered along the East African coast and linked in complex ways to an "Indian Ocean exchange system" (Steiner 163).[5] As these societies are ravaged by the brutal incursion of German colonialism, slavery persists, taken by the Germans as proof of the "savagery" of African cultures and as a justification for the *Zivilisierungsmission* ("civilizing mission") of imperialism.[6] As Emad Mirmotahari, Delali Kumavie, Esther Pujolràs-Noguer, and Nasia Anam all point out in different ways in their contributions to this issue, Gurnah's later novels are kaleidoscopic renderings of the interweaving of an ensemble of volatile forces—including Islam, slavery, colonialism, and race—that shape the particular contours of East African societies.

Put differently, for those who read Gurnah from the perspective of the African diaspora and above all from the Americas, novels such as *Paradise* and *Afterlives* are sobering correctives to African American exceptionalism. They are a reminder that we are not the template. For the diasporic reader, as Morrison once put it in an essay about Camera Laye, African literature can serve to explode "an idea of Africa fraught with the assumptions of a complex intimacy coupled with an acknowledgment of unmediated estrangement" ("Foreigner's Home" 101). Whether set in England or in East Africa, Gurnah's novels can be read as depictions of the ubiquity of antiblackness. But given the ways they tease out the asymmetrical dynamics between blackness and Africanness, they demonstrate definitively the inanity of any pretense that antiblackness is "invariant and limitless," or that the catastrophe of racial slavery in the New World somehow "forges [a] transatlantic connection (of categorical eligibility for enslavement) . . . among African-derived populations" across the globe (Sexton 47, 37).

Gurnah's oeuvre might be said to refashion a theory of afterlives on other, more subtle frequencies as well. As a number of commentators have noted, the title of the most recent novel, *Afterlives*, also seems to be meant to imply an intertextual relationship within Gurnah's work: although one does not directly follow from another, *Afterlives* can be read as a sort of oblique sequel to *Paradise*, since both novels feature formerly enslaved characters who volunteer to serve in the *Schutztruppe*, the

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askari or "native" forces notorious among fellow Africans for their brutality in the service of the German empire. Gurnah has explained that the concerns that "engage" and "worry" a novelist tend to "resurface," with the result that "there is always this unfinished business carrying on from one book to another" ("Abdulrazak Gurnah with Susheila Nasta" 354).

As Tina Steiner explores in her essay in this issue, Gurnah's fiction—unlike that of Morrison, whose "deliberate avoidance of literary references" is well-known[7]—is also characterized by a broader literary intertextuality, an often playful "mingling of ideas" from all sorts of sources and traditions (Gurnah, "Abdulrazak Gurnah" [Interview by Claire Chambers] 131; see also Gurnah, "Conversation" 166). One remarkable example in *Afterlives* is the poignant scene in which Hamza, who has learned some German during his service with the askari during the war, translates a few lines from a poem by Friedrich Schiller as a gesture of his growing affection for the orphan Afiya. He chooses a stanza that seems to allude to the predicament of their clandestine budding romance:

> Sie konnte mir kein Wörtchen sagen,
> Zu viele Lauscher waren wach;
> Den Blick nur durft' ich schüchtern fragen,
> Und wohl verstand ich, was er sprach.
> (Gurnah, *Afterlives* 192)

> She could not speak one word to me,
> There were too many listening;
> I could only shyly question the look in her eyes,
> And well understood what it meant. (Johnson 657)[8]

Hamza scribbles a makeshift Kiswahili version onto a tiny piece of paper and hands it to her:

> Alijaribu kulisema neno moja, lakini hakuweza –
> Kuna wasikilizi wengi karibu,
> Lakini jicho langu la hofu limeona bila tafauti
> Lugha ghani jicho lake linasema.
> (Gurnah, *Afterlives* 192)

Provocatively, Gurnah provides no full English version of these lines: the poem is quoted first in German and then in Hamza's Kiswahili. Only in the description of Afiya's response to Hamza's gift is there a partial rendition in English: "She was already waiting at the door when he hurried back from the café, and as she took the basket of bread and buns from him, she did not let go of his hand. 'I can read what your eye is saying too,' she said, referring to the last two lines of the translation: My eye can see for certain / the language her eye is speaking" (192). This gloss makes it clear that Hamza's Kiswahili is in fact a sly modification of the German, inserting a certainty ("bila tafauti") into the speaker's interpretation of the beloved's intentions, whereas in German there is only a shy questioning ("schüchtern fragen").[9] The narrative does not even provide an English translation of the title of the poem, giving only the German: "Das Geheimnis." For a reader who knows or looks up the word, the playful withholding of the English meaning of Schiller's title ("The Secret") underscores the complicity between the characters by pointing to the covert nature of their communication.

Only the sixth writer from the African continent to be awarded the Nobel Prize, Gurnah is sometimes described as an anglophone novelist. But as Steiner elucidates in her essay in this issue, his books are full of linguistic as well as literary "palimpsests" that subtly undermine any assumption that they emerge from a cultural context that can be described as monolingual. As a child, Gurnah grew up in a household where Kiswahili was the primary language, and his father also spoke Arabic fluently. It was common for him to hear other languages (Kutchi, Somali, Kingazija) in the neighborhood where his family lived in Zanzibar City, one of those "towns along the shores of the ocean, which had always drawn people from across the water and across the land, some more willingly than others" (Gurnah, *Afterlives* 139). He was sent to a Qur'an school in Msikiti Barza where he was taught to read the Arabic script even before he began to study English as a subject in elementary school. As Gurnah recalls:

> My encounter with English then and for many years after was casual and instrumental. It was a subject at

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> school. It was not until much later that it had any narrative utility and could tell me things that I was capable of understanding and reflecting on. By that time I had already been exposed to complex narrative traditions in the Qur'an school, in commentaries on the Qur'an, in the Mawlid and in Qasidas. I had listened to stories at home told by grannies and aunties, I had heard ribald and forbidden stories in the streets. I cannot describe what a rich and unforgettable body of work all this amounted to. Beginning to read with some purpose in English was an encounter with another narrative tradition, and not necessarily a polarizing one. What I mean by this is that there was no impossible conflict in partaking in all the different traditions in addition to listening to Taarab, Indian songs, and Elvis Presley. It was just that we did not fully understand the implication of possessing this complex heritage. . . .
>
> I am suggesting that we were exposed to many more currents than we were aware of or could make full use of or properly understand. But thankfully nothing was lost, although it took a long time to understand that, too. ("Learning" 29–30)

Interestingly, he adds that when he began to write fiction "in the bitterness" of his migration to England, "I was not concerned with who would read what I wrote or where or even particularly what language I would write in" (31). This trajectory results in a "more porous, more dynamic idea of language" (Walkowitz 329) that is legible, I would suggest, throughout Gurnah's multifaceted fiction: a sensibility that is "premised on adaptation and approximation rather than accumulation and mastery," in contexts defined by a constitutive "multilingualism that operates within, across, and underneath languages that have only appeared to be coherent and distinct" (343). In Gurnah's novels, multilingualism is what Francesca Orsini terms "a structuring and generative principle" that "holds both local and cosmopolitan perspectives in view" (346).

At one point in *Afterlives*, the gruff and irascible but infinitely generous clerk Khalifa is described as "a sentimental bearer of crimes, someone who took a share of responsibility for other people's troubles and for wrongs done in his time" (199). It is not a bad way to describe the narrative posture in Gurnah's fiction in general, which displays a similar generosity with a sundry cast of characters whose lives are the kinds of existences that are habitually overlooked or disregarded: the marginal and the maimed, the "fugitive and itinerant" (*Afterlives* 156), the downtrodden and the inconspicuous. His work displays an attention to "the detritus of lives with which we have yet to attend, a past that has yet to be done" (Hartman, "Venus" 13). To read Gurnah in counterpoint to Morrison is to come to realize that, in the words of the latter, "the gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It's bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one's ever assumed responsibility for" ("In the Realm" 247).

Brent Hayes Edwards

Notes

1. The symposium was organized in tandem with the exhibition *Toni Morrison: Sites of Memory* at the Milberg Gallery at the Princeton University Library.

2. I discuss this line of argumentation, and the ways it represents a revision of Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, in greater detail in my introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom* (xxxvii–xli).

3. See Brown for a thorough critique of the tendency to reify the so-called social death of the enslaved as an immutable condition conscribing Black life in general or, worse, as proof of the "impossibility of a Black ontology" (Wilderson 36).

4. While it is not foregrounded in the essays in this issue's cluster, Gurnah (like Morrison) has produced an important body of scholarship in addition to his fiction. See especially Gurnah's *Map Reading*, "Fear," "Idea," "Imagining," "Learning," "*Matigari*," "'Mid-point,'" "Themes," "Transformative Strategies," "Urge," and "Writing."

5. On the interlinked littoral cultures of the Indian Ocean and their significance in Gurnah's fiction, see Samuelson's article in this issue as well as Gupta et al.; Hofmeyr; Moorthy; Samuelson, "Abdulrazak Gurnah's Fictions" and "Coastal Form." Gurnah has described the historiographical ambition of both *Paradise* and *Afterlives* as correctives to the triumphalist narrative of Tanzanian history concocted both by German and British imperialism and by the postcolonial state: "I come from Zanzibar, and the history of the colonization of East Africa in the 1890s sees European intervention as a benign deliverance of Africans from Arab slavers. As a result, the decline of the coast is seen as a 'national' response of the now liberated nation—the expulsion of

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alien invaders. This is now the authoritative account, despite the impossible construction of nation in retrospect, an impossibility tolerated in other colonial-constructed territories and their nominal histories and cultures. In the case of Zanzibar, this account has now been internalized or naturalized into history, but it was not one which ever even felt complete" (Gurnah, "Imagining" 82). Gurnah's novels are an attempt to counter this triumphalist narrative by coming to terms with the "fragmentations within colonized cultures" in East Africa (85)—that is, the internal divisions and instabilities in the "complicated balancing act" ("Abdulrazak Gurnah with Susheila Nasta" 360) among the African, Arab, and Indian populations that intermixed in coastal regions around the entire Indian Ocean—that for Gurnah are in fact a major reason for the lack of sustained resistance to European incursion in the first place (360–61).

6. On the particularities of German colonialism in East Africa and its representation in Gurnah's later fiction, see Branach-Kallas; Göttsche; and Moyd.

7. Morrison writes, "This deliberate avoidance of literary references has become a firm if boring habit with me, not only because they lead to poses, not only because I refuse the credentials they bestow, but also because they are inappropriate to the kind of literature I wish to write, the aims of that literature, and the discipline of the specific culture that interests me. Literary references in the hands of writers I love can be extremely revealing, but they can also supply a comfort I don't want the reader to have because I want him to respond on the same plane as an illiterate or preliterate reader would. I want to subvert his traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one: that of being in the company of his own solitary imagination" ("Memory" 387).

8. This is Richard Wigmore's translation, from Graham Johnson's authoritative three-volume anthology of lyrics set to music by Franz Schubert.

9. Instead of employing a more common way of saying "for certain," such as "kwa hakika" or "kwa yakini," the Swahili version uses the striking formulation "bila tafauti" ("without difference"), which seems meant to imply that there is no gap or mediation between signification ("the language her eye is speaking") and interpretation (what "my eye can see"). I am deeply grateful to Jealool Amari for his assistance with the Swahili.

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