Reviews

Slavery, lived realities, and the decolonisation of forced migration histories: An interview with Dr Portia Owusu

Abstract

Academic institutions in the global North have historically claimed leadership in the production of high-quality scholarship. As such, it is their work that often informs pedagogical materials in secondary and tertiary education worldwide. This dominance has serious cultural impacts. At the very least, it positions Western academics as 'custodians' of knowledge with the ability to influence what is taught and how it is taught. Within this framework, learning is politicised, and the teaching of subjects such as history, becomes a space of contention. These issues touch on the aim of the Southern Responses to Displacement from Syria (SRD) project, financed by the European Research Council (grant agreement no. 715582) and led by Professor Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh in the Migration Research Unit at University College London. In particular, it aligns with the project's goal to explore a multi-directional approach to knowledge production and to centralise the experience of displaced peoples and actors from the global South in scholarship. The Research Associate Dr Estella Carpi discussed slavery as an ignored form of forced migration with Dr Portia Owusu, Assistant Professor of English Literature at Texas A&M. The SRD team's conversation with Dr Owusu, indeed, endeavours to rethink mainstream forced migration studies and rather engages with neglected—and, at times, silenced—epistemologies of forced migration.

Keywords: history, forced migration, slavery studies, African studies, Black American literature

Estella Carpi: Dr Owusu's book *Spectres from the Past: Slavery and the Politics of "History" in West African and African-American Literature* (2020) shows how writers from these regions often reject the traditional history and hegemonic historiographies of slavery in favour of indigenous literary narratives about the past. As a Research Associate on the *Southern Responses to Displacement* (SRD) Project, which engages with the colonial understandings of forced migration and geographies of aid, I was interested to learn from Dr Owusu how endemic understandings of slavery had violently been removed from the grand narratives of official history.

In the Western version of forced migration studies, the people who forcibly left their land do not fit today's normative accounts of forced migration and, therefore, they were not recognised as 'refugees'. Instead, the figure of the refugee has historically responded to the missionary impetus of Western subjects that desire to assist and care. In this vein, the definition of refugee was historically removed when it involved a battle against enslavement and slave trade. Thus, 'forced migration' has mostly become an entry point to study areas where the so-called white saviours turned into aid providers, causing these

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experiences in the African continent to be excluded from the global history of forced migration. Thereby, in academia, slavery has become a self-standing body of literature.

This removal, however, is not innocent in any way. The slave trade is the largest forced migration in human history: More than twelve million Africans were deported to the American continent. Therefore, why has that erasure happened? The creation of African diasporas was accompanied by the emergence of global capitalism and European colonial powers. This form of migration did not find room in the forced migration literature in Western institutions especially because the governments, such the British and the USA, refused to classify the slave trade as a crime against humanity. As Dr Owusu names it in her own work, this is the result of a specific 'politics of history' that has been promoted, and it is all but unbiased. For example, NoViolet Bulawayo's award winning *We Need New Names* (2014), which Dr Owusu recommended to me in the past, depicts conflict, displacement, and migration through the sceptical voice of a young girl named Darling, who first lives in a Zimbabwean slum and then moves to the USA. In light of this, how and why has slavery been deleted from official historiographies according to West African and African American writers?

Portia Owusu: To respond to this, we can consider our own history and experiences of trauma: the first reaction is often to try and forget it. Trauma, by its very nature, is something that is repressed, [and] covered up. In order to address it, some work needs to be done and that work is very hard, even at an individual level. If we place this in the context of state politics, deliberate efforts have been made to move on; to divorce the present from the past. In the context of the USA, slavery went against the nation's ideals, such as liberty and the pursuit of freedom in the Republic; it was a clear separation of theory from practice. What you find is selective history; national history thus becomes something that is nit-picked. While forgetfulness is the ideal, as Freud rightly tells us, whatever is repressed will come back.

So, these stories are seeping out in different ways, politically, socially, personally. Inequalities and discriminations are still here today, but we have tried to deal with these since the early 20th century. Yet, we are acting as though these things just came up. All of these issues are rooted in the history we refuse to acknowledge. It is then that slavery becomes a spectre, as I named it in my book *Spectres from the Past: Slavery and the Politics of "History" in West African and African-American Literature* (Routledge 2020): this ghost is always lurking around. Hence, we can't think that a short answer can be provided to such a past. However, at the same time, we are unable to move on, because history is always present. The past is always in the present.

EC: In this difficult global framework, is there any official educational system that offers room, instead, to such removed histories?

PO: The way we talk about this history has really been important in how we think of slavery, of any history, and of how we remember. The school curriculum in Texas, for instance—where I am based right now—includes some books that describe slavery as migration, but they do not specify it as a form of forced migration. Slavery is seen, therefore, as some sort of employment. The language itself, importantly, determines how children are learning this history: what they have been told is that people were brought to work to the USA, that it was a migration. Nonetheless, this is not only an American problem: you face the same issue in West Africa, especially in the early 20th century, when the people

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living in these countries were going through decolonisation and were trying to make new nations. That became wrapped up in a Pan-African rhetoric of hope, of the capacity to forge on into the future. The slavery stories were kind of glossed over in several books, either by historians from a colonial background who were Africans themselves, or by others. Nobody was really talking about slavery as a lived reality. To echo Toni Morrison: we ended up talking about slavery without slaves, as nobody wanted to talk about it in terms of incalculable loss. We often refer to this idea of twelve million people, which are supposed to be the official statistics, but we really do not know how many people were deported as slaves. Twelve million is a conservative figure that we play around with, but we actually do not know the number. The incalculable loss are these people who jumped off slave ships, who chose death in the sea rather than coming to the Americas. Coming to your question, the relationship of Black people with education, especially in America, is not an easy one: illiteracy and poor health are all factors that are discussed as if they were a new phenomenon. It would be important for us to go back to the root of all of these situations. What happened to the people who were enslaved and for whom education was illegal? If you read slave narrative, you will find out that many of these slaves learnt how to read and write their stories: doing this was a serious act of resistance and subversion.

This history is not gone. The education system can really aid in how we think about the past; the language we use, the perspectives we privilege forge this idea of global history. However, even when history is written by African Americans, are we adding all of the other voices to such history? For example, the politics of publishing means there are certain voices that are inherently silenced and there are things that you can or cannot say.

So, I do think there some systems that can support national amnesia and the way we are going to remember history, and how we are going to talk about it. If you have a school textbook that is describing slavery as people who came over to work and as people who travelled, the language heavily affects how we think about slavery, how we view it, and how we see links between the past and the present.

EC: Indeed, national amnesia and, more broadly, global amnesia are very often built on such processes of people's de-subjectification and de-individualisation. Among diverse stories of resistance, historian Hakim Adi (2018) wrote that early Pan-Africanism helped African diasporas build unity. Countries in Northern Africa, nonetheless, started embracing the Pan-African ideology only in recent times. We have a further example of this in the US context, where Black Internationalism was often posited as a valid alternative to Pan-Africanism, which, instead, cuts across different geographic areas and places less emphasis on the African continent.

In this regard, in what political geography do African-American literary writers locate this needed rewriting of official history? Do literary texts engage with these topics in the West-African region and in the Americas?

PO: There are many factors that suggest where these narratives are located. Among the African-American writers who engage with the history of slavery, Toni Morrison's 1987 book, *Beloved*, was quite a breakthrough as we had never had a literary text that talked about slavery in this way. During the 18th and 19th centuries, we had slavery narratives written by people who had just come out of slavery: these texts were political, as they were often sponsored by white patrons. These writers knew very well who they were writing for: they were begging for their freedom by writing these texts for such an audience.

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Reading and writing became ways of proving that slaves were also human beings, and worthy of God's grace. In this sense, these texts were poorly critical and insightful, as there was a lot that could or could not be said. Writers used assertations such as 'I am too traumatised to talk about this' when they did not want to publicly offend slave holders and their families. For example, women did not want to talk about rape, because it would offend the sensibilities of fragile white women readers.

From the 1950s onwards, with the civil rights movement, especially radical forms like Black Power, writers wrote history from the bottom-up. In brief, Black historians were writing for themselves, not for others; such texts, therefore, looked at Black people's engagement and relationship to their own history. Finally, the focus was on lived realities. In Morrison's *Beloved*, the focus is on a mother [Margaret Garner] who had just come out of slavery by running away. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, however, if enslaved people run away and go to the supposedly free North, slave owners could still pursue them and bring them back to the South to re-enslave them. You can also find this, for example, in Steve McQueen's movie *12 Years a Slave*. In Morrison's text, the mother lives in Ohio, a supposedly free state. She sees the slave catcher coming and decides to kill her daughter rather than let her go into slavery. Here, you have a graphic novel focusing on this mother's difficult decision to do what she felt like she had to do. The writer is less concerned with the grand history here, because there is the assumption—and, in my opinion, a rightful assumption—that history skirts around slavery. The grand history talks about slavery without slaves, as though there were no human beings at the centre of it. And, in so doing, it continuously dehumanises these people.

So, I would definitely say African American writers and, by extension, African writers, try to locate these ideas from the perspective of lived experience and the individual subject. They tried to link the past with the present, seeing history as something that has not necessarily passed. They draw attention to the idea that national projects of history want us to think that the past as passed. Many writers are resisting this kind of linear historiography, where you kind of say 'look at us now, we have progressed so much'. They are saying that there are slaveries by other names: we might not be physically in chains, but you still live the ramifications of history. For example: Ava Duvernay powerfully communicates this in her Netflix documentary, *13th*. Chattel slavery may be over but let's look at the 13th Amendment of the USA and how it made place for a disproportionate number of Black people to be incarcerated. Black people make up 70 per cent of the jailed population but, yet, they are 10 per cent or even less of the national population. How can we understand this without going back to the history of slavery?

EC: And, indeed, it is paramount to connect such lived experiences to transnational and regional trajectories of forced migration, through which ideology itself is subject to changes. In African ideological history, Pan-Africanism maintains the form of political and social mobilisation, moving outside of Africa before 1945 and returning to the African continent after the end of World War II. In your work, you look at African diasporas and West African writers in the continent: what geography has mattered to reformulate a West African politics of history? And have these views ever changed throughout literary history?

PO: There definitely have been some changes. You are definitely right to say that Pan-Africanism seems to have moved outside of the continent before 1945. I think this is

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largely due to where prominent leaders were physically located: many of them, like Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, were in the Americas or Europe to study. When they returned to the continent, their ideas travelled with them. These leaders, being many of them politicians, utilise the connections made whilst outside the continent to garner support for their ideas. These connections led to a global Black alliance, helpful for fighting common injuries and insults experienced by Black people.

The movement in different spaces also allowed for a greater understanding of specificities in the Black experience. For Africans who came to the USA, that is the understanding of race and racism. In the autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah, *Ghana* (1957), we learn that his first encounter with racism happened as a student in Pennsylvania when he goes to a café to buy a cup of tea, but the waiter refuses to serve him, essentially telling him 'I can't serve you', to which he responded 'Why can't you serve me? I have money, you serve tea, and I need tea'. He then realises that he cannot be served because he is Black, and he had walked into a segregated place. The whole encounter leads him to empathise with his African American colleagues; to understand that it is the Black skin—the mark he shares with them—that in America, prevents him from being able to do what he wants. This is that important moment—like an epiphany—where he realises the difference and the sameness between him and other Black people. Prior to that, he was an African but, once in the USA, he *became* Black. That experience of his solidified his concept of Pan-Africanism. He went back to Ghana with more ideas on how this political fervour cannot stay in the African continent: it needs to spread to the diaspora as well.

For a lot of these writers, there is a retracement of the so-called triangular relationship during slavery: to Europe, to the Americas, and back again to Africa. This triangulation is identifiable in several writers who moved around spaces: they noticed differences but also similarities and, hence, had the ability to interconnect and create enabling concepts for such an interconnection. Some movements, like Pan-Africanism, have a great merit but there are also limits. For instance, at a global level, Black nationalism is now articulated in the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) movement: there can be so much emphasis on sameness or on the essence of Blackness that we forget that there are also differences. The concept of race and racism, for example, is something that American Blacks experience in America and use their own political lens to make sense of that, but Africans do not necessarily. In other words, I think we need to be wary about how we group all of these people together; everyday aims and projects are, instead, specific to the lived realities of people. There is therefore a risk of conveying a less effective message: the BLM movement enables people to see sameness but, at the same time, somehow encourages us to blur our personal experiences.

EC: The possibilities for decolonising knowledge and the academy itself do not look promising at present. I personally believe that the decolonial turn for Western scholars has become a way of gaining legitimacy, a way to feel 'legitimate' teachers and researchers, and to have our work approved in the international intellectual community. In this sense, we need to adopt a critical gaze on these 'shortcuts' to decoloniality. There is not enough knowledge on what alternative ways of working and thinking can ever mean nowadays in Western societies, and on what decoloniality practically means to people in the global South. I therefore believe we do not know enough about ourselves in the first instance, as subjects of the global North and, in particular, *in relation to* the South. I do not mean to

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standardise people in the North, or discard the history of regional and international awareness that some people have worked on with great efforts. But, in the North, more work on self-awareness in relation to the South needs to be done. How is this 'need to decolonise' discussed in contemporary literary debates in the West African region?

PO: I am a Black West-African woman, Ghanaian to be specific, born in Ghana and grown up in the UK. I had, to all intents and purposes, a very good education and I travelled around. This is to say that I, as it is true for many scholars, have baggage that we need to unpack. The rhetoric of decolonised curriculum is a fashionable term at the moment. However, we really need to consider our own positionalities and ask: as scholars from minority backgrounds, are we critically probing the ways we do our work? What does it really mean to 'decolonise knowledge'? How can we decolonise our own thinking first?

One way, for instance, is reflecting on methodology. How do we make correct choices? Do our selected methods promote a certain type of knowledge? These are the questions that Linda T. Smith proposes in her *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (2012). For example, in my own work, I am reading in English and there are limitations of this language for articulating the lived realities of individuals in West Africa. Even when my texts are translated, something go lost. Another question is how do I define literature? Is it only the written word, which traditionally has been the case in Western epistemologies and literary studies? This needs to be rethought, because in Africa we have oral texts, or some messages are delivered without words.

So, are we willing to embrace different forms of epistemologies, different ways of thinking? Decolonisation needs to be about questioning our own training and learning to unlearn many of the things we have internalised. It is wrong to think of ourselves as neutral, especially when we are racially and culturally positioned.

As you said, at times, we are rather concerned about having our work recognised. But are we really serious about decolonising knowledge? Are we making steps to work with the people we are writing about? I know plenty of scholarship that writes about Africa, but some of them have never been to the continent, or they have never talked to anybody else who works in the same field as theirs. This segment of scholars end up producing African Studies without Africans; and that, inevitably, is a form of colonisation. To borrow Edward Said's words (1978), people in the Orient can speak for themselves, we do not have to speak for them. As academics, beyond personal intentions, we often end up speaking on their behalf instead.

So, when I think about decolonising, we need to start with ourselves, we should not see it as something outside of us. We need to question the ways in which methods and ways of thinking can reinforce structures steeped in colonialism. We need to think about our engagement with places, and with who we are working with, and how we look at these people. Are we looking at our research subjects as people whom we can get something out from, or people that we can stand side by side with? Are we going to the countries we are working on, seeing ourselves as the authority, with our education and conviction that we can come up with a new understanding? And how are we using funding: when we interview people, are we paying them, or how are we giving back to these communities?

I am appreciative of the fact that we are finally having these conversations in universities and institutions that, previously, would not even have seen all of this as worth

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considering. Let me conclude that, when we include different forms of knowledge, it is important for us to see these as legitimate. Are we treating other forms of knowledge as legitimate, even when we do not share the same perspectives? These are the questions that we need to ask ourselves. If we are going to do the job of decolonising knowledge, if we are serious about it, then we need to start the work on ourselves. This is the heart of the anti-racist discourse: you must assume that you also have views, you also have unhealthy perspectives, whether you know it or not.

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Estella Carpi[1,*] and Portia Owusu[2]
[1]Department of English Literature, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX, USA
[2]Department of Geography, University College London, London WC1E 6BT, UK
*Corresponding author. Email: e.carpi@ucl.ac.uk
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