

Memory and Tonality of Mourning in Hyginus Ekwuazi's *That Other Country*

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Abstract

Memory studies in contemporary humanistic scholarship, including literature, have mostly been preoccupied with collective or cultural memory. From the Holocaust, the World Wars, the Atlantic Slave Trade, the 9/11, the Rwandan Genocide, to the civil wars in Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and so on, major catastrophic events around the world have dominated literary memory studies, often overlooking individual memory. This article examines the imbrication of individual memory of a lover with the collective memory of a nation, and vice versa, in Hyginus Ekwuazi's *That Other Country*. Drawing theoretical insights from the assumptions of Maurice Halbwachs which challenge the autonomy of memory, the paper shows how the poet persona's individual memory of his lover is shaped by social context on the one hand. On the other hand, it shows how collective memory of a "nation" also impacts the poet persona's individual memory. It goes further to demonstrate how the tonality of the poet's versification of both memories makes the selected poems come across not only as a memory verse, but also as an elegiac verse.

Key words: Individual memory, Collective memory, *That Other Country*, Nigerian poetry, the Nigerian Civil War

Introduction

As with many others, memory is one phenomenon which lends itself to multiplicity of understandings and sometimes complexities. This, according to Vita Fortunati and Elena Lambert, is precisely because it is highly variable and dynamic. In its most literal and active sense, memory is synonymous with storing and recollecting information. While it seems attractive to stick to this literal understanding of memory in order to avoid complexifications, it is still necessary to unpack two dimensions critical to the conception of the phenomenon in order to give subsequent analysis a proper anchor.

One issue that is both contentious and central to the theory and praxis of memory is its bifurcation into individual and collective categories or a conflation of both. Ordinarily, there seems to be no argument about what individual memory is or should be. After all, we all remember or recall things, using our cognitive faculty without any recourse to interaction with another person, that is, often alone. The same thing happens when we forget, as the act of forgetting takes

place in our individual cognition. Yet, scholars of memory, dating back to foundational ones such as Frederic Bartlett and Maurice Halbwachs argue that there is no such thing as autonomy of memory or a strictly individual memory, while still maintaining that memories are shaped by socio-cultural contexts. According to Halbwachs, it is “in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (38). This view implies that memory is not just about what occupies an individual’s passive mind, but how the mind works in relation to what obtains in society. If memory is therefore understood in this light, which is that memory can neither *be* nor *become* without some outside or external influences impinging upon it, how then may we proceed to speak of what constitutes the notion of individual memory and what makes up collective memory? Or, is it that all memories are collectively shared?

In his engagement with the seeming conflation of individual and collective memories, Jefferey Olick attempts an intervention by pointing out that “collective memory is merely a broad, sensitizing umbrella, and not a precise operational definition” (158). He goes further to note that collective memory is a combination of what he describes as *mnemonic products and practices*. While *products* refer to such things as stories, rituals, images, pictures, records, speeches, and the like; *practices* include, among others, recall, commemoration, regret, renunciation, denial, acknowledgement, rationalization and so forth. More importantly, Olick concludes that focusing on collective memory as “a variety of *products and practices*” is a better way “to reframe the antagonism between individualist and collectivist approaches to memory... as a matter of moments in a dynamic process” (158). This view reasonably demonstrates a clarity that can be considered quite sufficient to lay the matter of conflation to rest.

Perhaps it is also in anticipation of the need for clarity such as this that Halbwachs eventually distinguishes between autobiographical memory and historical memory, where the former is described as remembered events of one’s own life as directly experienced by one. The latter, on the other hand, refers to events to which a group can lay claim. Generally, memory scholars recognize that while memory-making begins as an individual activity, it is ultimately shaped by influences beyond the individual. This explains why emphasis in memory studies has always been on collective memory. In this article, I bring the representation of memory in Hyginus Ekwuazi’s *That Other Country* under scrutiny with a view to deepening and extending critical engagement with memory in Nigerian literature. Unlike extant studies’ almost

exclusive preoccupation with collective memory, the article engages with both individual and collective memories in Ekwuazi's selected collection. Using Halbwachs's theoretical insights which challenge the autonomy of individual memory, the article shows how individual memory of the poet-persona in the collection are mediated by interactions and relationships with others, and how collective memory also shapes individual memory. It goes further to show how both memories conspire to place some psychological and emotional burden on the poet-persona, and makes the collection to come across not only as a memory verse, but also as an elegiac verse.

Memory in African Literature

Memory studies in postcolonial African scholarship, Sakiru Adebayo notes, occupies a rather marginal space despite the practice of memory politics on the continent. To be sure, memory studies is even more peripheral in African literary scholarship. This is in spite of the fact that historical memories about Africa and its representation in creative writings offer comparable weight to that which dominates contemporary memory studies in general – the Holocaust, the world wars, and 9/11. Without doubt, memories of the Atlantic Slave Trade, colonialism, as well as wars and violence of different magnitudes on the continent, hold as much potential for scholarly engagement as the Holocaust and similar catastrophes. Yet, while such historical events have not really been ignored in African literary criticism in general, engaging them from the perspective of memory studies is quite scarce. Besides Adebayo's recently published *Continuous Pasts*, the other extant work in memory studies in African literature is Tim Woods' *African Pasts*.

In his book, Adebayo examines the representation of collective memories in selected African novels, using the texts to make a case for what he calls African Transnational Memory (ATM), a concept which sees memories of conflicts in postcolonial African countries as interconnected, and with shared commonalities across national geographies. Although Adebayo proposes and centralizes ATM as a framework for reading memory texts from Africa, he goes further to also suggest the idea of ancestral memory as another possible framework for the studies of African memories. As a pioneer theoretical offering in African memory studies, one cannot agree more with Hanna Teichler that Adebayo's work was long overdue.

However, like Adebayo's work, and most memory studies in other parts of the world, Woods' *African Pasts* also focuses on collective memories. In his work, Woods largely examines history-memory relation, directing his focus on collective experiences such as apartheid in South Africa in particular, and

colonialism in Africa in general. Clearly, individual or autobiographical memory is sidestepped in the emerging matrix of African memory studies. In other words, like studies on the Holocaust and other devastating events in the global north and parts of the global south, emerging African memory studies also privileges collective memory, despite the fact that there are imaginative uptakes on memory at both individual and collective levels in African literature.

Ekwuazi's *That Other Country* is one of many examples. The collection comprises thirty-two poems, all of which explore memory in one way or another. In fact, to underscore the thematic focus of the collection, in the section entitled "In lieu of a Preface" (Ekwuazi 6), the poet reflects on memory as a human phenomenon, and submits that man is a creature sentenced to continual preoccupation with memory. He also shares the view that the burden of certain memories may be fatal if other memories, especially pleasant ones, do not replace or mitigate their effects. However, despite recognising the mitigating effect of pleasant memories, the poet's versification of memory in the collection is unrelentingly sombre, thus inviting more than a cursory interest.

Versifying Memories of a "Lover"

In "The feeling persists" (Ekwuazi 13), one of the early poems that explore memory in *That Other Country*, the poet persona's remembrance of his former lover, as he thinks of returning home from some distant place, marks the beginning of memorialization in the collection. After what appears like many years of separation and conscious efforts to forget the same, the thought of returning home evokes a memory of his lover, who had falsely accused him of causing a drought in the land because he killed the bird that sang for rain. As the urge to return excites memory of his former lover, the persona soon discovers that the remembrance of the lover is "like a strand of dried meat / between... teeth / where no broomstick can reach" (Ekwuazi 14). In other words, his memory of the lover is riddled with pain and discomfort. Thus, as he journeys homeward, he becomes overwhelmed with loneliness, and each step becomes a pain comparable to that of "digging out / the strand of venison in the cavity / of a decayed tooth / where no salve can reach" (Ekwuazi 15). While this comparison clearly speaks of remembering as an active component of memory practice, rather than a passive storage, the backdrop to the comparison also incites the need to see his memory construction in the given context as inflected by a social frame. We can see that it is the persona's remembrance of home that incites his anamnestic relation with his erstwhile lover. In other words, his remembrance of home provides the stimulus that activates the remembrance of his lover, which in turn shapes the way he recalls. With the persona also linking

the recall with the incident of her false accusation against him in the past, Halbwachs' view that a coherent remembrance is only possible within a group or social context is confirmed. The persona's reliance on a social framework in order to recall is more forcefully seen in some earlier lines in the poem: "and the memories of this home – / those memories that I've taken with me – / they are the remembrances / of you / that I thought I'd forgotten" (Ekwuazi 13).

Whereas the remembering of the lover comes with some pain that may be attributed to the false accusation, it also frames the current disposition of the persona as a deeply sad person. To call attention to the emotional torture and pain that remembering the lover has caused him, I cite again directly from the poem:

... this mixture of
love and guilt and bitterness and sorrow
which seeps into my blood
and makes me pant for air
each time you ride into my memory –
no longer will it poison my day (Ekwuazi 16).

It is important to pay attention to the feelings notable in these lines. Are they really feelings about the lover in the present, or feelings connected with the memory of the lover as it concerns their past association? While it seems more like the latter, the last line of the excerpt suggests that they also have potential to impact the present. In fact, the phrase "no longer" implies that up till lately the persona has been struggling with such feelings. By raising this observation in form of a question, I wish to underscore how shifting or variable social frames may impact memory. And, with this kind of serious emotional pain, the resolve in the last line comes as no surprise. Here, the poet expresses a sentiment that recalls the English poet, Thomas Wyatt's disposition in his famous sonnet "Farewell to Love". In Wyatt's poem, the persona laments over the pain often associated with love, and relates his disillusionment with the emotion, declaring it poisonous. Like Wyatt, the persona in Ekwuazi's "The feeling persists" (Ekwuazi 13-16) grieves in pain over the bitterness and sadness that accompany his memory of love.

In the poem entitled "Colour me grey", which is also concerned with memory of love, colour "grey" functions more or less as a *lieux de memoire*, a term

coined by Pierre Nora, which literally means site of memory, and has become quite influential in recent memory studies. According to Nora, “a *lieux de memoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community” (xvii). I use the phrase “functions more or less” because while the term *lieux de memoire* is usually applied in the context of collective memory, its symbolic import in the context of individual memory in which it is deployed in “Colour me grey” warrants the formulation. This is particularly so because the idea of the object becoming a symbolic element due to “human will” (xvii) over a period of time may be difficult to apply in the context of individual memory. The main point in Nora’s articulation of the concept is that memory is mostly attached to real sites which are symbolic and functional. In this poem, colour “grey” refers to a real object that appears not only symbolic and functional to the reader, but also linked to memory. In the poem, “grey” refers to the persona’s beard’s transformation from colour black to grey, which signals a part of his ageing reality. However, the colour is deployed as a symbol of pain and a trigger of memory in the verse.

As the persona stands in front of a mirror counting the streaks of grey in his beard, he remembers how people compliment the colour grey by saying that it makes him look distinctive. While happy to note that those who compliment his grey beards are unaware of its symbolic import for him, all memories he thought he had perfectly and permanently locked up, “buried deep beyond a resurrection” (Ekwuazi 38), came back swarming over him. The memories are, however, unpleasant, as the sight of his grey beards in the mirror brings back painful memories to him. He recalls an occasion when his lover made him to shave off his beards on account of the claim that the greyness made “*her*” look old. After shaving off the beard, she fussed over him with wet kisses. The wetness on his cheeks had, in a figurative sense, barely dried up when he got the news of her death in an automobile accident. With the incident of shaving his grey beards being the last memory associated with the lover, shaving becomes not just a reminder of his tragic loss, the greyness of the beards, which originally prompted the idea of shaving, becomes a site of memory whose sight regularly evokes painful memories. Thus, whereas the persona’s memory here seems personal, the construction of the memory is framed by relationship and interaction with others. Without other people complimenting the greyness of his beards as a mark of distinctive look, the memory of pain would not have arisen. In other words, the compliments not only act as a sad reminder when his lover compelled him to shave his beard, the irony that underlines the compliments as harbingers of sadness shapes the remembrance and makes it even more painful.

As Aleida Assmann reminds us, “the dynamics of individual memory consists in a perpetual interaction between remembering and forgetting” (97). Therefore, it is also pertinent to note that active forgetting, otherwise called intentional forgetting, also plays a role in the memory making of the persona here. He had made deliberate efforts to bury the memory of his lover’s death, but others would have it untombed by unsolicited compliments. While the persona is intentionally trying to forget, others are fortuitously causing him remembrance, thereby showing that biases and psychological pressures from others influence individual memory. By constraining the persona to remember what he does not want to, the recollection is made more painful. To call attention to the intensity of his pain, I cite the concluding lines of the poem:

but I knew, even if I had my life,
from womb to tomb, to live all over again–
I knew I would never shave again:
not in any number of lifetimes
would I ever shave again” (Ekwuazi 39)

He would never shave again in order to avoid seeing his grey beards in the mirror again, which also means to avoid remembering his last moments with his lover. Like in the poems examined earlier, “Colour me grey” is used to limn the fact that while individual memory as a cognitive artefact inheres biologically with the memory-bearer, articulating memories is usually inflected by interaction with contexts. This is because, as Henri Bergson notes, remembering is an active engagement that is fluid and changing. As the foregoing appraisal of “The feeling persists” and “Colour me grey” shows that memory-making is not absolutely an individual cognitive praxis, the next section uses “I shed lava-hot tears for both halves of the yellow sun” and “A dear Frank’s letter” to show how collective memory also impacts individual memory.

Writing Memories of a “Nation”

In separate but related works, Adebisi-Adelabu and Esamagu, and Adebisi-Adelabu and Aguele have noted that national consciousness is a major thematic focus of modern Nigerian poetry. In Ekwuazi’s shared preoccupation with this theme, the Nigerian Civil War is a major focus in *That Other Country*. Not long after its independence from Britain, Nigeria went through a civil war between 1967 and 1970. One of the then four regions in the country, the Eastern Region, declared its secession from the Federal Republic of Nigeria as Biafra in May 1967, but was forcefully resisted by the other three regions. The resultant war

is variously referred to as the Nigerian Civil War, the Nigeria-Biafra War, or the Biafran War. Besides the very suggestive title of the collection, many of the poems therein thematise the traumatic memory of this war.

“I shed lava hot tears for both halves of the yellow sun” (Ekwuazi 17) is preoccupied with memories of the war, in a way similar to the depiction of trauma teased out by Adebisi-Adelabu and Aguele in their reading of *The Monkey’s Eyes*. The “half of a yellow sun”, from which Adichie’s (2007) well known novel also got its name, is the emblem engraved on the Biafran flag, and is said to symbolise hope and a glorious future for the “nation” of Biafra. Since the civil war, the image of half of a yellow sun is still used as a symbol of Biafra. Therefore, Ekwuazi’s reference to “both halves of the yellow sun” (Ekwuazi 17) in the title of this particular poem stimulates more than a cursory interest. While a half of “both halves” of the sun is not difficult to figure out as referring to Biafra, one is a bit unsure of the referent of the other half. Could the one-half be referring to the real Biafra of 1967-70 and the other half referring to a dream-Biafra of the future? Or, could the poet have the rest of Nigeria in mind as the other half? Despite the double entendre inherent in the poet’s phraseology here, the poem demonstrably memorialises the war experience as a collective one for the Igbo, the dominant ethnic group in the then secessionist Eastern Nigeria. The memory of the war is not just a collective one for the Igbo because of their greater involvement, but also because the experience has come to shape the Igbo identity since the event of the war.

In line with Olick’s notion of collective memory as *mnemonic products* and *practices*, “I shed lava hot tears for both halves of the yellow sun” (Ekwuazi 17) interestingly functions simultaneously as a story and as a reminiscence. It is a story in confirmation of trauma’s belatedness where the narrator, in this case the poet persona, suddenly becomes overwhelmed with memories of a war while relaxing at a beach. As a reminiscence, the persona recollects with fondness the sonorous rendition of the Biafran anthem by his deceased lover. Paradoxically, it is the lyrics of the anthem that would later incite trauma in a belated mode.

Although the memory of the war is presented from an individual perspective by the poet persona, we soon realise that the experience which inspired the remembrance is a shared one. Besides the Biafran anthem sung by his lover, and the experience of a certain relation called Nwayinmma who is also mentioned in the poem, the persona also speaks of “the victors and the vanquished” (Ekwuazi 19), who had either become bonded or branded due to the war. In other words, the persona is speaking of a burden that he shares with others. It is particularly useful to note that the persona’s memory is activated by the voice

of his lover, who had not even been born as of the time of the war, singing the Biafran anthem; an act which is itself a form of memory making, one described by Marianne Hirsch as postmemory. For the persona's lover, and many contemporary Biafran activists, especially members of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB), singing the anthem is simultaneously a form of post-memory-making and a practice aimed at identity-construction and solidarity-invocation.

The third stanza of the anthem in particular inscribes most of the ordeals which Biafrans went through during the war, especially as witnesses to large scale starvation and mass deaths. In short, the lyrics of the anthem, also metonymic of the collective Biafran memory, bring back personal but painful and traumatic war memories hitherto trapped in the subconscious of the persona. These include memories of Nwanyinmma grieving the loss of her husband and children who were butchered in the 1966 pre-war anti-Igbo pogrom in Northern Nigeria and the mass return of fellow Igbos to the South East of Nigeria in dangerous circumstances. These recollections, together with the lyrics of the anthem, both impel the persona to shed lava-hot tears for both halves of the yellow sun, and transform the breeze along the beach into a "into a whirlwind / of pain too deep for tears /...[and] too intense for consolation" (Ekwuazi, 2010: 18). In other words, while the persona's individual reminiscence evokes a shared burdensome memory with others, the memory evoked in turn deepens the persona's painful "free floating memories" of his lover.

It is important to note that the persona's mnemonic practice in this context aligns with Olick's view that "no matter how concrete mnemonic products may be, they gain their reality only by being used, interpreted, and reproduced or changed" (158). The use or interpretation brought to bear by the persona on the symbol "half of a yellow sun" seems not only concerned with the Biafra of 1967-1970 because shedding tears for "both halves of the yellow sun" suggests a lament over two related but different things. With his mnemonic practice figuring both sides to the conflict as "the victors" as well as "the vanquished" (Ekwuazi 19), the persona may after all be referring to the Biafra of 1967-1970 and the Nigeria of the same period. Like J. P. Clark-Bekederemo insists in one of his poems, all Nigerians, including former Biafrans, are casualties of the war. The persona in "I shed lava-hot tears for both halves of the yellow sun" also seems to insist that those perceived as "the vanquished", the Biafrans, were "victors" as much as other Nigerians were also "vanquished". This sounds plausible because the sense of solidarity hitherto uncommon among the Igbo before the war was made possible during the war, and also endures thereafter,

whereas division among Nigerians after the war belies the purported unity enforced by the war.

Given the collective roots of the memory that inflicts so much pain on the persona as he reminisces about the voice and passion of his deceased lover, the agency of the individual in collective memory-making becomes very pertinent. In fact, if collective memory is plural, rather than monolithic, as Halbwachs insists, then one is also inclined to share the view that collective memory is an aggregation of different individuals' perceptions, thoughts about, and understandings of the same experience. Accordingly, the persona's individual traumatic memory about his lover deepens the pain of collective memory he shares with other Igbo victims of the war.

In a more profound way, another poem entitled "A dear Frank's letter" (Ekwuazi 69) evinces an imbrication of individual and collective memories. Like the previous one above, the poem is both about individual and collective memories. Firstly, it is about the persona's memory of his late friend, Frank. Secondly, it is essentially about the Igbo collective memory of the Nigerian Civil War. In the first part of the poem, the persona recalls an evening of recreation with his friend, when they attended a poetry reading, wine, dined, and enjoyed the company of others. A particularly memorable feature of the reading occasion is his friend's critique of one of the poems read as "rhythmically asthmatic and asthmatically / rhythmic" (Ekwuazi 70), as well as the uproar the comment generated. The comment would become a significant memory marker when the news of Frank's death came and the tragedy was attributed to an asthma attack. Several years later, when tears over the death had ceased to flow, the memory of the evening returns like a belated trauma, renewing a silent grief. In the persona's words, "each time I am at a reading / each time I drink a cold beer / each time I eat a hard-boiled egg / each time I see a tin of sardines" (Ekwuazi 70), the memory of Frank's death returns with a sense of loss. This situation, whereby an activity rather than an object or place associated with an event triggers the memory of such an event, again recalls Nora's notion of *lieux de memoire*.

However, while the persona explores all that happened to his friend and himself since the evening of their recreation at the British Council in terms of the pain it evokes, he also reflects on how that particular memory always excavates other memories. He observes:

that evening of drinks and readings
at the British Council always turns another
page of memory's album of photographs:
I am looking at that big scar of the war -
The scar you wore on your heart
like a hair shirt-that scar which only those
very close to you could see (Ekwuazi, 2010: 71)

These lines naturally prompt a question: what is the connection between the evening of recreation at the British Council and the memory of war cryptically alluded to in the verse? And which war? While subsequent lines de-crypts the war as the Nigerian Civil War, they are unable to establish any link between the memory of the war and the evening of the recreation. However, a careful unpacking of the previous lines, especially the first of the five sections that make up the entire poem throws some light on this. The most memorable action by Frank during their "evening of drinks", which also happens to be on the persona's mind when the news of his friend's death broke, was the debate over whether a certain poem was "rhythmically asthmatic and asthmatically / rhythmic" (Ekwuazi, 70) or not. That the friend was killed by an asthmatic attack later on therefore always takes the persona's memory to that evening. The evening, in turn, always turns another page of memory associated with the late friend, which is a memory of the civil war that the friend was always preoccupied with. It is therefore interesting that the poet persona would draw on the personal memory of his outing with his late friend to reflect on the collective memory of the civil war. Thus, Ekwuazi's versification limns how individual memory could activate collective memory and how collective memory could engender grief at a strictly personal level.

One of the most central events to the Igbo collective memory of the Biafran war is the Asaba Massacre, where hundreds of civilians, particularly men, were killed by the Federal troops on account of sympathetic identification with Biafrans. The late Frank, apparently obsessed and traumatised by the memory of the tragedy, had been researching and writing a book on the war crime. The persona's recollection of his friend's undertaking in this regard, with its accompanying pain, further underscores what the poet persona earlier refers to as "the deluge of our pain" (Ekwuazi, 2010: 72). Thus, while personal memory triggers pains of loss in the persona, the subject of the pain, Frank's death, also

triggers the pains of war which he shares with others as a collective experience. Also, the persona not only recalls his plan with Frank to undertake a pilgrimage to the place where Christopher Okigbo was killed in the course of fighting for Biafra, Opi Junction, but also their plan to smoke pipe to the late poet's memory. This reference to the locale of Okigbo's death effectively functions as a site of collective memory for Biafran intellectuals such as the poet persona and his late friend. His plan to mount two plaques in memory of the late poet also inscribes a resolve to resist official attempt at erasing the memory of the war. What is perhaps most vital about the explorations of memory at the two levels in the poem is that both are denominated by grief, pain and trauma, just the way Ottanelli and Bird (2017) describe in their book about the Asaba Massacre.

Memory and Tonality of Mourning

In this section, I briefly reflect on how memory practice at both levels of individual and collective memory-making in the collection is readable as an elegiac versification. With due consideration to formal properties such as metrical patterns and rhyme scheme, the poems in Ekwuazi's collection can hardly be categorised as elegy. Yet, many of the poems, though in different degrees, exhibit a tonality that is at once mournful, reflective and sorrowful. They basically explore individual and collective experiences of persons in terms of events of the lives they lived and the relationship they shared. In the poems, lovers, wife, friend, and the ethnic group to which the persona belongs feature as subjects. Whereas some of the persons are deceased, it is not the events of their death that the poems focus on, it is the memories of the lives they lived. In other words, while there are no laments or griefs over the event of death itself, memories of the lives of the dead are recalled with a sorrowful tone. This cuts across the four poems examined in this article.

In "The feeling persists" (Ekwuazi 13), it is a feeling of loneliness and tone of sorrow that percolate the lines. The imagery evoked by the idea of something "weighing down / the footsteps of the mind" (Ekwuazi, 13), during which the persona's struggle to stop remembering her former lover, betrays dejection. Besides, as the memories of the time the lovers shared in the past continue to haunt the persona, as signaled in such diction as "sorrow, bitterness, guilt and love" (Ekwuazi 16), he simultaneously laments and reflects on his loss. Although he declares that memories of his lover "no longer will... poison [his] day" (Ekwuazi, 16), the persona's acceptance of the reality of their sad separation brings his grief to a closure. However, with such imagery of loss as depicted above, his choice to reconcile with reality is further betrayed as a doleful one.

As one of the poems that deal with personal memory in the collection, “Colour me grey” (Ekwuazi 38) is largely a recollection of some fond memories. The poet persona recalls memories of his wife, as well as reflects on the gravity of losing her to an automobile accident. From the mirthful and nostalgic tone in the first section and the first part of the second section of the poem respectively, the latter part of the second section to the end of the poem is suffused with shock, heartbrokenness and a woeful tone. It is a shock over the suddenness of her death, a heartbrokenness from loss of a partner, and a woeful affect due to the irreversibility of the tragedy. These feelings inevitably call attention to the sorrowful note on which the poem ends. Indeed, the sorrowful end may well suggest that just like life itself is an admixture of joy and sorrow, a memory of powerful, positive and joyful emotion of love is also sometimes tempered with elements of sadness. Thus, unlike the Freudian conception of mourning as a healthy process which often results in reinvestment in life, the continued woeful affect occasioned by the irreversibility of the tragedy in this instance resonates with the Derridean position that mourning is never complete.

Such a sad disposition is also prevalent in “I shed lava-hot tears for both halves of the yellow sun”. In the poem, the persona laments not the death of family and friends, but the loss of Biafrans’ dignity. His voice, quite subdued, imagines Biafra as “a country doomed at birth” (Ekwuazi 17). As he listens to the anthem of the ill-fated Biafra in his imagination, each word of its lyrics transforms into a tear drop as he grieves for “a hapless and dispossessed people” (Ekwuazi 18). Remarkably, as the poem inches towards its end, the persona’s anguish is foregrounded in the last two lines where his grief is further underscored by his shedding of tears. Notably, his private reflection on the memory of the Biafran War does not only give him away as sad about the tragedy of the war, it also underlines what Dominick La Capra characterizes as “acting out” (496); in this case “acting out” the trauma of the Nigerian Civil War as an instance of unfinished mourning.

While the poet emphatically states at the beginning of “A dear Frank’s letter” (Ekwuazi 69) that the poem is “mainly about that evening of / drinks and readings at the British Council” (Ekwuazi 69), it is also a meditation on personal human and cultural losses. Whereas it is about the memory of a good time once shared with his friend, the persona’s memorialisation of the moment is simultaneously nostalgic and tormenting. After dwelling on the lightheartedness of the occasion in a tone that is initially and pleasantly convivial, then sober, the poem gradually unfolds with intimations of sadness that the memory also brings. The evening of drinks and readings “turns another page of memory’s

album of photographs” (Ekwuazi 71), which is that of mental visualisation of the scar that the Civil War had etched on Frank’s heart, as well as of his research into the tragedy of Asaba Massacre during the war. This does not only bring him some pains, it also recalls the emotional and psychological pains that Frank always experienced during his research on the tragic incident. As both of these also bring “a mist of unshed tears” (Ekwuazi 71) to the persona’s eyes, a tendency towards a refusal to move on is registered.

On his frequent occasions of remembering Frank, the persona informs us that he actually grieves “well beyond / all known and unknown boundaries of grief...” (Ekwuazi 74). Just like this observation underscores a personally mournful dimension to the memorialisation of Frank in the poem, the concluding lines’ re-statement that the poem “is mainly about that evening of / drinks and poetry at the British Council...” (Ekwuazi 74) would encourage one to possibly apprehend the verse as one strictly about personal memory. On the contrary, the poem speaks more to the collective memory of pain and anguish that the Nigerian Civil War caused the Igbo persona, as Awuzie (2020) forcefully argues. Therefore, the persona’s references to grief, pain and tears betray not just personal sadness about the loss of a friend, but also sorrow and lamentation over collective human, and cultural losses of the Igbo. In short, Ekwuazi’s memorialisation in the poem, at both individual and collective levels, is both traumatic and mournful.

Conclusion

The article has examined memory at both individual and collective levels in the four poems selected from Ekwuazi’s *That Other Country*. In the poet’s representation of individual memory, privilege is given to memories of his lover or partner, as the case may be. However, despite the private and deeply personal nature of such memories, they are linked to public or shared experiences with others. In some instances, such memories are stimulated by non-personal incidents or issues, while in other instances, the memories actually stimulate other memories of experiences shared with others. At the collective level, memories of the Nigerian Civil War dominate. Yet the memories are mostly evoked in contexts of personal reflection or private ideations. Also, the article shows that it is not only individual memory that is shaped by social contexts. Just as individual memory is influenced by relationship and interaction with others, so is collective memory also mediated by individual memories and personal ideas. In this symbiosis, the article observes that the poet’s memorialisations of both personal and collective experiences in the poems are largely laced with a doleful tone, making the poems not only effectively elegiac,

but also establishing a relationship, even if a tenuous one, between unpleasant memory and mourning.

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