Unsettling the coloniality of power: form, grievability, and futurity in Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems (1996)

Rogers Asempasah¹ and Emmanuel Saboro²

Abstract: This essay reframes Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems (1996) around coloniality of power and Derrida’s ethic of learning to live finally. Focusing on form or rhetorical structure, we argue that Opoku-Agyemang’s poems on Cape Coast Castle and the slave trade suggest that the possibility of grievability and giving voice to the disremembered is contingent on the disavowal of silence and unsettling the coloniality of power of Cape Coast Castle. The paper shows that Cape Coast Castle is a contestatory site where imperial voice and power are confronted with alternative voices and that the disavowal of silence constitutes a potent rhetorical and ethico-political strategy for learning to live finally or futurity.

Subjects: Literature; Literature by Geographic Area; Post-Colonial Studies; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Rogers Asempasah (PhD) is a senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Cape Coast, Ghana and a Fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), African Humanities Program (F’20). His research interests focus broadly on postcolonial literature. In the last few years Dr. Asempasah has directed his research focus on popular culture in Ghana. He is currently working on a book project tentatively titled Beyond the Tunes: The Animal Gaze, Critique and Pedagogies of the Everyday in Highlife Music in Ghana.

Emmanuel Saboro (PhD) is a senior Lecturer in African Oral Literature, Slavery and Memory Studies at the Centre for African and International Studies, University of Cape Coast, Ghana and a fellow of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), African Humanities Programme(F’17). Dr. Saboro is an interdisciplinary scholar with research interests centred on the interface between Literature/Folklore, Memory and Oral History. He has studied and published extensively on oral and material cultures on enslavement among northern communities in Ghana. His book, Wounds of Our Past: Remembering Captivity, Enslavement and Resistance in African Oral Narratives is forthcoming in the Global Slavery Series Brill (Leiden and Boston).

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The slave trade and enslavement are regarded by many as Africa’s greatest tragedy and its devastating consequences are still visible in contemporary times. Scholars have shown how this tragic story of slavery and the slave trade in the modern world is not a pretty one. Its memory still constitutes an unhappy chapter within our collective history which, one might think, is best forgotten. This paper contributes to the existing body of scholarship on how memories of this dark part of our history still resonates through both expressive and material forms by examining Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle.
Keywords: coloniality of power; Cape Coast Castle; form; silence; grievability; Opoku-Agyemang

The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of an act of thinking in thought itself.

Gilles Deleuze, 1994.

The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995.

1. Introduction

The transatlantic slave trade continues to haunt the collective memories and everyday practices of Africans, especially communities that directly lived it either as unwilling witnesses, conscripts, casualties or as active participants in a diabolical regime of corporeal commodification and disposability. The dominant response to this post-transatlantic slave trade hauntology is silence.\(^1\) For most communities in West Africa, silence constitutes a will to annihilate or banish the slave trade from cultural and social memory. Thus silence is the figure of a discontinuity between a painful, disconcerting, and ignominious past, and the desire for an alternative social configuration (Green, 2012; Hosley, 2008; Kowaleski-Wallace, 2006). But as various scholars have shown, silence does not necessarily mean absence; traumatic pasts are subtly transmitted through a complex matrix of mnemonics of memorialization or performativity such as ceremonies, masking traditions, rituals and magical discourses, bodily practices, and oaths (Argenti, 2007; Connerton, 1989; Shaw, 2002). While these survival techniques indicate the “multi-dimensional nature of memory” (Green, 232) on the transatlantic slave trade, they are also suggestive of attempts by communities to naturalize and keep as secrets histories of the slave trade and indigenous forms of slavery (Smith, 2016). Little wonder then that in West Africa literary imagination, the slave trade and its painful legacies are articulated through metaphor (Murphy, 2007).

It is within this context that Opoku-Agyemang’s *Cape Coast Castle* (1996) marks a radical shift in conceptualizations of silence by linking it to passivity and complicity. In other words, Opoku-Agyemang stages a radical critique of silence as the condition of possibility for genuine grievability\(^2\) and futurity in contemporary Africa. *Cape Coast Castle* is a thoughtful rumination on Cape Coast Castle as the embodiment of historical dehumanization and injustice, a perverse structure of disposability, and a provocation to rethink postcolonial being, agency, mourning and liberation. Using Cape Castle as a metonym for the transatlantic slave trade and imperial discourse or historiography, Opoku-Agyemang deploys a poetics of contestation and disruption of coloniality of power and being in order to excavate silenced and disremembered voices. The *Collection has received some critical commentary*. Some critics have pointed to how *Cape Coast Castle* relocates the tragedy of the slave trade to Africa through a poetics of mourning and burial (Nartey & Kakra, 2011). Smith (2016) has pointed to Opoku-Agyemang’s deployment of “multiple narratives” as a strategy that breaks the silence around the subject of the transatlantic slave trade and claims “unspoken memories” (p. 125). However, the scholarship is marked by a profound absence on how the form or rhetorical architecture of the *Collection* affirms the ideological thrust of unsettling the coloniality of power of imperial historiography and representation. The result is that Opoku-Agyemang’s problematization of silence as a means of articulating an ethic of learning to live finally has rarely been explored. This paper seeks to address this gap through a close reading of the “Introduction” and some selected poems. Our contention is that, for Opoku-Agyemang, genuine grievability and futurity is contingent on a radical rejection of silence and the coloniality of power of received historiography and representation. Our analysis is framed around coloniality of power and Derrida’s location “learning to live finally”. Therefore, in the next section we focus on the concept of coloniality of power and how we contextualize it in our reading of *Cape Coast Castle*. Drawing on Burke, the third section discusses the rhetorical force of the form or structure of the collection by paying attention to how Opoku-Agyemang uses the “Introduction”
as a framing apparatus. The penultimate section is a close reading of some selected poems in order to demonstrate how the strategy of decentering the Castle’s coloniality of power is rhetorically orchestrated. The conclusion evaluates the implications of our analysis.

2. Coloniality of power: conceptual clarification

Originally theorized by the coloniality/decolonial group, coloniality of power has become a powerful traveling conceptual and analytical tool that is deployed in examining “the interrelations among modern forms of exploitation and domination” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 242). Derived from the idea of coloniality as “the symbolic, invisible and indelible traces of the colonial experience” (Giraldo, 2016:161), coloniality of power designates a complex power mechanism that revolves around racial formation, the control of labour, the state, and knowledge production (Maldonado-Torres, 2007; Mignolo, 2007; Quijano, 2000; Restrepo, 2018). Theorists of coloniality of power therefore make a distinction between coloniality and colonialism. As Maldonado-Torres (2007) emphasizes,

Coloniality is different from colonialism. Colonialism denotes a political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation, which makes such nation an empire. Coloniality, instead, refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus coloniality survives colonialism. (243).

The concept of coloniality of power has been applied in the African context in order to shed new light on Africa’s predicament (Fasakin, 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). For the purpose of this paper, coloniality of power describes the enduring power wielded by Cape Coast Castle as an authoritative colonial voice and discourse. Coloniality of power is relevant to our reading of Cape Coast Castle not just because it “opens up an analytic and critical door that reveals the darker side” of the colonialism (Mignolo; as cited in Maldonado-Torres, 2004, p. 39); it is also important to understanding Opoku-Agyemang’s exploration of the mechanics of Cape Coast Castle’s continuing construction of coloniality of being. Unlike decolonial theorists, coloniality of being in this paper describes a form of postcolonial subject whose actions/inactions ironically perpetuate the power or ideology of colonial thought. As our analysis of “What the Castle Said” demonstrates, coloniality of power in Cape Coast Castle operates at the level of colonial discourse that represents the colonized as animal and disposable. Therefore, the physical and psychic trauma of colonialism is easily elided in the grand narratives of colonial history. Coloniality of power thus denies the possibility of postcolonial grievability or learning to live finally.

3. Learning to live finally: form and the disavowing silence

Most communities in Ghana are often unwilling to discuss openly the subject of slavery and peoples slave origins because of its potential to fuel inter or intra family or ethnic tensions. Silencing and disremembering is therefore a kind of social censorship. Some traditional leaders have in the past enforced customary laws to prohibit the discussion of slave origins in order to ensure social harmony. At the attainment of political independence, most African countries coming out of colonial domination were more interested in calling for national unity and integration. There were calls to move beyond Africa’s dark history- a history based on narratives about slavers and enslavers. For most African leaders, it was more convenient to forget or disremember slavery and the slave trade for the collective good.

Consequently, the issue of how formally colonized territories and people can reconstitute themselves as active historical subjects is at the heart of postcolonial and decolonial studies. Fanon’s diagnosis of the crisis of the postcolonial nation-state and his ruminations on the possibilities of postcolonial freedom continues to be influential. So are recent works by Mbembe (2001, 2002), Scott (2004, 2014a, 2014b) and Bignall (2010). More importantly, African creative writers have in various ways explored the possibilities of genuine postcolonial mourning and living. For
example, in Anowa (1970), Ama Ata Aidoo problematizes and draws critical attention to the long contested notions of remembering and forgetting the slave trade within Ghanaian collective history. As part of the ways of dealing with the dark part of our collective history, Aidoo criticizes Ghanaian society for not talking about the slave trade because good men and women try to forget. Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle falls within this broad ethico-political sensibility. This is why we propose that in order to understand the ethico-political force and the internal integrity of Cape Coast Castle, it is essential to return to our central claim that Cape Coast Castle encapsulates the ethic of learning to live finally. This ethic puts in proper perspective the rhetorical function of Opoku-Agyemang’s unsettling of coloniality of power and the quest for genuine grievability.

But what does learning to live finally mean and how does it explain Opoku-Agyemang’s denunciation of silence as a strategy for combatting the legacies of imperial histories of domination and shame? In the “Exordium” to his Specters of Marx, Derrida (1994) reflects on the ethical and political imperatives of the locution “I would like to learn to live finally” (xvi). “To learn to live finally,” Derrida argues, is a transindividual project and aspiration. It invokes a radical form of ethical responsibility and relationality to the dead, the Other. Put differently, “to learn to live finally” captures the desire for a social formation wherein the present and especially the future become meaningful or livable on the basis of communion with ghosts, the dead. It is important to remember that in Specters of Marx Derrida attempts to combat a form of endism that followed the collapse of communism and, for some apologists of capitalism, the obsolescence of Marx. At stake in Derrida’s rumination is the call for a historical sense or attunement in which the present and the possible future are contingent on a genuine dialogue with, rather than renunciation of, the past. Hence Derrida’s insistence that to learn to live finally is “ethics itself […] a politics of memory, of inheritance and of generations” (xviii). By this formulation, Derrida calls into question a modality of thought that positions the living on a temporal trajectory that configures the modern as, to borrow Kowaleski-Wallace’s (2006) felicitous phrase, “after those who came before us” (p. 208). Opoku-Agyemang, like Derrida, is interested in our engagements with ghosts. Unlike Derrida, however, Opoku-Agyemang’s hauntology revolves around slavery as a legacy of colonialism.

For communities that are grappling with the scars of the slave trade, the Derridean ethic of learning to live finally becomes a crucial way of interrogating the place of silence as a structure of survival. The slave trade resulted in economic and political destabilizations, massive geographical or territorial depopulation, and above all psychic destruction of being (Green, 2012). These have left a painful legacy of betrayal and shame. Under such circumstances, silence appears as the immediate mechanism for containing memories of pain and complicity. However, as we shall demonstrate later in this paper, for Opoku-Agyemang, to learn to live finally as a victim society, calls for unsettling the coloniality of power of colonial monuments such as Cape Coast Castle. Hence the disavowal of silence is compellingly presented as an epistemological and existential imperative in Cape Coast Castle. To appreciate Opoku-Agyemang’s conceptualization of silence in the collection, however, it is important to explore, briefly, some of the dominant ways silence has been represented. This is especially important because when Opoku-Agyemang says “The world does not listen to silence”, he is not just articulating an ethic; he is engaged in a politics of contestation of meaning or an implicit dialogue with certain existing conceptions of silence.

Silence, as most scholars of cultural memory have shown, is a complex phenomenon, although commonly viewed as a response to catastrophe or a traumatic event. Indeed the literature on silence is as diverse as it is complex (Crane, 2000; Ephratt, 2008; Kowaleski-Wallace, 2006; Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002; Vinitzky-Seroussi & Teeger, 2010; Winter & Emmanuel, 1999). For lack of space, we appropriate Ferguson’s immensely useful categorization of the dominant figurations of silence in the various disciplines. In “Silence: A Politics”, Ferguson (2011) argues that the diverse representations of silence can be crystallized into two: “denigrated silence” and “resistant silence.” Denigrated silence refers to the critical conception of silence as powerlessness, disempowerment, lack, negation of the norm, and as a threat to politics and community (pp. 115–117). Resistant silence, on the other hand, refers to the metaphorical conception of silence not just as withdrawal
or disavowal but as “a more overt refusal to participate in the normative linguistic practices of the state or society” (p. 119). Arguing that these conceptions of silence are limited, Ferguson puts forward “constitutive silence” as a third broad approach to conceptualizing silence. Unlike denigrated and resistant silence, constitutive silence describes the various ways silence is used to enable or constitute identities or “as a strategy to negotiate the competing realities of incommensurability and community” (p. 121). Rather than ask whether Opoku-Agyemang’s notion of silence in Cape Coast Castle falls within any of the above, we prefer to focus on the more productive question: what does the disavowal of silence mean and how is it articulated in the collection? It is from this perspective that form, unsettling the colonality of power and being, and the possibility of grievability, and learning to live finally emerge as meaningful categories in the exploration of Cape Coast Castle: A Collection.

In terms of form or structure, Cape Coast Castle is divided into four parts: “Introduction”; “Cape Coast Castle”; “People in Me,” and “First Trip to Sunrise”. Part I, “Cape Coast Castle”, is the longest and all the poems in this section revolve around the slave trade and Cape Coast Castle. According to Nartey and Kakraba (2011), form is “at the core of the subject of (re)writing the history of the slave experience” (p. 237) in Cape Coast Castle. Although this observation is insightful, it is also typical of most readings of the book that overlook the criticality of the “Introduction” as a potent thematic and rhetorical frame that anticipate the emergence of silence as a leitmotif in the poems in the succeeding parts. To grasp the broader internal logic of the poems that deal specifically with the experiences of the slave trade, it is pertinent to pay attention to the concepts and ideas deployed and contested in the “Introduction” and how these are taken up in specific poems in the collection. It is for this reason that we insist that the “Introduction” is integral to the rhetorical architecture of the collection.

Our emphasis on the “Introduction” as the starting point for reading form or rhetorical coherence in Cape Coast Castle takes its cue from Kenneth Burke’s exploration of literary form. Literary form, according to Burke (1968), is “an arousing and fulfillment of desires” (p. 124). Form in literature is crafted on a logic of expectation whereby “one part leads the reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence” (p. 124). Form, then, can be described as a mechanism that foregrounds the interrelationships between the parts of an artistic work. The function of form is to suggest internal logic; therefore, form governs reader expectations. Burke identifies five types of form: syllogistic progression, qualitative progression, repetitive form, conventional form, and minor or incidental form (p. 124). Only “syllogistic” and “repetitive” forms are relevant to our argument in this paper. Syllogistic progression takes the form of a step by step argumentation (p. 124). Syllogistic form engenders reader expectations on the basis that “given certain things, certain things must follow, the premises forcing the conclusion” (p. 124). In other words, reader desire or expectation follows a unidirectional arrow. Repetitive form, unlike syllogistic form, unfolds through the restatement of the same thing or theme in different ways or guises (p. 125). Our contention is that the “Introduction” to Cape Coast Castle functions as syllogistic form. It rhetorically prepares the reader for poems such as “What the Castle Said” and “What happens when people forget.” Repetitive form is also at play especially with the repetition of the dangers of silence in such poems as “Watering the silence”, “Of Ghosts and Guests” and “Eclipse”. “What the Castle said” also establishes a connection with poems such as “Supplication: Equiano’s Mother.”

To appreciate the significance of the “Introduction” to the rhetorical architecture and force of Opoku-Agyemang’s book, we must attend to its key ideas and overall message. The first thing to note is that the “Introduction” is driven by a spirit of critical rebellion and urgency that is aptly captured in the statement “The world does not listen to silence” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1996, p. 7). This rhetorical riposte captures the poet’s desire to decenter the power of Cape Coast Castle, the colonial edifice that presides over collective landscape and memory of Ghana. Therefore, it matters greatly how we understand the locution “The world does not listen to silence.” First, it could be understood as a refutation of the Adornoan thesis that silence is the fitting response to
catastrophe or unspeakable trauma (Adorno, 1981). Such silence, as the historian Saul Friedländer (1999) argues, proceeds from the assumption that “our traditional categories of conceptualization and representation may well be insufficient, our language itself problematic” to capture the catastrophic events (as cited in Schlant, 1999, p. 7). However, in the last few decades, various theorists and scholars of collective memory have shown that silence, exclusions and omissions may not necessarily be the result of the inadequacy or powerlessness of language to convey an “unspeakable reality” (Schlant, 5) but because people consider the past as “a shameful and embarrassing moment” that provokes or raises issues of “accountability and guilt” (Vinitzky-Seraussi & Teeger, 2010, pp. 1104–1105).

The locution can also be understood as an insistence on silence as the antithesis of being. In this second context, silence takes on the diabolical form of passivity and complicity in the historical injustices of the slave trade that was perpetrated on African communities. This silence, ironically, reinforces the power of the Castle. It is from this perspective that we argue that, for Opoku-Agyemang, unsettling the coloniality of power of Cape Coast Castle constitutes an existential imperative as it inaugurates a radical dismantling of that collusive pact of collective silence that has defined the peoples’ response to the slave trade. In other words, the possibility of alternative voice is dependent on challenging the singular history that springs from colonial historiography symbolized by Cape Coast Castle. It is worthy to note that the quest for voice is also an aesthetic issue wherein the focus is on the search for a form that can articulate the burden of the slave trade as a devastating historical event. Therefore, Opoku-Agyemang’s crucial question, how do we give “the formlessness of pain form?” is motivated by the much larger ethical question, how do we capture “the bundle of untamed agonies of a continentful of people, living hearts of unspoken fear”? (Opoku-Agyemang, 7). Obviously, the issues raised by these questions transcend the aesthetic; they are “ethico-political” since what is at stake is the dismantling of the solidity of colonial discourse that Cape Coast Castle represents, in order to inscribe the experiences, voices and subjectivities of the “damned who survived, those deprived relatives of the captured Africans” (Opoku-Agyemang, p. 5). Hence the decisive issue in the “Introduction” becomes “how to disempower or dissolve Cape Coast Castle as fetish” (ibid, p. 9). It is here that the idea of unsettling the coloniality of power finds concrete expression. Opoku-Agyemang’s strategy of disempowering Cape Coast Castle revolves around the dramatization of voice: imperial voice and subaltern voice co-existing in a conflictual space of imperial “fact” and subaltern “counterfactuality”. Voice is thus crucial to Opoku-Agyemang’s poetics of dismantling the coloniality of power of Cape Coast Castle. For it is in giving voice to the dispossessed, those left behind, those forgotten by colonial historiography or the official narratives of the slave experience, that we can begin to imagine the totality of the slave experience as traumatic and Africa as a victim society, and, more importantly, begin the process of genuine mourning and learning to live finally.

Beyond re-inscribing the voice of the disremembered, therefore, Opoku-Agyemang suggests that centering the coloniality of power of Cape Coast Castle will forestall the repetition of the monstrous past and provide the fillip for Africans to rise above their shameful genuflection to the fetish of Cape Coast Castle. Hence, in reading the “Introduction”, the key question we need to address is ‘what are the strategies for interrogating or dismantling the authority of Cape Coast Castle and what does such a project entail? Opoku-Agyemang suggests that this is an urgent issue because although political freedom has been won (“freed from chains of enslavement and the curse of Cape Coast Castle”), Cape Coast Castle continues to wield a potent epistemic and narrative power since its influence as fetish is productive of coloniality of being. Coloniality of being as implicitly articulated in the collection is a form of postcolonial subjectivity that is constituted by indifference to or silence on the history of enslavement and colonization. The urgent task, then, is to decolonize the mind by de-fetishizing the epistemic power of Cape Coast Castle. That is why rather than seeing Cape Coast Castle as a monument, Opoku-Agyemang asks us to see it as a fetish that rules by its power to occlude and create the illusion of wholeness when in actuality the postcolonial world is a world of fragmentation and denial (Opoku-Agyemang, p. 9).
For Opoku-Agyemang, undoing the coloniality of power of Cape Coast Castle requires a series of epistemological and rhetorical moves. First, it is essential to see Cape Coast Castle as domination or “a sign both of the triumph of others over us and our seemingly rootless grief” (Opoku-Agyemang, p. 8). Second, Cape Coast Castle must be seen as a “threat and a humiliation, a living and active reminder of this society as victim” (ibid, 8). Rather than being complicit in the insidious silence that the Castle imposes, Opoku-Agyemang asks the reader to see it as “a standing provocation to thought and action” (ibid, p. 8). Finally, the economic and political aspect of de-fetishizing the coloniality of power of the Castle lies in the recognition that “we kneel because it stands [and] it stands for a system of production, distribution and exchange” (p. 9). Reversing this colonial economic system and its concomitant asymmetrical relationship of domination and subordination inaugurated in 1650 when Cape Coast Castle was built will require a radical revaluation of the people’s everyday engagement with and perception of the Castle. In other words, it calls for a redistribution of the sensible that will result from a radical interrogation of the Castle’s, to borrow Butler’s (2009) apt phrase, “differential allocation of grievability” (p. 24) and negation of blackness. This will go a long way to exposing not just what the Castle represents but, more importantly, what it produces.

The radicality of what Opoku-Agyemang is proposing resounds with Deleuze’s notion of encounter. In Difference and Repetition, Deleuze (2004) introduces the concept of encounter in order to dislodge the dominance of recognition in Western philosophical thought. Deleuze’s idea of encounter is pertinent to Opoku-Agyemang’s emphasis on unsettling the coloniality of power of the Castle as it helps us characterize the usual engagement with Castle in terms of representation. An essential dynamic of representation is recognition, which according to Deleuze (2004), rests on the presupposition that “Everybody knows, no one can deny” (p. 165). Recognition therefore prejudges everything since it reinforces “doxa” or “established values” (pp. 170–171). It is apparent from our analysis of the “Introduction” that, for Opoku-Agyemang, our everyday engagement with the Castle has operated merely at the level of representation which implies that we habitually presume that we know or recognize what it represents: a colonial edifice. Herein lies the danger; for to remain only at this level of perception is to be complicit in imperial ways of seeing and knowing. This is because the problem with recognition, as Deleuze argues, is that it does not lead to the creation of new values. In order to engender genuine grievability and create new values, the coloniality of power of imperial materiality and structures of thought will have to be displaced. In other words, what is required is a new “image of thought” that “tears thought from its natural and notorious bad will and forces us to think” (Deleuze, 1994: xvi). Therefore, when Opoku-Agyemang argues that we decenter the coloniality of power of the Castle, he is calling for a new image of thought that moves away from habits that merely reinforce silence, conformism, indifference and produce a recumbent coloniality of being. When Opoku-Agyemang describes Cape Coast Castle as “a standing provocation to thought and action”, he shares in Deleuze’s contention that the object of encounter must force us to think. Essential to this process of unsettling the continuing power of Cape Coast Castle is the importance of rethinking the place of silence in the constitution of postcolonial subjectivity.

In light of the above, what does it mean to read Cape Coast Castle as a poetics of the destruction of an image of thought and the genesis of a new act of thinking? In other words, what image of thought does Cape Coast Castle unsettle and what does such a destruction imply? As our reading of the “Introduction” has so far demonstrated, Cape Coast Castle is emblematic of an imperial image of thought. Furthermore, as our reading of “What the Castle said” will show, the Castle represents the coloniality of power. By giving voice to Cape Coast Castle, Opoku-Agyemang succeeds in staging a dogmatic imperial image of thought and the necessity of unsettling its continuing power. What is objectionable in “What the Castle said”, as we show in the next section, is not simply the Castle’s arrogance but the racial prejudice on which it constructs its conquest and animalizes the conquered. It is on this score that we can arrive at the ethical and rhetorical force of such poems as “Of Ghosts and Guests”, “What happens when people forget”, “Watering the silence”, “Eclipse” and “Supplication: Equiano’s Mother.” Through these poems, Opoku-Agyemang
warns of the dangers of silence, and calls for the urgent necessity of countering the Castle’s narrative with alternative stories.

4. Beyond the “Introduction”: unsettling Cape Coast Castle’s coloniality of power

The preceding section has demonstrated the conceptual, thematic, and rhetorical relevance of the “Introduction” of Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems. We argued that the “Introduction” syllogistically or rhetorically positions the reader to anticipate the disavowal of silence in the poems that follow. Following Burke it may be more appropriate to say that the “Introduction” arouses our desire and suspicion about the subject of silence and rhetorically configures the fulfillment of that desire in the poems that follow it. More importantly, we claimed that Opoku-Agyemang’s main strategy for unsettling coloniality of power is through the staging of silenced voices or perspectives. A sequential reading of the collection will rarely reveal the dialectical sensibility that drives the unsettling of the coloniality of power of the Castle or colonial discourse. Hence, in this section, we focus on how the clash of voices and therefore the decentering of coloniality of power is orchestrated. We begin with “What the Castle said”. Although this poem is not in the first section of the collection, it is central to the rhetorical architecture or form of the collection and to Opoku-Agyemang’s ethics of learning to live finally.

“What the Castle said” is a poem in which Cape Coast Castle narrates its colonial victories, mocks the attempts by the formerly colonized people of the Gold Coast to liberate themselves, and asserts its confidence in its enduring power over the territory and people of the Gold Coast and Ghana. By giving voice to the Castle, Opoku-Agyemang discloses the arrogance of imperial historiography and the nature of colonial power as based on the exploitation and subordination of the racial Other. Imperial power is represented as the domination of territory, the dehumanization and commodification of others. As the Castle says:

I am bold with legend
I have conquered these gaping shores
With surprise laps of my race …
I captured the land and its abundant blackness …
With my paws I checksumed the people … (47).

It is crucial to note how the Castle’s rhetoric of domination moves from past accomplishments and atrocities to its continuing power over the people. Colonial violence is conveyed through the deployment of violent verbs such as “conquered”, “captured” and “checksumed”. So self-assured is the Castle of the permanence and solidity of its power that it dismisses attempts by the people to enact a history for themselves as a free and independent people:

I am surrounded by a colony of bending knees
A people made drunk by lethal fatality …
I sleep in the silence of scars
The silhouette of a defiled race leaps flaming
But it’s only a shadow
I remain strong in the darkness of my whiteness (47).

At this point, one must ask ‘to what does the Castle owe the audacity with which it concludes its narrative/history of self-glorification? It arises from the Castle’s conviction that the political resurrections of colonized people “has not yet found the key to life.” Hence the “defiled race leaps flaming/But it’s only a shadow” (47). The Castle views decolonization as a failure especially within the context that there has been no radical challenge to the coloniality of power. Postcolonial national consciousness and national liberation have woefully failed to institute epistemic shifts in conceptions of the self; failed to discontinue the form of economic system that merely reproduces
Africans as disposable commodities, and failed to contest the singular stories that colonial historiography constructs about its victories and the people it has subjugated. Contrary to Narrey and Kakroba (2011) claim that “What the Castle said” is a confession, our reading suggests that it is quintessential exemplum of colonial narratives of self-aggrandizement. Their reading of the conclusion as indicating the Castle’s confession of “its usefulness in helping to (re)write the history of the slave experience” is a misreading of the Castle’s intentions and ignores how Opoku-Agyemang strategically sets up the Castle’s voice for contestation in subsequent poems.

Also worthy of note in the Castle’s narrative of the triumph of whiteness over blackness is the representation of the victims of imperial conquest as unguiviable. In the Castle’s brazen dismissal of the humanity of the victims of the slave trade, Opoku-Agyemang subtly stages what Judith Butler (2009) refers to as the differential allocation of recognizability and grievability (p. 6; 12). Within the imperial frame from which the Castle speaks, black lives are unguiviable; they are disposable: “I laugh at the animal cries women make/… The number is fired and numberless/ That perished under my watchful eyes.” The Castle’s coloniality of power is enacted not just through racial bigotry but also through the bestialization or animalization of colonized subjectivities.

We will miss the politics or complex play of voices Opoku-Agyemang stages in this poem if we assume that the triumphalist voice is simply that of the edifice Cape Coast Castle. “What the Castle said” should also be read as ventriloquizing colonial discourse. Embedded in this poem is the almost undifferentiated existence of double voice: Cape Coast Castle and colonial discourse as discrete but integrated voices. This claim requires that we make the imaginative leap from regarding the voice in the poem as originating from a colonial edifice located specifically in a geographical area on the west coast of Ghana Africa to the more appropriate view as representing imperial discourse with the power to construct an image of the self through the subjugation of alien territories and people. As Foucault shows, discourse is the language deployed by dominant groups to produce knowledge, or “truth” in order to constitute reality. However, this constitution of reality, as “What the Castle said” exemplifies, is not without violence. This is because discourse delimits the boundaries of normality and therefore constructs notions of self and other, civilization and barbarism, black and white, visible and invisible, grievable and unguiviable. Following from Siemon (1987), we propose that “What the Castle said” presents a particular “concept of history: . . . history as the record of signal events, the actuations of great men upon the ground work of time and space” (p. 5). In this imperial conception of history, Cape Coast Castle is one of the “privileged monuments” (p. 5) that tower above people without History. In this connection, we can reinterpret the Castle’s dismissal or denial of colonized voice and corporeality, the figuration of blackness in terms of negativity and bestiality as a strategy that forecloses the possibility of genuine grievability and therefore consigns the people to a perpetual state of subjugation and nonbeing. How do you mourn people who are not considered human in the first place? Under such circumstances, learning to live finally will entail re-humanizing colonized lives as grievable by giving voice to their pain, and by deconstructing the very attitudes that reinforce the Castle’s superciliousness.

For Opoku-Agyemang, the danger in “What the Castle said” lies elsewhere other than the Castle’s blatant imperial mentality. The real danger is the silence of Africans. This is highlighted in “Of Ghosts and Guests”, “Eclipse” and especially “What happens when people forget?” In these poems, the poet explores the dangers of collective amnesia, silence, and indifference to the subject of the slave trade. In “Of Ghosts and Guests”, the speaker reflects on a visit to the dungeons at Cape Coast Castle. Contrary to the expectation that the spectral presences there evoke fear, the speaker states that “I fear more the silence of the living” (p. 15). “Eclipse” intensifies the poet’s exploration of silence. He laments that collective amnesia which is the result of the fear to “intrude”, “to offend/The post” to “impose”, ironically privileges “absence” as a gift to the present (p. 40). The result of the strategies of indifference and denial, this “refusal to give memory nothing”, is the pervasive darkness:
It was dark then, it is dark now
Give memory nothing
And it is darker till tomorrow (ibid, 40).
“What happens when people forget?” which is found in Part II of the collection can be regarded as the acme of the poet’s repudiation of silence:

What happens when people forget?
And what is forgotten descends
To the pit of the stomach
And the stomach rounds into a tomb
Womb of all pain? (p. 53)

Here the poet contests the therapeutic and regenerative power of silence. For the poet, the cumulative result of continuous silence is that “... what is forgotten descends/ To the pit of the stomach/ And the stomach rounds into a tomb/ Womb of all pain” (ibid, 53). This silence forecloses the possibility of interrogating the tragedy of the slave trade and naming the victims: “How are their ancestors ever to know why/ Ever to find them without name/How to find them except by their cry?” (p. 53). Opoku-Agyemang is in no way suggesting that there is a determinate answer to the “why”. Rather, he is suggesting that interrogating the tragedy of the slave trade leaves the subject open-ended so that each generation can constitute its subjectivity through a rigorous engagement with that history. In that way each generation will be paying homage to the victims whose lives must first and foremost be regarded as grievable. This is not just a commitment to memory; it is also a commitment to justice which is at the core of Derrida’s conception of to learn to live finally. So far we have demonstrated how the repetition of silence in these poems heighten the theme of disavowal of silence and therefore establishes a rhetorical link to the “Introduction”. However, there remains a crucial aspect of our analysis that deals with the voice of those denied place in “What the Castle said”.

In the poems we have so far discussed, the emphasis has been on the poet’s response to Cape Coast Castle. Through these poems we hear the poet’s urgent desire to speak about the slave trade not only in order to dispel the darkness but also to dislodge the assured note on which “What the Castle said” ends: “I remain strong in the darkness of my whiteness.” As Kofi Anyidoho (1996) argues, breaking the silence on the slave trade is the surest way to curtailing “the heavy burden of permanent sorrow and recurring seizures of rage” (as cited in Nartey & Kakraba, 2011:238). One of the gaps in the Castle’s historiography of colonial egoism is the absence of any genuine reference to the pain and sorrow of those left behind. In the context of the Castle’s story, colonized bodies do not count; the agonies of women are reduced to “animal cries” and their virginities ruined in the “deepest dungeons” (Opoku-Agyemang, 1996:47). Opoku-Agyemang unsettles or counters the Castle’s bestialization of women by imaginatively recounting the pain and sorrow of Equiano’s mother in the poem “Supplication: Equiano’s Mother” (25–26). This poem, which is divided into three parts, is crucial to the poetics of remembering the disremembered and genuine mourning. By imaginatively capturing for the reader the brutal pain and sorrow of Equiano’s mother, the poet corrects a fundamental historical injustice in the historiography on the slave trade in Africa. Equiano is, perhaps, one of the most written about ex-slaves. Precisely because Equiano succeeds in writing down the story about his capture and enslavement, his eventual freedom, and positions himself, simultaneously, as a cosmopolitan and transnational figure, he lends historicity to his being and at the same time demonstrates the humanity of those who were captured and sold as slaves. However, the same cannot be said about his mother and the many African women whose children and loved ones were violently captured and sold, transported under inhumane conditions to geographically and ecologically foreign and hostile environments.

“Supplication: Equiano’s Mother” weaves together thematic issues that are crucial to Opoku-Agyemang’s poetics of unsettling coloniality of power and staging unspeakable things through the
dramatization of voices. The poem captures the intensely visceral forms Equiano’s mother’s mourning of her son takes and the necessity of keeping the memory of the slave trade and individuals alive. From the initial perspective of the teller, the poem culminates in section III on the actual voice of Equiano’s mother. The speaker captures for us the pain and sorrow of the woman:

She shouts her own name to the passing wind  
That something it time will remember her proper name  
The rush seed, the animal pain and the cornered eyes  
At the shrine where skulls parade the Apirede dance  
Child of the crocodile, she is beating water  
Chasing the dead with her dirge (p. 25).

In these lines we are confronted with object disconsolation. As we hear Equiano’s mother’s prayer to the gods, the real tragedy lies in “why do they not return/ Those who go? These lines capture the disintegration of those intimate bonds that constitute the fabric and stability of society: “The bond between the lines, where is it today?” Life in an environment destabilized by “calculated cruelty” can be nothing other than precarious. The precariousness is heightened by the sense of unknowability and fear. Hence the importance of the last four lines of poem:

I fear the report, the endless deaths  
No place is safe, not even my own mouth  
And the words that lie in it, how true are they  
To the few who hear?  
When a people come to that historical moment when the only thing certain about the future is “endless deaths” and hesitations or doubts about their tragic history, then what is at stake is annihilation or disappearance. It is also precisely at this moment that the protocols of survival and individuation will have to be problematized, coloniality of power destabilized, and a deliberate act of naming and remembering the disremembered initiated. All of these constitute the difficult ethic of learning to live finally that recognizes the centrality of ghosts. As Derrida notes towards end of Specters of Marx (Derrida, 1994):

If he loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the intellectual of tomorrow should learn it from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, specters, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. They give us to rethink the “there” as soon as we open our mouths. (p. 221)

“Supplication: Equiano’s Mother” exemplifies this strategy of giving back speech to the ghost. For Opoku-Agyemang, as for Derrida, a genuine socio-political mourning and regeneration is contingent on redefining our engagement with the past or ghosts. This is especially urgent for post-colonial societies where the connection between colonial material structures and historical memory continue to insidiously perpetuate a narrative of subjugation and invisibility. In giving voice to Equiano’s mother, Opoku-Agyemang not only challenges the singularity of the Castle’s story; he also suggests that silence or indifference is the surest way to existential annihilation or irrelevance in the global scheme of things. Crucially, “Supplication: Equiano’s Mother” succeeds in mourning those left behind.

5. Conclusion
Memories of the slave trade in most African societies have often been carved in silences and sometimes deliberate elisions and outright contradictions; these memories and silences still
resonate in most communities in Africa more generally and in Ghana in particular. In most communities in Africa, people shy away from making references to a person's slave ancestry and sometimes only make “vague” references to the slave trade while others insist that “the slave business should not be spoken about” or that “they do not remember these events anymore” (Greene, 2003, p. 42; Saboro, 2021, p. 1). All of this raises the issue of remembrance and mourning. This paper has sought to demonstrate that Opoku-Agyemang’s Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems can be read from the perspective of Derrida’s ethical imperative of learning to live finally. This approach allowed us to read Cape Coast Castle as a contestatory site where the coloniality of power of Cape Coast Castle is unsettled through the disavowal of silence and indifference as survival strategies and through the staging of the voices of the disremembered. We have shown how the form contribute to overall thematic and rhetorical coherence of the collection. We have also shown that reading the poem “What the Castle said” as colonial discourse rather than merely as a monument allows us to uncover the dialogical and contestatory sensibility inhered in the other poems we have discussed. Conceptually, the paper has demonstrated the productivity of Derrida’s ethic of learning to live finally to rethinking postcolonial issues of memory, genuine grievability, justice and futurity. It is by focusing on this aspect of the collection that the future emerges from the undertow of the collection as a potent force. Opoku-Agyemang’s declamation “The world does not listen to silence” should be read, we have argued, as an ethico-political imperative essential to postcolonial mourning and learning to live finally. The contestation of Cape Coast Castle as imperial discourse is vital to rehumanizing colonized being. It is in this context that the epigraphs encapsulate Opoku-Agyemang’s strategy and objective in Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems. Indeed, at stake in the collection is the quest for a new image of thought or a new mode of being, that while recognizing the impossibility of escaping imperial history, is nevertheless keenly aware that it is dangerous and unwise to be held hostage by that history. Hostage? Perhaps we have finally arrived at Opoku-Agyemang’s unstated formula: breaking the silence on the subject of the slave trade is the categorical imperative for sociopolitical regeneration. Breaking that silence makes it possible to not just genuinely mourn the disremembered dead but to see this mourning for really what it is—the desire for justice, futurity and to learn to live finally.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no direct funding for this paper.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

The author(s) received no direct funding for this paper.

**References**

Adorno, T. W. (1981). *Cultural criticism and society. Prisms*. MIT Press.

Aidoo, A. A. (1970). *Anowa. Longman*

Anyidaho, K. (1996). *Slave castle, African historical landscape and literary imagination*. Drumspack, 1, 21–32.

Argenti, N. (2007). *The intestines of the state: Youth, violence and belated histories in the Cameroon grassfield*. Chicago University Press.

Bignall, S. (2010). *Postcolonial agency: Critique, and constructivism*. Edinburgh University Press.

Burke, K. (1968). *The nature of form. Counter-Statement*. University of California Press, 124–138.

Butler, J. (2009). *Frames of war: When is life grievable? Verso*.

Connerton, P. (1989). *How societies remember*. Cambridge University Press.

Crane, S. A. (ed.) (2000). *Museums and memory*. Stanford University Press.

Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. P. Patton. London: Athlone Press

Deleuze, G. (2004). *Difference and repetition*. (P. Patton, Trans.). Athlone Press.

Derrida, J. (1999). *Specters of Marx: The state of debt, the work of mourning and new international. Rutledge*.
Ephrat, M. (2008). The functions of silence. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(11), 1909–1938. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.03.009.

Fasakin, A. (2021). The coloniality of power in postcolonial Africa: Experiences from Nigeria. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(5), 902–921. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1880318

Ferguson, K. (2011). Silence: A politics. In C. Glenn & K. Ratcliffe (Eds.), *Silence and listening as rhetorical art(s)*. (p. 113). Southern Illinois University Press.

Giraldo, I. (2016). Coloniality at work: Decolonial critique and the postfeminist regime. *Feminist Theory*, 17(2), 157–173. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116652835

Green, T. (2012). The rise of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in Western Africa, 1300-1589. Cambridge University Press.

Greene, E. S. (2003). Whispers and silences: Explorations in African oral history. *Africa Today*, 50 (2), 42. Oral Heritage and Indigenous Knowledge. https://doi.org/10.2979/AFT.2003.50.2.40

Hosley, B. (2006). *Routes of remembrance: Refashioning the slave trade in Ghana*. Chicago University Press.

Kowaleski-Wallace, E. (2006). The British slave trade and public memory. *Columbia University Press*.

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2007). On coloniality of being. Contributions to the development of a concept. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2–3), 240–270. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2016). Outline of ten theses on coloniality and decoloniality. *Franz Fanon Foundation* (http://franzfanonfoundation) Accessed 2 December, 2019

Maldonado-Torres, N. (2004). The topology of being and the geopolitics of knowledge. *City*, 8(1), 29–56. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360481042000199787

Mbembe, A. (2001). *On the postcolony*. University of California Press.

Mbembe, A. (2002). African modes of self-writing. *Public Culture*, 14 (1), 239–273. Trans. Stephen Randall. https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-239

Mignolo, W. D. (2007). Introduction. *Cultural Studies*, 21 (2–3), 155–167. https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498

Murphy, L. (2007). Into the bush of ghosts: Specters of the slave trade in West African fiction. Research in *African Literatures*, 38(4), 141–152. https://doi.org/10.2979/RAL.2007.38.4.141

Nartey, T., & Kokraho, A. D. (2011). (Re)writing the slave experience: The case of cape coast castle. *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(3), 236–243.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni, S. J. (2019). Coloniality of power. CODESRIA.

Opoku-Agyemang, K. (1996). *Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems*. Accra: Afrum Publications.

Quijano, A. (2000). Coloniality of power, eurocentrism, and Latin America. *Nepantla*, 1(3), 533–580.

Restrepo, E. (2018). Coloniality of Power. In H. Callan (Ed.), *International encyclopedia of anthropology* (pp. 1–6). John Wiley and Sons Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118924396.wbie2118

Saboro, E. (2021). Wounds of our past: Remembering captivity, enslavement and resistance in african oral narratives. Leiden and Boston.

Schlont, E. (1999). The language of silence :West German literature and the Holocaust. New York: Routledge.

Schlont, E. (1999). The language of silence: West German literature and the holocaust. Routledge.

Scott, D. (2004). *Conscripts of modernity: The tragedy of colonial enlightenment*. Duke University Press.

Scott, D. (2016). *Omens of adversity: Tragedy, time, memory, justice*. Duke University Press.

Scott, D. (2014b). The tragic vision in postcolonial time. *PMLA*, 129(4), 799–808.

Shaw, R. (2002). *Memories of the slave trade: Ritual and historical imagination in Sierra Leone*. University of Chicago Press.

Slemmon, S. (1987). Monuments of empire: Allegory/counter discourse/post-colonial writing. *Kunapipi*, 9(3), 1–16.

Smith, E. V. (2016). *Secrets of West African slave ancestry: Fante strategies of silence and the didactic narrative in ghanian literature*. *Journal of West African History*, 21(2), 109–131. https://doi.org/10.14321/jwasfhist.2.2.0109

Trouillot, M. (1995). Silencing the past: Power and the production of history. *Beacon Press*.

Vinitsky-Seroussi, V. (2002). Commemorating a difficult memorials. *American Sociological Review*, 67(3), 30–51. https://doi.org/10.2307/3088932

Vinitsky-Seroussi, V., & Teeger, C. (2010). Unpacking the unspoken: Silence in collective memory and forgetting. *Social Forces*, 88(3), 1103–1122. https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.0.0290

Winter, J., & Emmanuel, S. (Eds.). (1995). *War and remembrance century*. Cambridge University Press.
