

# Acting Out: Performing Memory of Enslavement in Ouidah, Benin Republic

by

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Memory, an exercise of the living, and especially of those who remember so that cultures may not die, impose both a responsibility and a curse on those who choose to remember.

Flora González Mandri, *Guarding Cultural Memory*, 2006

## Abstract

Using examples from Ouidah, Benin Republic this essay examines a few ways that the descendants of slave traders, enslaved and witnesses “act out” issues of trauma resulting from the slave-trading history, sometimes with the conscious hope of healing the physical and psychic rupture between African and African diasporic peoples; other times in a seemingly uncontrollable compulsion.

## Reliving the Trauma

The European transatlantic slave trade was initiated and perpetuated by the Portuguese, the British, the French, the Spanish, the Dutch and others of European heritage in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. It caused a profound rupture in the African and African diasporic psyche which has in turn caused a sense of disorientation, dislocation and alienation amongst peoples on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. Using examples from Ouidah, Benin Republic, once a major hub of the slave trade, this essay examines a few ways that the descendants of slave traders, enslaved and witnesses “act out” issues of trauma resulting from the slave-trading history, sometimes with the conscious hope of healing the rupture; other times in a seemingly uncontrollable compulsion. As Dona Marimba Richards asserts in *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (1994), “The trade in African lives and the enslavement of African beings by Europeans constituted the most thoroughly destructive act ever to be perpetrated by one group upon another (1994: 12).

The experience was traumatic for not only those who endured the Middle Passage, but also for those who were left behind. It meant chaos on both sides of the Atlantic (ibid, p. 13). Furthermore, Dr. Richards points out that “African groups that allowed themselves to procure slaves for the Europeans did so in repudiation of basic African humanism (ibid, p 13). Their involvement has caused a metaphysical imbalance that must be addressed and remedied as the descendants of sellers, sold and witnesses are still caught in the traumatic web that the slave trade set in motion. Richards proposes that “Kungara/Emi Lilo” or ritual drama is the key to replacing chaos with harmony. I propose that as contemporary Africa and African diasporic peoples address their historical trauma through ritualistic drama, “Spirit”<sup>1</sup> is also working on both sides of the transatlantic divide to promote healing and reconciliation. I want to further suggest that this metaphysical push for healing is what we see manifest as seemingly compulsive behavior in the physical world.

The expression, “acting out,” is defined as “a (usually irritating) impulsive and uncontrollable outburst by a problem child or a neurotic adult. In psychiatry it is the display of previously inhibited emotions (often in actions rather than words); considered to be healthy and therapeutic” (wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn). It also means “to perform an action to express (often subconscious) emotional conflicts. The acting done is usually anti-social and may take the form of acting on the impulses of an addiction” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acting\_out). It is characterized as a “reaction in which a person lowers anxiety, hostility or other unpleasant emotions by allowing the expression in overt behavior. It is the process of expressing unconscious emotional conflicts or feelings via actions rather than words” (www.careinaction.com/resources\_dict\_a.html). This expression can take many forms including dangerous behavior such as self-harm or suicidal gestures” (www.mindcontrolforums.com/didglossary.htm).

On one hand, the expression, “acting out”, has negative connotations. It is uncontrollable and anti-social behavior. This meaning is usually applied to children or adults who behave in a way that is socially unacceptable. On the other hand it is considered to be healthy and therapeutic, referring to the actions of individuals or groups who are misbehaving, but who, upon further investigation, are discovered to be doing so because they want to draw attention to something that is not right; something that is bothering them, but which they do not feel empowered to articulate directly. In this case it may be seen as an expression of the adage, “actions speak louder than words”.

The descendants of those who were involved in the transatlantic slave trade have inherited a collective memory of the experience. This “memory” has come through environmental markers, stories, visual art, spiritual unveilings and rituals, to name a few. The reenactment and display of the traumatic event in overt and covert ways highlights (calls attention to) ruptured identities with the hope of reunifying them, replacing exile with home and alienation with rootedness. Because this “acting out” results from a historical trauma that lives in the collective memory, it may also be called “performing memory”.

I address two forms of “acting out” or “performing memory” in this essay. The first is an example of what Sigmund Freud, has called “traumatic neurosis,” the “peculiar and sometimes uncanny ways that catastrophic events repeat themselves for those who have passed through them” (1961:23). According to Freud, the repeated experience does not seem to be something over which the victims have control, but rather appear to be the “possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely out of their wish or control” (ibid, p.23). The reliving of a trauma that has been suppressed is one where someone (or a collective group) unwittingly reenacts an event that cannot be left behind. Joy DeGruy Leary (2005), looking specifically at the effects of slavery on the descendants of enslaved people in a U.S. context, explores what she calls “Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome” (PTSS) whereby oppression leaves scars on the victims and victors alike that embed themselves in the participants’ collective psyches and are passed down through generations. Though the descendants of enslavers, enslaved and witnesses did not actually experience the slave trade and slavery, Africans and people of African descent have a collective consciousness about that historical era that is kept alive in the ways that they behave towards each other and the descendants of their ancestors’ enslavers. The history is also kept alive in ways that I have outlined (i.e. environmental markers, visual art, spiritual unveilings and rituals). Though Leary focuses her study on the descendants of the enslaved in a U.S. context, this essay explores the effects of the trade from the site of origin of many of those descendants on the West coast of Africa, specifically, Ouidah.

As Leary and Richards suggest, it is imperative that the descendants of those who were involved in the trade heal the injuries inflicted during the slave trading era and beyond. The second form of “acting out” is instrumental in this process of healing. It is an “acting out” that is deliberate and ostensibly proactive whereby rituals, commemorative gestures and ceremonies are held in order to consciously, often collectively, remember a traumatic past. Examples of this can be found in Rwanda, China, South Africa and Argentina where large-scale traumatic events have taken place. Another example of this deliberate “acting out” can be found in Ouidah. One of the most formal and publicized ways has been with and through the support of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). In 1994, with a desire to contribute to a better understanding of the causes, forms of operation, issues and consequences of slavery in the world (Africa, Europe, the Americas, the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, Middle East and Asia) as well as highlight the global transformations and cultural interactions that have resulted from that history and finally, to contribute to a culture of peace by promoting reflection on cultural pluralism, intercultural dialogue and the construction of new identities and citizenships UNESCO invested in building monuments and sponsoring ceremonies worldwide to commemorate former sites of the slave trade<sup>2</sup>. In Benin Republic, one of UNESCO’s World Heritage Sites, the organization undertook the creation of the Slave Route Project, a kind of open-air museum that features statues and monuments that start at the beginning of the last leg of captives’ journey from their homelands in the town of Ouidah and ends at the town’s shores.

With the country's governmental support, the Slave Route Project helped spawn an initiative from the indigenous spiritual leaders and members of the intellectual community to perform their own remembrance with the express purpose of facilitating physical and spiritual reunification of Africa and its diaspora. Such performative gestures are deliberate, strategic and conscious attempts to heal physical, psychological and spiritual ruptures. They take the form of what Lisa Woolfork calls "bodily epistemology" whereby the body is conscripted into working through a past psychic trauma. The person who has suffered the trauma returns to the site of the trauma in a kind of reenactment in order to confront the pain that resides in the body through memory. In the two instances that I describe here, Vodun Day and the March of Repentance, participants walk the path that enslaved people are believed to have walked hundreds of years ago in a kind of surrogate captive experience. Both events are part of contemporary attempts to work through the past through various means and from various vantage points from the African side of the transatlantic divide.

With the support of a Fulbright grant I conducted field research on manifestations of memory of the transatlantic slave trade in Ouidah, Benin Republic from April 2006-February 2007. Ouidah was once a densely populated, prosperous kingdom located on what was then called the Slave Coast of West Africa. It rose to prominence as an exporter of slaves in the late 17th century and flourished for about sixty years before being conquered by the kingdom of Dahomey in 1727. For over a century more, Ouidah remained a center of the transatlantic slave trade under the various kings of Dahomey.

During my time in Ouidah I lived next door to historian and guide, Martine de Souza, a descendant of the famous Brazilian slave trader, Francisco de Souza. The patriarch, de Souza, traveled to Ouidah in the 1820's and remained there until his death in 1849. During his time in Ouidah, he became a very wealthy and powerful slave trader. Though it is hard to say how many people are direct descendants of the kings who oversaw the administration of the slave trade there is no evidence that they profited greatly from the trade. Though the official website for the Ouidah Museum of History, for example, says that the de Souza's hold a place of importance in Ouidahan society because of their slave trading history, the family compound where many of the de Souzas reside is not characterized by wealth or opulence. Though the European countries that participated in the trade accrued enormous wealth that is a cornerstone of their current economies, conversely Africa has reaped poverty, war and corruption as a result of what Richards calls its repudiation of African humanism (13). In other words, an ancient contract between humans and "Spirit" was broken during this period resulting in the profound disharmony that is part and parcel of the continent's contemporary underdevelopment.

In addition to visiting many of the sites that UNESCO supports several times, I attended ceremonies in which memory of the distant past was central. I also listened to and recorded local stories that offered insight into and commented on the past and its impact on the present. What struck me most during the eleven months that I was there was how the history of slavery permeated the fabric of contemporary life. Not only was slavery visibly represented at several sites, both formally and informally, but it was also in the stories that people told about their origins.

The memory is also in the trees that are rumored to have been silent witnesses to the trade. Where those natural markers no longer exist, their absence also serves as sites of memory. It is also in the swampy area that travelers wrote about in the nineteenth century and which lies just beyond the manicured path that both local people and foreigners walk every day. Finally, it is in the contemporary rituals that are meant to do harm to others. Two examples of such memory are mimetic enactments of the enslavement process through the use of *cakatú* and shackles.

### *Cakatú*

Contemporary audiences are familiar with the voodoo doll of Hollywood imagination. It is commonly associated with the African diaspora of Louisiana and Haiti. According to the stereotype, voodoo dolls are used to curse a neighbor and summon evil spirits. Its macabre incarnation in the diaspora does not seem to be far from its inspiration amongst the Fon people of Dahomey where it is a spiritual force called *cakatú* that takes the form of a doll that is produced in the likeness of the offending person and then tortured usually until the person dies.

In Ouidah, a statue of the *cakatú* stands in *Kpassézoume* (Vodun Sacred Forest), one of the sites where UNESCO commissioned art to be included in an art festival called Ouidah '92 (see p.73). According to a guide in the Sacred Forest, *cakatú* were traditionally used as a Vodun<sup>3</sup> power:

In the olden days they were used to punish those who went against the laws of the tribe. If the person obeyed they were set free. It was used, first of all, as an instrument of punishment.

Wicked people discovered the power and used it to hurt people. That is what is now widely spread and known about Vodun<sup>4</sup>.

In the guide's explanation, *cakatú* were used as a mechanism for social control and order, insuring that members of the community would abide by the laws of socially responsible conduct. Art historian, Dana Rush, in a more anti-social reading of *cakatú* says the force can be sent to harm an enemy. It can be transmitted in a number of ways and results in debilitating pain both inside and outside the body and is meant to be followed by death. "Victims are said to feel as though their entire bodies are being pierced by shards of glass, nails and metal fragments" (2001:38-39). Rush goes on to relate a case in which a man went to a Western hospital with pain. When the surgeon opened him up he found glass, razor blades and nails inside the man's body (ibid, p.94).

The destruction of the victim's physical body mimetically through the use of the *cakatú* represents a physical and metaphysical enactment of slavery. It reflects and comments on the historical reality of the containment and eventual destruction of the physical body during slavery. During the slave trade enemies captured in war, priests who threatened the king's power, and farmers who owed taxes were some of the people who were sold into the New World. It was a physical form of punishment for those who posed a threat to societal and political harmony. Likewise, the *cakatú* were metaphysical forms of punishment for those who disrupted the social order.

In a kind of symbiotic relationship, the slave trade and the *cakatú* inform one another. Just as the slave trade had spiritual implications for those who experienced it in different capacities (whether as captives, captors or witnesses) so too did the *cakatú* have physical consequences for those who experienced it. Thus, spiritual disharmony coincides with and informs physical and spiritual pain and perhaps death in both instances.

## Shackles

Soon after my arrival in the country, Ms. de Souza took me to a popular market in Porto Novo, the nation's capital. There, in the fetish section of the larger market, I found tucked amongst the pots and herbs, a large pile of miniature iron shackles (see p.74). Ms. de Souza explained that the shackles could be used in rituals to spiritually bind or enslave someone. Like the *cakatú* that was traditionally deployed to rid the community of a perceived destructive presence so too do the shackles neutralize a threat to the community through the elimination of an individual threat. Their usage as a spiritual bind can also be seen as a reenactment of the physical enslavement that continues to haunt the descendants of those who experienced the slave trade. Though I did not witness the ritual that would bind the spirit of someone, clearly the tools used in the ritual are replications of those that were used to enslave the bodies of those who were sent into exile in the past. Those ills of the past are perpetuated metaphysically as people try to make sense of their contemporary disenfranchisement and poverty.

These tiny mimetic representations of historical tools of enslavement can also be read as reflections of a zero-sum worldview in which there are a limited number of resources available. In effect, one person's success is predicated on another person's loss. Therefore, one perceives his/her success as dependent on another's failure (Isichei 2002; Austen 1993). The other's loss is manipulated through the use of tools at one's disposal. During the slave trade one of the tools was sending one's enemy into slavery. Today, the enslavement is spiritual, facilitated by a ritualistic enactment of the historical enslavement process. This contemporary spiritual enslavement of one's enemy signified by shackles like those that bound the hands and feet of those who were taken into the Middle Passage may be seen as a performed memory of the historical enslavement of the body. It is also slavery's legacy as the historical enslavement of the body is integral to the spiritual and psychic rupture and subsequent mental enslavement that keeps the descendants of those who experienced the trade locked in this zero-sum worldview.

Similar to the original function of the *cakatú*, the use of the shackles may also be read as an indigenous means of policing the community. By shackling the offending party's spirit, the one who does so removes an undesirable element from the community. The person whose spirit has been shackled is rendered powerless to harm others<sup>5</sup>. The removal of the negative force means that the individual, as part of the community, can move forward socially and perhaps, politically and economically.

Such social devices continue to be relevant as the threat of physical enslavement persists. Even though transatlantic slavery as an institution has ended, slavery is still very much a part of African life<sup>6</sup>. Stories of parents and relatives selling children into slavery populate the daily newspapers<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, as the threat of physical enslavement continues so too does the need to reflect that reality as well as guard against it. One of the ways to do that is to enslave others before they have a chance to do it to you<sup>8</sup>. This means that not only has slavery remained a viable reality for people on a physical level, but on a metaphysical level as well. The metaphysical enslavement may be seen as a way of coping with this potential of physical enslavement as people facilitate the performance of a fate that is most feared as a way of keeping it at bay.

## **Vodun Day: January 10<sup>th</sup>**

Sometimes the commemoration and reenactment of the past, no matter how traumatic, is deliberate. In Ouidah there is a deliberate push to actively remember the slave-trading past. The push comes both from within the society as well as outside of it. The organizers of the commemoration and reenactment are motivated by different things. Some seem genuinely motivated by a desire to heal the rupture that they perceive as a barrier to personal and collective health in Africa and its diaspora. Others see the possibility of social, political and economic upward mobility by aligning themselves with cultural tourism. For still others, it is a combination of the two.

Even though, according to the definitions that began this essay, this form of acting out or performance of memory is proactive, it will quickly become apparent that there are challenges that interpolate the seemingly straightforward work of resolving emotional conflicts or trauma resulting from the slave-trading history for which the performances were created. The unresolved conflicts come into stark relief as the work that is being done to unify Africa and its diaspora bring the history to the forefront for it to be confronted and examined with the hope of reconciliation and reunification. As a result, the differences in perception of the history of and contemporary challenges to reconciliation between Africa and its diaspora also come into stark relief.

One of the locally conceived memorializations that began taking shape as a result of UNESCO's Slave Route Project is Vodun Day, a community-wide gathering that encourages international participation. On January 10<sup>th</sup> of every year since 1992, the year that the Door of No Return (see p.72) was erected on Djebaji Beach where millions of people are believed to have disembarked, Beninois citizens and members of the international community gather together (see p.76). A procession begins at the Daagbo Hounon, the supreme priest of Vodun's, compound, proceeds through town, continues along the Slave Route with the Daagbo Hounon stopping at various Vodun shrines along the way. The procession ends at Ouidah's shores. Throughout the day, there is dancing, singing and rituals. The ceremony<sup>9</sup> is a large-scale commemoration of the slave trade and an opportunity for the Daagbo Hounon to implore members of the diaspora to "return home". The ceremony date corresponds with the "traditional calendrical date for Dahomean families to worship their ancestors at home" and was conceived of as a way to unite local Vodun groups from all over Benin "to worship the long departed slaves as objects of a transnational form of ancestor worship" (Sutherland 1999:202). According to cultural historian, Peter Sutherland, at the time that Vodun Day was conceived, Benin's traditionalist faction of Vodun practitioners were trying to refashion the religion's public identity in Africa by referencing its cultural 'branches' in the Americas" (ibid, p.202). They did so in order to combat the influence of Protestantism, a major threat to the indigenous belief system. Contrary to the discourse of Pentecostalism that links the religion with American consumerist values of modernity, wealth, success and power as the material signs of the religion's salvation, the festival's organizers present Vodun as a counter discourse to modernity based on black unity (ibid, p. 202). By internationalizing the belief system, the Vodun leaders hoped to legitimize it nationally.

In addition, the Daagbo Hounon contends that the ceremony is meant to absolve the Beninois of the guilt of their historical involvement in the slave trade, a sentiment that a member of the Council of Kings, King Kpotegbe of Allada, does not share. For him, Ouidah's past must be left in the past. He says,

We must forget, we must completely efface the bad things which happened before our time...this is the place from which our brothers left by boat for the Americas in chains. It is with sadness that they came here [Ouidah]. But now, everyone is happy because they have returned in joy (King Kpotegbe qtd. in Sutherland 1999:197).



In other words, according to the king, there is no need for absolution. The ends justify the means; the ends being the spread of Vodun internationally as well as African access to African diasporic experience, networks and material wealth.

The return of the African diaspora to Africa allows the Daagbo Hounon to call on his “brothers in the Americas to return in human form” as “dutiful sons” and to build something there that will define them, so that from time to time those in Africa can invoke their name as dictated by African custom (the Daagbo Hounon qtd. in Sutherland 1999:205). This sentiment is made manifest visually in the entrance of the Museum of Return, a short distance from the Door of Return, also on Djebadji Beach (see p.73). The installation in front of the museum features a larger-than-life statue of “Mother Africa” welcoming a man and a woman (her children) from the diaspora with open arms. The male and female statues both display evidence of their “success” in conservative western-style clothing, a briefcase, and what looks to be a diploma from abroad. They stand as evidence of the good things that must be remembered. According to one African-American tourist whom I met at the museum the statue gives the impression that the diaspora is not welcome unless they come with wealth and a western education. In other words, only the “good things” will be remembered as well as anticipated in the form of philanthropy as the diaspora makes its way “home”.

The difference between the African leaders’ perception of the outcome of the slave trade and that of the African diaspora is highlighted in the preceding comments from King Kpotegbe contrasted with those from the tourist from the diaspora about the statues. They are also highlighted in the well-known documentary series by the literary critic, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. entitled *Wonders of the African World*<sup>10</sup> (1999). In Abomey, once the seat of power of ancient Dahomey, Gates asked Joseph Adande, palace restorer, whether African people knew what horrors they were selling people into. Adande responds that they must have known. In the series’ companion book by the same name (1999), Gates interviews Akosua Perbi of the University of Ghana-Legon. In response to the same question that Gates posed to Adande, Dr. Perbi responds that they must have known. She goes on to assert that African people did not sell their own people. They sold strangers, foreigners, enemies and captives (1999:208).

The two experts’ responses from the Gates documentary and book taken in conjunction with the king of Allada’s assertions speak to a divide in perception of the events of the past depending on which side of the Atlantic one’s ancestors ended up on. Gates’ insistence on asking the question repeatedly also points to a preoccupation with needing the descendants of African leaders and witnesses to take responsibility for their ancestors’ roles in the history; a responsibility which is not always forthcoming, nor, some would argue, constructive.

While Gates went in search of recognition by the people of Ghana and Benin Republic that their ancestors had perpetrated a great evil, what he found was a defense of the past based on an understanding of a different ontological positioning on the part of their ancestors. While now, people like Adande use familial terms like “brother and sister” to refer to those who were sold into slavery, Perbi makes it clear that this was not the position from which people were functioning in the distant past. Before Europeans reduced several hundred cultures and peoples into a single entity (Africa), the people who lived on the continent did not think of themselves that way. They were not selling their “brothers” and “sisters”; they were ridding themselves of their enemies. It is, of course, this mindset that Richards criticizes in her research on the Maafa (1994). Thus, while Gates may walk through the streets of Accra greeting people with “hey brother” his insistence on making these connections is a twentieth century preoccupation. He is representative of many of the descendants of those who were exiled during the slave trade who return to this perceived site of origin seeking “home”, a sense of belonging and very often, an apology for the fates that their ancestors suffered as a result of Africa’s role in the slave trade.

Indeed, Sutherland identifies two major issues for African-Americans in regards to the commemorative gesture of Vodun Day: 1) the need for atonement by Africans for participating in the historical slave trade and 2) the commercialization of the history of slavery by contemporary African tourism operators (1999:205). I would add that there is another issue: that is, African diasporic people’s haunting sense of alienation and displacement that gives way to the need to locate a site of origin; to find one’s roots in Africa.

One of the linchpins of African diasporic identity is a sense of alienation because they do not know where their origins lie. This sense of alienation has resulted in what the Guyanese poet, Grace Nichols, has identified as a kind of “restlessness where [Caribbean] people feel psychically connected to Africa” though they were exiled from it hundreds of years ago (*i is a long-memored woman* 1990). It has been the subject of countless scholarly and creative works and is the basis for the recent explosion of African diasporic people subjecting themselves to DNA tests with the hope that they will finally know from whence they originate. This longing plays out regularly at Vodun Day ceremonies where a sense of return is encouraged. For example, in 2006, reporters for the *Associated Press* interviewed some of the Vodun Day participants. One of the people interviewed at the ceremony was an African-American nurse from Omaha, Nebraska who asserted that as a result of attending the Vodun Day celebration she understood “many things” about her origins and felt like she was being remembered. She was subsequently initiated into the Vodun faith.

When I attended Vodun Day a year later in 2007 an *Associated Press* reporter interviewed me. She pressed me to draw some heartfelt conclusions about my relationship as an African diasporic person to this significant celebration<sup>11</sup>. Later, a reporter from a French television station interviewed me and repeatedly asked whether the gathering was emotionally moving and if I saw any connections between the Vodun celebrations held in Benin and those held in Haiti.

The interview was a repeat of a scenario in which I had participated whether actively or passively almost every day that I lived in Ouidah. The bolder of those I encountered would ask directly if I came to Benin in search of my roots; others did not bother to ask, but nodded knowingly when I told them why I was there. The reporter, like many of the Beninois I encountered, made an assumption about my motivations for being in Benin, few or none of which had anything to do with any ideas that I might have had about my research.

At the same time, from these encounters, one notes how, for the reporters—one a white woman from England (originally from South Africa and living in Nigeria), the other, a white Frenchman, were led to their questions by an assumption that I should seek out a connection between me (a collective self that represents the African diaspora) and the Beninois. I was placed in a position of authority and authenticity and given the job of spokesperson based on this imagined connection.

Gate's film also features an interview with Prosper de Souza, a senior member of the de Souza family as well as Martine de Souza. For the elder de Souza, his ancestor, Francisco de Souza's involvement in the slave trade is cause for celebration as, according to him, Francisco de Souza saved the lives of thousands of people who would have been sacrificed by King Guezo (1818-1858). He maintains that his ancestor "did a good thing by sending them away from the country". Ms. de Souza gives an opposing view of her ancestor's involvement in the trade. She says, "I am not proud of him because the slave trade was terrible. It sent out of Africa a lot of descendants". More shockingly she proclaims that she wishes that she were descended from slaves because she would feel better about herself. Her confession moves Gates to feel sorry for her and acknowledge that he had never thought about the devastating impact that slavery had on the descendants of the traders. Ms. de Souza made similar statements in an interview with John Burnett for NPR radio in 2004. When I was in Benin I asked Ms. de Souza about her "confession". She said that many people—both local and foreign—had asked her if Gates made her say what she said. She then reiterated her position to me.

In comparing the nurse from Omaha's response to the king of Allada's, Ms. de Souza's confessions as well as my own experience during Vodun Day in 2007, one comes away with a sense of a dialectical relationship between Africans and diasporic Africans coupled with a conflation on the part of people who are not sensitive to the complexity of the relationship between the two. The issue of positioning; in this case, a sense of *longing* versus a sense of *belonging*, is heightened during such a deliberate attempt to foster a sense of unity. A woman who is a descendant of enslaved people claiming that she understands "many [unspecified] things" about her origins after attending a four-hour commemoration ceremony, points to the diaspora's sense of longing. Conversely, since the people of Ouidah can trace their origins back several generations the need to connect with Africa as a site of origin physically and metaphysically is not an issue.

## The Daagbo Hounon and His Vision

Daagbo Hounon<sup>12</sup> means “grandfather controller of the sea”. Belonging to the Hula people who traditionally subsisted as fishermen, the Hounon lineage traces its power to the sea and its genealogy back to 1452. According to the lineage myth, the first Hounon ancestor emerged from the sea as an enormous fish, then transformed into human form. In death he returned to the sea. A list of ancestors in the Daagbo Hounon’s receiving room describes them as such: *retourné en mer* (returned to the sea) (see p.74).

According to the Daagbo Hounon, a storm washed away the sand on the beach and revealed a “stump” that he identified as the remains of the tree to which the slavers used to tie their pirogues. Since his maritime heritage establishes a direct link to him and the ocean his proclamation during the first Vodun Day that he had gotten this sign that validated what became a maritime conception of the ceremony was fitting.

Through such “natural signs” the Daagbo Hounon says, “vodun shows us what kind of thing vodun is.” He explains,

The sea revealed this tree trunk by the beating of the waves on the beach. After that, [the sea] receded rapidly to show that, when the slaves went into the ships, the root of vodun remains in Ouidah. When they had to go by ship, they wanted to leave behind their ancestral vodun for me, Daagbo Hounon. That’s what’s called *vodunheundo* (ancestral vodun). If you go to some other countries, whatever country, you will see Vodunheundo (the Daagbo Hounon qtd. in Sutherland 1999:204).

The stump that the ocean revealed has since been enclosed in a shrine which the Daagbo Hounon visits each Vodun Day. He describes the stump as a new vodun, whose powers he hoped to establish as the presiding vodun of his reign as supreme chief. The tree stump thus, marks the sacred center of a revalorized vodun for Benin and the diaspora. In the Daagbo Hounon’s view, not only do the other deities sanction the welcoming of the spirits of those who were exiled hundreds of years ago back into the religious fold, he also sees the possibility of elevating the collective spirit of those exiled to the status to a major vodun in the religion. For him, “the site in Ouidah must be respected by the whole country as the root of the Vodun culture, the place from which diaspora religions in the Americas were derived” (ibid, p. 204). Again, his larger mission was to legitimize Vodun on a national scale by internationalizing it. He, no doubt, knew about the considerable involvement of African-Americans in the preservation of slave castles in Ghana, for example<sup>13</sup>. By integrating what he interprets as the site of origin of the diaspora into the Vodun pantheon in an elevated position, he gives the diaspora a vested interest in supporting the legitimization of the belief system.

While the Daagbo Hounon's desire to include the diaspora in the Vodun pantheon as part of the larger goal of reunifying Africa and the diaspora is in line with his pronouncement about welcoming the diaspora "home", there is the danger of overshadowing the traumatic history that underlies the necessity of such a welcoming. The reason that in 1992, the Daagbo Hounon needed to make statements about a maritime revelation about pirogues, traders and reunification is because of a history that has been suppressed for centuries. It speaks to the contemporary preoccupations with events of the past. For example, when Gates went to visit the king of Abomey he expected some sign of regret about the king's ancestors' role in sending Gates' great great grandmother into the Middle Passage. Instead, the king simply states that he is happy to see that a child of Africa has gone to Europe or America and become so important. There is no sense of responsibility, let alone, guilt, for his ancestor's part in facilitating the suffering of Gates' ancestor. Rather, the king's reaction evidences the king of Allada's pronouncement that the sad things must be forgotten, only the good things remembered. The history is effaced and only the positive outcome celebrated. Conversely, the Daagbo Hounon's gesture denotes a desire to atone for and foster inclusion of the diaspora into the present and future of Africa. Contrasted with the interaction of Gates with the king of Abomey, the Daagbo Hounon's gesture may be viewed as a different socio-political positioning between the Daagbo Hounon and the king as well as a different vision for the outcome of the performance of memory that he has organized.

The history of slavery is being transformed and the horror of it subverted in the shifting of focus from the trauma of the separation in the past to a celebration of the reunification in the present. As Sutherland notes, the maritime mythology constructed by the Daagbo Hounon, gives a tendentious representation of Diaspora identity in which the magical symbolism of movement across the ocean substitutes utopia for history...The history of slave procurement by former Dahomeans is thereby 'expurgated'... and the suffering experienced by the slaves in the Middle Passage, so deeply etched in African-American collective memory, is redeemed by the magical reversal of transatlantic movement: slaves long departed in pirogues come back as ancestors and contemporary brothers from the Americas return by plane as tourists and benefactors" (1999:207).

This displacement of the reality of the slave trade in favor of a utopian narrative seems to have insinuated itself into Ouidahan society especially amongst its poorer citizens. In my own conversations with people, I heard repeatedly from the more disenfranchised sector of the Ouidah population that African-American people were the lucky ones for having been able to leave. Not only were they lucky for being spared sacrifice as Prosper de Souza claims, but they have access to education, wealth and opportunities that their brothers and sisters in Africa will never have. This sentiment is not new nor is it limited to Benin. For those who believe this, it is expected that those who return seeking their roots bring with them their material wealth to be shared with the descendants of those who remained and who were not so "lucky". Such a way of thinking about the slave experience though, obfuscates the suffering of those who made the Middle Passage journey (countless numbers of whom died en route) as well as their experience during and after slavery.

Furthermore, it ignores the continued institutional roadblocks as well as overt and covert forms of racism that people of African descent continue to face in order to earn the material wealth that is to be shared with their “brothers back home”.

I agree with Sutherland’s observation that the commemorative ceremony of January 10<sup>th</sup> serves a political purpose. As he says, “[t]he African diaspora in the Americas constitutes the primary referent for a populist discourse of modern national identity that seeks to resist the foreign values of the state and Christianity by emphasizing the transatlantic unity of Vodun practitioners” (ibid, p.195). Moreover, from a psychoanalytical perspective, those who left serve as referents for those who remained. Like the double-telling of the oscillation between the crisis of life and death that results from trauma that Cathy Caruth discusses in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), the fate of the African diaspora is tied to the fates of those who remained. One hears evidence of this (sub)conscious referential in a number of ways. It is in talk of “the lucky ones” who went abroad, in enslaved people being spared or sacrificed according to Francisco de Souza’s slave trading choices and in artisans in Abomey who were kept enslaved there rather than sent abroad because the king valued their creative prowess. For everyone who is mentioned, there are their counterparts who are not. Nonetheless, they are not forgotten. They are being called upon contemporarily to help give political weight to the belief system of which they are a part, according to the Daagbo Hounon, and to perform acts of philanthropy in their “ancestral home”.

### **Zomachi: Place of Light**

Along the route to the beach where the majority of Vodun Day is held stands Zomachi— a courtyard surrounded by a high wall. Zomachi, which means “Place of Light”, tries to fulfill the promise that Vodun Day makes. The founder, a sociologist named Honorat Aguessi, conceives of Zomachi (also known as the Monument of Repentance) as a place where descendants of enslaved people and descendants of traders can come together in a conciliatory space. Though the physical space was constructed in 1997 and officially commissioned in January 1998, the ritual that Professor Aguessi also devised, The March of Repentance, has been going on since 1996. The ritual which takes place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of January involves people gathering and walking from Place Chacha, the former residence of Francisco de Souza, to Zomachi where they then discuss the issue of slavery and how it affected Africans in every aspect of its dealings, because, according to one of the guides at Zomachi, “the pain is still there”<sup>14</sup>.

Professor Aguessi built Zomachi because he noted that the descendants of Europeans who sold Africans were always coming to Ouidah and asking for pardon. His position was that in order to be pardoned they must repent. Only then could everyone—seller and sold—move forward collectively. The March of Repentance is meant to facilitate the collective movement towards forgiveness and reconciliation that Professor Aguessi envisioned.

The procession in which I participated took place on a relatively cool and overcast day. The small group of us who attended the ceremony met at a tree outside Francisco de Souza's house that is reputed to have been a slave market. We then walked to Zomachi to simulate the last leg of the trail that enslaved people took on their way to the shore. The eternal flame that sits on a pedestal just beyond the entranceway was lit (see p.75) and Professor Aguessi and his wife were in attendance, seated on a raised platform in front of and to the right of the general audience. Mère and Père Jah, the self-designated ambassadors of the African diaspora from Martinique and a Haitian student on scholarship were guests of honor. There were a few local families and college students there as well. After a dramatization of the sale and deportation of enslaved people and speeches about the need to forgive and move forward, the participants poured libations for the ancestors who were lost to the trade (see p.75).

In a break between performances and speeches I looked up at a tree that, during an earlier visit, the guide at Zomachi had told me was called Bois Caïman (see p.76). Obviously, the tree's name conjures images of the famous Bois Caïman Ceremony that marked the beginning of the Haitian Revolution. The guide claimed that captives who were trying to escape the traders hid in that particular tree in order to avoid capture by slave traders. While the tree is indeed very tall, one look at the flimsy limbs and the sparse leaves reveals that no one could have hid in it. Furthermore, as a simple logistical issue, if an enslaved person could have climbed the tree there was nothing to stop a trader or one of his workers from climbing the tree to go after him or her.

The guide at Zomachi, in his own way, participates in the mythmaking that is taking place around the history of the slave trade in Ouidah, elements that he believes will appeal to an emerging audience: roots or cultural tourists and Beninois youth who want to know about their history and who seek to forge connections between Africa and the diaspora. The guide's story does so<sup>15</sup> by giving a tree that grows in Ouidah a name that is synonymous with revolution in Haiti. By making the tree a place of refuge in Africa he is creating an almost natural trajectory from a single tree of refuge in Africa to a forest of freedom in the diaspora. Thus, his story may be considered a kind of origins myth whereby the tree in Africa is posited as the birthplace of African diasporic resistance to slavery.

## **Conclusion**

These forms of "acting out" or performances of memory that I have discussed in this essay happen for a myriad number of reasons, some of which are apparent; others which are more obscure(d). Thinking about what is revealed in the performance of memory opens up different avenues for exploring the way that memory manifests in the descendants of those who lived through the slave trade and slavery.

Uncovering these avenues is part of the work of understanding the complexities that comprise and define the relationship between Africa and its diaspora at this time; one that constitutes a period of individual and collective psychic and spiritual alienation that began with the Maafa and continues into the present. This performance of memory is an intricate part of the work of moving past the alienation to one of reconciliation with the past and a way to move forward, perhaps to the reunification that some seek and to the healing of the physical and psychic rift between Africa and its diaspora that persists.



Door of No Return





Statue in front of the Museum of Return



*Cakatú*



Shackles found in the market in Porto Novo



Detail from Daagbo Hounon's receiving room mural



Eternal Flame at Zomachi



Pouring libations during the March of Repentance Ceremony



“Bois Caïman” Tree in Zomachi



Daagbo Hounon in procession toward the beach during 2007 Vodun Day celebration

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<sup>1</sup> I will not attempt to define "spirit" here, but concur with Dr. Richards when she says, "'Spirit' is, of course, not a rationalistic concept. It cannot be quantified, measured, explained or reduced to neat rational, conceptual categories as European thought demands... We experience it often, but the translation of that experience into an intellectualized language can never be accurate. The attempt results in reductionism" (1994: 3).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. "The Slave Route". <[http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=25659&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en/ev.php-URL_ID=25659&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)>.

<sup>3</sup> "Vodun" with a capital "v" is the spiritual belief system of the Fon people; "vodun" with a lowercase "v" is a deity.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, September 2006.

<sup>5</sup> This is pure speculation as I do not know under what circumstances such binding happens or if it is sanctioned by the community as it is supposed to be in the case of the *cakatú*.

<sup>6</sup> There is no way of knowing when the idea for the shackles like the ones I found in the market was conceived. Therefore, at least in my mind, there will always be a question of whether they were created and used ritually during the slave trade era or if they were they introduced later as a response to and reflection on it.

<sup>7</sup> A sampling of countries across the African continent reveals a disturbing trend. For example, in Nigeria and Benin Republic children are reportedly kidnapped and sold for \$20 - \$70 each by slavers and sold as sex slaves or as unpaid domestic servants in wealthier countries. In Ethiopia, children between 10 and 18 years old are trafficked into prostitution, to provide cheap or unpaid labor and to work as domestic servants or beggars. Boys are often expected to work as cattle herders in rural areas and in the weaving industry in Addis Ababa, and other major towns whereas girls are expected be domestic workers or prostitutes.

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Sudan has also seen a resurgence of slavery since 1983, associated with the Second Sudanese Civil War. It is estimated that as many as 200,000 people were taken into slavery during the Second Sudanese Civil War.

<sup>8</sup> I am not saying that these forms of slavery are caused by transatlantic slavery as it is well known that slavery existed in Africa before the European transatlantic trade. I wish to point out that contemporarily, shackles, one part of larger threats to people's security, offer a lens through which to see how people responded to that particular moment in history. The shackles may have had a pre-transatlantic life, but they are also useful to the work of deciphering and delineating people's method of processing and incorporating a particular historical moment into their contemporary realities.

<sup>9</sup> The decision of how to characterize Vodun Day is a bit tricky as it is hard to discern whether the day is a festival, a celebration or a ceremony. It is, in fact, all these things wrapped up in a grand day of sacrifice, spectacle and speeches. I will use the term, commemorative ceremony, for my purposes, since remembrance and commemoration is the focus of my work.

<sup>10</sup> The film series was very controversial when it was released and produced a flurry of debate across disciplines. For a sampling of some of the discussion that the series generated refer to: Mazrui, Ali A. "Black Orientalism? Further Reflections on 'Wonders of the African World' by Henry Louis Gates Jr.," Draft, November 11, 1999. A Dialog on Black Radical Congress List, Nov. 1999. Web. 20 Mar. 2010

<sup>11</sup> <[www.blackstudies.ucsb.edu/people/strongman/benin\\_voodoo\\_fest\\_ends.pdf](http://www.blackstudies.ucsb.edu/people/strongman/benin_voodoo_fest_ends.pdf)>. In her haste to file the report, she misspelled my last name.

<sup>12</sup> The Daagbo Hounon with whom this interview took place has since died. A new one was enthroned while I was in Ouidah and presided over the Vodun Day commemoration that I attended.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Anne Bailey, *African Voices of the Atlantic Slave Trade: Beyond the Silence and the Shame* (2005); Brempong Osei-Tutu, "Contested Monuments: African-Americans and the Commoditization of Ghana's Slave Castles" in *African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora* (2006), 9-19; Edward Bruner, "Tourism in Ghana: The Representation of Slavery and the Return of the Black Diaspora" in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 98, No. 2 (1996), pp. 294-304.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with the guide at Zomachi, September 2006.