

Marking Transgressive Spaces And Bodies: A Review Of Contemporary Ghanaian Poetry Prince K. Adika¹

Abstract

This paper reviews contemporary Ghanaian poetry in the light of emerging scholarly discourses about transnational cultural traffic, especially as they relate to Africa and its post-slavery Diasporas in the Western world. The paper argues that while most studies of Ghanaian poetry have been framed by narrowly conceived nationalist viewpoints related to the limiting and inherited mandates of European colonialism, contemporary Ghanaian poetry actually embraces a wider conception of *nation* that invokes spaces and bodies in both the Ghanaian/African homeland and the Diaspora. The paper argues that nation-language, for Ghanaian poets as much as it was for Kamau Brathwaite and others in the African Diaspora, rests on a foundation of multiple memories and historical experiences drawn from the spaces of both the African continent and its Diasporas, and that is precisely why the imagination of nation in Ghanaian poetry paradoxically transgresses the borders of Ghana and logically leads to transnational transactions.¹

1.0 Introduction

One of the remarkable things about attitudes to African literary productions of the past century or so is how closely many of those works have been identified with all kinds of national projects and narratives. Over and over again, both African creative writers and their readers have gauged the value of “authentic” African literary works in terms of how useful they are to the socio-cultural and political unit of the nation and its ambitions. That tendency has been even more pronounced with regard to Ghana. For instance, Kwaku Larbi Korang’s (2003: 2) assertion that Joseph Casely Hayford’s pioneering work, *Ethiopia Unbound* (1911) is a “pathfinding...national allegory...a representative work of early middle class nationalism” succinctly captures an earlier, colonial era version of

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the close affinity between literature and the national project in Ghanaian literature. Korang's reading of *Ethiopia Unbound* and the broader tradition of nationalist literature it inaugurates is one that is shared by relatively recent works of scholarship on the subject, including Priebe (1988), Angmor (1996 and 2004) and Anyidoho and Gibbs (2000). For instance, in the introduction to *Fontomfrom: Contemporary Ghanaian Literature, Theatre and Film* (2000), Anyidoho does not only agree with the existence of a link between the nationalist project and the production of imaginative literature in Ghana, but also goes on to identify specific "defining metaphors" that Ghanaian writers invoke to champion that nationalist agenda. It is fair to say that this affinity between the creation of literature and the process of imagining the nation can be found in all the genres of Anglophone Ghanaian literature, whether we look for it in the poetry of early writers like Raphael Armattoo, in the more overtly political life writing of Kwame Nkrumah in the mid-century, amidst the varied works of the *cultural nationalists* of the 1950s and beyond, or even in more contemporary, 21st century works.²

Given such a background of close links between literature and the national project in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa, there has been a tendency among scholars to overlook an equally important—some would say related—dynamic in Ghanaian literature: its tendency to collapse and even subvert the very national boundaries it has so often been identified with. The present paper is an attempt to analyse some samples of contemporary Ghanaian poetry that do not confine themselves to the old notion of the bounded nation and the *essentialisms* and *invented traditionalisms* it often seems to fetishize, but instead attempt to perform identities that may best be described as *transnational* because the scope of their references—spatial, bodily, or otherwise— straddle multiple national boundaries. These works, as I argue, show a keen awareness of the limitations of the narrowly conceived postcolonial nation as a marker of belonging and identity, and re-focus our attention on transnational imaginaries of identity that, while not totally ignoring the old national boundaries, remind us once again of the relevance of Frantz Fanon's famous assertion that the proper pursuance of national consciousness would ultimately have international or transnational implications.³

Transnationalism and African Literary Imaginations: A Brief Literature Review

It is worth pointing out right from the outset that in broad terms, the concept of transnationalism with which I intend to frame this discussion is not altogether new; neither is it a peculiarly Ghanaian or African phenomenon. It is also worth pointing out that we can not talk about the transnational in a conceptual vacuum; it is defined from/against early conceptions of the nation such as Benedict Anderson's famous "imagined communities" or even Ernest Renan's more historicized declaration that the nation is "based on the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories...and present-day consent" (1990: 19). Yet since Marshall McLuhan came up with his notion of "the global village" to describe the highly interactive nature of the modern world, diverse scholars have pointed to the diminishing relevance of the nation as the dominant socially imagined space of our times. For example, Mary Louise Pratt, in her seminal essay, "Arts of the Contact Zone", refers to the growing importance of transnational contact zones and defines them as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived in different parts of the world today" (1991: 530). Like Louise Pratt, Anzaldúa (1987) posits the emergence and increasing eminence of border personalities whose lives, linguistic heritages and legacies of memories are on the thresholds of the nation and challenge old notions of pure, centered national identities while stressing the in-between spaces where old notions of the nation are most susceptible to challenge. In addition, Appadurai (1996), Sassen (1998), Maalouf (2001), Ngaboh-Smart (2004), Manuh (2006), and Jeyifo (2009) have all stressed the ascendance of the transnation and transnational identities into prominence against the enabling background of what Benedict Anderson (1983: 5) had earlier referred to as the inherent limitations of national narratives of imagined communities in conceptualizing both time and place. From the works of these scholars and others, we can summarize the transnation as being a fluid, translocal, contact-based, ethno-social formation that is situated on the interstitial faultlines of nation. The transnational can be marked on spaces in and outside of the nation because those spaces have some historical or contemporary experiences in common; it can

also be marked on *bodies* that live those historical or contemporary experiences and therefore organize cultural reflexes in response to those experiences. In sum, the outlines of the transnation come into proper focus on the foundations of the old nation and its essential narratives, but the chief distinguishing mark of transnational spaces or bodies is that they transcend those essential narratives of national purity and instead thrive on the *impurities* that the nation has always sought to eliminate by championing essentialist discourses.

While it is generally assumed that the turn to the transnational in recent times is largely driven by the postnational impulse of global Capital's movements, a close reading of the emerging scholarship also strongly suggests that much of what drives contemporary transnationalism especially in postcolonial spaces has its roots in the historical anomaly of the postcolonial national imaginary which, many critics argue, extends anachronistic colonial-era cartographies beyond their expiry dates while perpetuating the truncation or even erasure of most of the nation's contending multiple memories. The postcolonial nation and the way it is imagined, in this regard, does not account for all of the memories that members of the postcolonial nation have of kinship and relational associations. Nor does it attempt to come to terms with evolving realities that members of the nation-state have to constantly contend with. Colonial boundaries, arbitrary as they were, tended to disregard real social formations of colonized peoples, or rather worked consciously to distort them. One can point to multiple examples of this phenomenon in various colonized spaces such as the British Raj or even the erstwhile Francophone Maghreb. But perhaps the most obvious instance of this colonial balkanization can be found in sub-Saharan Africa where colonial policies such as the British "divide and rule" were actively employed to distort social cohesion while arbitrary borders, mostly drawn in European capitals, were imposed against the wills of native peoples.

Furthermore, even before the advent of formal colonialism, the institution of chattel slavery had done much to create a network of organized *dismemberments* which, as Ngugi (2009), Armah (2010), and others have shown, the postcolonial/neocolonial nation-state neither accounts for nor recognizes as a matter that needs to be redressed. Ngugi, Armah

and others rightly argue that to simply embrace a rhetoric of nation that legitimizes boundaries inherited from colonial times is to consciously participate in the process of one's own continued dismemberment, especially since those boundaries were imagined and willed into being by the powerful elites from the West for whom the practice of colonialism was also the practice of dismemberment of the Other. In further extending the critique of that insular model of the national imaginary inherited from the colonizing West, one is also reminded of Partha Chatterjee's (2005: 406) biting criticism of postcolonial national constructs that are throw-backs to an era of European colonialist imposition:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. *"Even our imaginations must forever remain colonized"* (my emphasis).

As I intend to show later in this paper, much of the driving force behind Ghanaian poets of the transnationalist bent derives from the need to overcome or transcend this tendency in some circles to indulge "imagination that must forever remain colonized". It is driven by a determination to balance existing national narratives with their transnational extensions and, to paraphrase Kofi Anyidoho's words, connect with aspects of the Ghanaian/African Self that present constructions of the nation do not account for. With that background in mind, I go on to analyze the poetry of Kofi Anyidoho, Abena Busia and others as samples of Ghanaian poetry that encode the transnational logic that, as I argue, is prominent in much of contemporary Ghanaian literature.⁴

2.0 Kofi Anyidoho

To many critics, the work of Kofi Anyidoho as a poet points to an artist with multiple personae. To some, he is the author of sentimental juvenilia in the pages of Ellen Sangster Geer's *Talent for Tomorrow* series. Robert Fraser argues that his more adult work is stronger on the level of musical style because it complements Leopold Sedar Senghor's "syncopating syllabic strands" and also "showcases a strong, individual voice over communal concerns" (Fraser 1986: 311-318). Kofi Awoonor notes that Anyidoho's poetry tackles "the eternal situation of the African condition" (qtd in Priebe 1988: 162) while Charles Angmor sees Anyidoho as "the poet of the Ghanaian revolution" whose artistry "bespeaks fundamental influences...from his native Ewe culture...and the national cultural renaissance that has been prevalent since Ghana's independence" (Angmor 1996: 186). Finally, A.N. Mensah stresses how Anyidoho adapts traditional conventions for his love poems (qtd in Anyidoho and Gibbs 2000: 217-226).

These critical views summarize critics' responses to Anyidoho's poetry over the past thirty years or so and are useful for our understanding of aspects of his work, especially the earlier work. But they do not account for the expanding notions of the *Self* and the *World* that Anyidoho's more recent works have engaged with. For instance, his 1993 collection, *AncestralLogic and CaribbeanBlues* opens with a poetic passage he calls the "IntroBlues." There the poet explains to us how:

In the last decade or so I have journeyed into various spaces of the world. And everywhere I must confront dimensions of myself that I did not know were there. I discover new purposes I did not know I could make my own. There is something of my story carved into every tombstone in all the graveyards of the world, something of my history enshrined in every monument and in every anthem ever erected in honour of the spirit of endurance (1993:2).

Two dominant images jump out at us immediately from this passage. First, there is the image of journeying or travelling that occupies the persona; then there is the image of wide-flung multi-national spaces captured by the reference to "the various spaces of the world". We are

also made aware that the persona is not a stranger on a joyride in foreign spaces. Rather, what he is really doing is embracing visions of himself for which the postcolonial nation—in this case, Ghana—and its narrowly conceived narratives cannot account. He is confronting “dimensions of myself that I did not know were there” as a result of the limiting impact of his old limiting worldview and sense of belonging (Anyidoho, 1993: xi). The above text is thus a passage about fluid motion across global(ized) spaces, but it also acquires more power if we pay attention to the persona’s claim that his story—and by implication, the stories of many Ghanaians and Africans like him—transcends the borders of the nation since in pursuance of a more rounded understanding of himself, he must ultimately embrace the transnational dimensions of his being.

All of *AncestralLogic and CaribbeanBlues* is shaped by a keen awareness of an African history which in its worst moments is “a living wound under the patchwork of scars” and at other times is no more than the maimed offshoot of the multiple dismembering practices of centuries-old encounters with Europe.⁵ But the collection is also a response to the contemporary transnational ramifications of the asymmetrical North-South contact phenomenon. The very title of the collection attests to these related driving forces, and so does its introductory poem, “IntroBlues”. In subsequent poems, we see a soulful, bluesy persona covering miles across spaces in the Black Atlantic and engaging with Caribbean history, not with the detached eye of a foreign observer, but rather with the involved psyche of a man who reads himself as being part of all the tortured sub-worlds he portrays. Written in part as a manifesto against those who “tell us our salvation lies in the repudiation of our history of pain and endless fragmentation” (Anyidoho, 1993: xi), and in part as vigorous interrogation of the “the intimidating splendour of this young history of lies” (Anyidoho, 1993: 3) that enables amnesia across the fragmented African world, *AncestralLogic* also connects both the African and the African Diasporan experience in a network of inevitable mutuality and encourages dialogic engagements between African-heritage peoples scattered across various national boundaries both within and without Africa.

It would seem on the evidence of much of the poems in Anyidoho's recent works that he is a poet who is very much concerned with the exploration of transnational spaces. And we could read the poet's poignant references to a "history of pain and endless fragmentation" and "the young history of lies" above in a number of fruitful ways that bring that engagement with transnational space to the fore. For instance, in subsequent poems like "Republica Dominicana," the dual processes of fragmentation and dispersal across multiple spaces and the lies that prevent their reversal are illustrated thus: "Dispossessed of your ancestry/your BlackNess/ Dissolves into Vague regions/of the Indios Myth" (Anyidoho, 1993: 8). The subjects of this poem are not only stripped of connections to their original African memories but also have to contend with palimpsests or grafted myths that are used to supplant those old memories. As we read through successive pieces in the collection, we are increasingly made aware that the structures (and strictures) of the slave, colonial and even postcolonial societies contribute a great deal to this fragmentation and amnesia. Consequently, when the poet envisages a new, emancipatory poetics of *remembering* as a solution to the dismemberment that he finds all around him, he organizes that process in defiance of various national boundaries. As he had found out by personal experience, one must start the process of psychic healing by traversing dismembering borders of all sorts, and crossing the Atlantic, challenging the Indios myth, invoking African memories in its place, among other things, are all part of this process.

That Anyidoho calls for transnational journeys of reconnection across spaces in *Ancestrallogic* is obvious enough, but he is also particular about the routes of those journeys and the final destination. The poet or the personae that speak for him are keen on making the journeys into the Diaspora and engaging with Diasporans, but he is equally keen for Diasporans to cross over; so keen that sometimes one gets the feeling that he is even more in favour of the journey of Diaspora back to homeland than he is of that of homeland to Diaspora. Certainly, this vision of journeys back to homeland in Anyidoho's poetry is not always to be read literally, but we cannot discount the literal dimensions either. On several occasions in the collection, the poet points out that, short of the journeys back into the space of primal beginnings, the efforts of various Black peoples at self-cognition are futile and misdirected, insisting in the process that,

...all our journeys must always take us
away from destinations into Dislocations
until one day, tired at last from endless
trailings of lost purpose and lost vision
we mark the only straight route from Ghana to Havana to
Guyana and on and on to Savannah in Georgia of the deep deep
South. With AfricanaAirways, we can re-navigate the Middle
Passage clear the old debris and freshen the waters with iodine
and soul-chlorine (1993:12)

In other words, the poet insists that current efforts to progressively advance the cause of the Black peoples across the world and heal abscesses from their historical wounds are failing and leading to “Dislocations” precisely because those efforts often do not engage the critically important subject of transnational, cross-continental pan-Africanist dialogue in all its historical complexity. Part of this complex engagement involves Africans like Anyidoho journeying into various Diasporan spaces to engage with them, but its critical counterpart involves the return journey back to Africa instead of away from it, and Anyidoho insists that making that return is possible only through the pan-Africanist medium of what he calls “AfricanaAirways.” Even more to the point, he castigates those who do not count the relevance of re-navigating the Middle Passage as a central part of this process but subscribe to the dominant tendency to allow “the old debris” of historical amnesia and lack of dialogic engagement between the African Diasporas and Homelands to worsen the suppuration of the wounds on both sides. It is a broad canvass of re-engagement that the poet paints, but we also have to remember, especially in the context of this paper’s thesis, that the ultimate consummation of the kind of remembering that the poet advocates can be made possible only through transnational engagements. The poet implies that one flouts commitments to one’s *Ghanaianness* to engage with Caribbeans or African Americans as members of a more comprehensively imagined sense of identity, but these infringements are necessary stepping stones for coming to terms with the dimensions of the African self in all its implications and extensions.

AncestralLogic, then, is set up partly as a rebuke of those who are unwilling to make journeys across national boundaries to engage in productive transnational engagement, but it also champions transnational

adventurers who seek to renew kinship across the Atlantic. For instance, “Lolita Jones,” which is partly dedicated to Maya Angelou and her time in Africa in the 1960s, is spoken in the voice of a female African Diasporan returnee to Africa who engages in dialogue with Africans about subjects as diverse as her name, the Atlantic slave trade, contemporary African politics and her claims to a place in the contemporary African world. Lolita also points out that she had made a conscious decision to “fly over and find ma Space” in the post-independence African era simply because she thought the dawn of new hope “gave her back her soul” for reconnection with African kinsfolk (1993: 28). More importantly though, Lolita had also concluded that her coming to African space would enable “Ma People” and “your People” to dialogue over the lingering questions of how “Long ago your People sold ma People” and consequently, how the Atlantic storms of the Middle Passage “took away our Voice/Then it took away our Name/And it stripped us of our Soul” (1993: 27). At the end of the poem the persona makes it clear that she is aware of the transgressions that are implied in her laying claims to “ma Space” in Africa since “you didn’t even invite me here at all” (1993: 29). In other words, the fact that new narratives of the postcolonial nation do not account for the histories that produced the Lolita Joneses of this world is being questioned here, and the poet obviously encourages the tendency towards transgressing those postcolonial narratives through transnational engagements.

Taken as a whole, *AncestralLogic* is a strident invitation to kinship carnivals in defiance of old, colonially circumscribed national boundaries. And it is directed at both Africans in the Diaspora and those in the homeland. But *AncestralLogic* is not the only collection that showcases the efforts by Anyidoho to come to terms with the transnational dimensions of the Black Self. In the more recent *PraiseSong for the Land* (2002) which, significantly, is dedicated to “all the people I call My People”, the theme of transnational journeys over spaces informed by history dominates once more. In the opening poem, “Memory and Vision”—itself part of a section called “Journeys into Time”—the persona finds it necessary to remind his readers about the Oddysean journeys of Africans over the past half millennium:

For Five Hundred Years—and more—
We have journeyed from Africa
Through the Virgin Islands into Santo Domingo
From Havana in Cuba to Savanna in Georgia
From Vodou Shores of Haiti to Montego
Bay in Jamaica from Ghana
To Guyana from the Shanty-Towns
Of Johannesburg to the Favelas
In Rio de Janeiro
From Bukom to Harlem to Brixton
From Hamburg to Moscow to Kyoto— (2002: 28)

Given the fact that *PraiseSong for the Land* is something of a eulogy to the land/space of belonging, the global journeys suggested by this and other similar poems in the collection call our attention once again to Anyidoho's growing concern with a vision of the national polity that, paradoxically, is driven by a poetics of the transnation. "Memory and Vision," like much of Anyidoho's poetry, evokes a pathos that must be familiar to those who know something about the Ewe dirge form or the song of sorrow. That acute ear for the sorrowful cadence has been transported into the written medium to serve Anyidoho's latest engagements with the travails of Black people around and across the world. Like Langston Hughes' famous poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Memory and Vision" follows the historical journeys of Africans across the world. Anyidoho attempts to historicize the global sprawl of the African Diaspora in the lines above. But through that process of historicism, he also tries to excavate the reasons that led to those journeys of Diaspora-creation in the first place. Though he does not say so explicitly, there is the heavy implication in the lines above that the "journeys" by Black people from Africa to these various slums around the world that he refers to are anything but voluntary, especially since their genesis coincides with the beginning of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade five hundred years ago.

This criss-crossing of global spaces in an attempt to engage versions of the Black world in those spaces is a common theme in *PraiseSong* and elsewhere in Anyidoho's work. But with specific reference to "Memory and Vision", he points out how these journeys help him only to consistently

discover “a Dispossessed and Battered (African) people still kneeling in a Sea of Blood lying deep in the Path of Hurricanes” (2002: 28). To Anyidoho, a critical part of the answer to resolving the crisis of African peoples, whether they live in Hamburg or Kyoto or Harlem or Bukom, lies in an unwavering transversal of those ghettoized, cut-off spaces, followed by a new commitment to transnational kinship traffic which begins with a return to the historical space and time of first beginnings. To put that insight in perspective, he invokes memories of space that are meant to encourage African peoples across the world to reengage with the African Homeland and with the history that led to the break between the African Homeland and the Diaspora. Rather than encourage what he considers the fashion for amnesia or conspiratorial hiding from the history of pain and fragmentation that created the dire situations he sees around him, he asserts that any attempt to solve the contemporary problems of Africans around the world has to reckon with the history of the past five hundred years. He points out,

No matter how far away we try to hide away from
Ourselves
We will have to come back
Home and find out Where and How and Why
We lost
The light in our Eyes. How and Why
We have become
Eternal Orphans living on Crumbs and LeftOvers (2002: 29)

Returning home, to the persona, is essential for communal healing and renewal. Above the limited conception of home as African space, the stress in these poems by Anyidoho, it seems to me, is on traversing national boundaries and engaging in kinship dialogues with other African-heritage peoples. These journeys, as I have tried to show, challenge the essential foundational thesis of the postcolonial nation in various ways. But to us as readers, the larger point that needs to be kept in mind is that the poet seems to have no problems with transgressing the boundaries of the postcolonial nation of Ghana and embracing transnational kinship precisely because he sees those transnational journeys and engagements as key to a new era of healing and even social progress.

The point about the exploration of transnational space in Anyidoho's work is further supported by evidence from his latest collection, *The Place We Call Home* (2011). Although the collection is anchored by a title poem which asserts that there is a lot to be said for the nostalgic memories and familiar scents of the "place we call home" because it "defines our sense of Self of Time of Place" and holds "Primal Memories" (31-35), the poet is also concerned about the complacent tendency on the part of some to consign themselves only to that space. Even by naming that space "the place we call home," he is calling our attention not to an absolute, essential place that marks being and identity, but rather to a strategic adoption of space; a local address that would serve as a staging ground for further explorations of our "backwards-forwards dance" into the various transnational spaces where kinsfolk now dwell as spirits or as living humans. That is the more reason why *The Place We Call Home* is filled with "Crossroads" and "Crossways" and journeys across "space and time" to come to terms with "Our constant act of dismembering/Our sacrificial egg/laid at the shrines of alien gods", as the poet puts it in his homage to Kamau Brathwaite in "Atigbon Legba" (2011: 29-30).

The point being made about transnational engagements of the pan-Africanist variety in *The Place We Call Home* is noted by Femi Osofisan who, in his preface to the collection, points to how "Kofi displays an impressive intimacy with the geography and genealogy of black dispersal throughout the world, from the entire North and South America to the Caribbean and then to the Eastern Hemisphere" (Anyidoho 2011: xxiii-xxiv). That statement is particularly true of the "first movement" of *The Place We Call Home* which, as I have tried to show with examples above, constitutes nothing but movements into Diaspora and back to African space in a series of kinship rituals meant to challenge the history of dismemberment. "Ancestral Roll-Call" which is a libation-invocation of personas of various nationalities from across the Black world, appropriately sums up his transnational cum pan-Africanist bent in this latest collection; a fact which in turn reasserts the continuing relevance of transnational visions and hopes in the poetry of Anyidoho and increasingly, of other Ghanaian writers.

3.0 Abena Busia

The dominant imagery of journeying across transnational spaces in search of the scattered remnants of self that characterises much of Anyidoho's recent poetry is echoed in Abena Busia's poetry. Yet apart from traversing transnational spaces, Busia's poetry is also significant for focusing our attention on transnational bodies of Black people straddling and being straddled by various spaces within the *Black Atlantic*. It is in this regard that Busia extends Anyidoho's engagements with spaces of transnational transaction. Unlike Anyidoho, however, Busia's critique of the nation has a more radically subversive tone, as she sometimes appears to be calling for the total abolition of the postcolonial nation and all its claims to being the place of first belonging. In addition, she at the same time lionizes a perpetual exilic state of being and consciousness as the model for the postnational/transnational persona. This reading is in keeping with her major collection so far, the aptly titled *Testimonies of Exile* (1990). In *Testimonies*, Busia begins by recreating series of images that conform to Pratt's contact zone concept of bodies of the colonized and the colonizer in contact. The opening poem from that collection—and perhaps Busia's most anthologized—is called "Caliban." "Caliban" primarily revises our understanding of the Shakespearean character of the same name. Busia's Caliban starts off as a native who finds himself locked up in a scenario of asymmetrical relations of power with a Master. As a result, s/he is left with bondage, dispossession and the dubious consolation of speaking "this dispossession in the language of the master." But being Caliban, for Busia, has other implications. For instance, it paves the way for the now enslaved native's body to receive the mark of doom, so to speak, and to be "ravished and naked/chanting the words of a little girl lost/...a black man's child/stranded on the shores of saxon seas" (1990: 5). The contact experience, in this scheme of affairs, logically leads to an eternal exilic existence for all Caliban-like natives and that experience becomes the Ur-text for all of Busia's subsequent portrayals of the world and for self-cognition in *Testimonies*.

From what must have been sure-footed beginnings of pre-Encounter native self-knowledge and self-possession, what we notice in poems such as "and anyway i can't go home" is an overwhelming sense of alienation

and a perennial wandering in search of a new identity forged in the crucible of Encounter. Like the Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish's visions of exile from the Self, Busia's personas are exiled bodies branded by markers of a foreign power that insists on keeping them in zones that straddle being and non-being.⁶ And from that externally imposed atrophy of Self-hood, they must create a new language of Being. From the caves of Calibanesque transmogrification, they "have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single word: *Home*" (Busia, 1990: 7). Yet this search—or searches—are doomed to failure because they learn soon enough that they cannot go home. We are thus made aware of the consequent tragic inevitability of their Odyssean fate; the never-ending wanderlust that must drive them on perennial transnational journeys across boundaries and frontiers of old nations in search of psychic purgation and kinship renewal without the consolation, however far removed or mythical in a Saffranesque sense, of a return home at some future date. In "Migrations" she re-emphasizes that exilic, nomadic reality thus:

We have lived that moment of the scattering of the people—
Immigrant, Migrant, Emigrant, Exile,...That in other nations, other
lives, other places has become: The gathering of last warriors on lost
frontiers/The gathering of lost refugees on lasting border-camps/
The gathering of the indentured on the side-walks of strange cities...
In the half-life, half-light of alien tongues,/In the uncanny fluency
of the other's language...All my friends are exiles,/born in one
place, we live in another/ And with true sophistication,/rendezvous
in most surprising places—/where you would never expect to find
us/With the globe at our command, we have everywhere to go, but
home. (1990: 8-9)

Driven by exigencies of both history and contemporary global pressures, the "we" of "Migrations" are also marked by another quality: their resistance to national boundaries and the nation's narrowly conceived and yet totalizing narratives, especially in the light of the dispossessing effect of the master's power on them. In fact, by taking up labels such as "immigrant, migrant, emigrant, exile" and so on, they hold themselves up as warriors whose spaces of operation the nation cannot control precisely because they live on the margins of the nation while at the same time

transcending it. One reads a certain ennui generated by loss dominating the lives of these scattered migrants of the new world order, but it is also obvious that these are people determined to transform the loss of home into a new syllabary of identity that challenges the dispossessing discourses of the old nation. This desire not to be confined by the limiting definitions of the nation is stressed even more loudly in another poem, “Petitions” where we are made aware that these same renegades of national space have defiantly,

...asked for courage Not
to belong, Not
to identify, Not
to regret.
Not to confine the spaces of our souls
To the places of our first heart beat
Not to let withering umbilical cords
keep us parched (1990: 19)

Perhaps what Busia calls “petitions” in this poem might sound odd to those of us who are used to belonging to and identifying with various standard social formations and communities, especially the particular kind circumscribed by the borders of the postcolonial nation-state. Significantly, this abjuration of belonging is loudly in defiance of birthplace and homeland; the same places that Anyidoho’s poetry has strongly pointed to as the destiny of all those who want to undo the effects of colonial dismemberment. Even more importantly, she seems to strongly suggest that the fetishization of return-to-homeland narratives can only have retrogressive consequences for those who pursue them (“confine the spaces of our souls”/ “keep us parched”).

But her wishes/prayers/requests/demands make sense if we understand them not as absolute abjurations of all sense of belonging and identification but rather as references to the untenable nature of keeping allegiances to essences and dehydrating monologic narratives at the base of the postcolonial nation and its alter-egos in centers of colonial power. In the portion of “Petitions” quoted above, and elsewhere in Busia’s poetry,

what we see is the subversion of birth-place fetishism, the unquestioned and unchallenged glorification of the place of the first heartbeat and the burial ground of the metaphorical umbilical cord—in the face of multiple sojourns across multiple spaces forced on us by the realities of history and every day life. In other words, Busia is telling us that fixed identities, especially those derived from and limited to the nation, are not tenable in the face of the multiple transnational sojourns and contacts that various people have as a result of history and contemporary developments. In fact, in what seems to be an extension of her radical diversion from Anyidoho, she seems to be discarding the very idea of nation as the basis of identity, and consequently advocating the acknowledgement of the new being founded on the very ruins of allegiance to the nation. In other words, in Busia’s work one transcends the nation, not to extend it, but rather to abolish it so that other realities suppressed by the nation might flourish.

This reading is supported most eloquently by perhaps the most powerful and emotionally effective poem in *Testimonies*, “At Last Rites.” In it, Busia creates a poetic vision very similar to that of Anyidoho as discussed earlier, by reminding her readers of the multiple dimensions of herself that lie scattered in multiple spaces across continents and how these multiple dimensions came to be in those many places. She, too, explains why she (or bodies like hers) must wander over various transnational spaces through her lifetime to come to terms with herself. Yet, that is where the comparison with Anyidoho ends. “At Last Rites” is a defiant poke at those who want to re-collect and return; to go “home to that place where otherwise I will not go”. Busia seems more interested in expanding the pace of her “furious wanderings” and the “passion of disharmonies” that overwhelm her body now. She also asserts her determination to stay that way till death, effectively sounding the clarion for a lifetime of activist rejection of the notion of exclusive belonging to nations or even larger formations such as continents. As she succinctly puts it:

i

I am a passion of disharmonies
axing my dismembering self
splitting my body among continents
At my death re/collect me.

Steady me into a casket
and take me home to that place where
otherwise I will not go

ii.

let's not twi-
st down or re le ve
o ver my r-o-
ving ra ging bones.

A four step hesitation will pace this rage
An economy of movement to contain
The grief for furious wanderings
The grace of a-do-wa will mark
my fi-nal time
So pray it can stay
the course of severed histories;
hold still, to give me rest,
the portion of earth which gave me birth

By the adoption of a succession of –ing verbs in “axing” and “dismembering” and “splitting” she also signals her active embrace of those on-going, dismembering processes. It is important that we do not lose sight of the context of these statements: in embracing dismemberment this way, Busia is obviously acknowledging histories of dismemberment that African-heritage peoples have experienced over the years. But she is also embracing those histories not as regrettable cataclysms that need to be undone but rather as staging grounds for new transnational identities. And even more to the point of our argument, she is acknowledging transnational movements as the natural consequence of severed histories and calling for a progressive appropriation of those histories.

In sum, we may say that Busia's struggle to come to terms with identity involves reckoning with dimensions of herself split among continents and nations in the course of “furious wanderings.” For her, the simple—and simplistic—answer of the national birth-place cannot explain the complex histories that have marked her and her “passionate” wanderings

over the years. Her whole life as represented by *Testimonies* is summed up by a quest to reckon with severed histories that have also dismembered the self. Her body itself is marked as an index of those wanderings and migrations and dispersals and scatterings across national boundaries. But rather than putting shattered pieces of dismemberment together, she is more interested in defiantly “staying the course of severed histories”. Whichever way we look at that decision, we also must understand her or the multiple voices that speak in *Testimonies* as transnational sojourners whose very bodies and the passion of disharmonies that occupy them become the symbolic sites of an important version of the transnational *agon* in contemporary Ghanaian literature.

5.0 Other Ghanaian Poets and the Transnational Impulse

While this discussion has focused largely on Anyidoho and Busia as eloquent spokespersons for two major manifestations of the transnational instinct in contemporary Ghanaian poetic expression, we could isolate a generous amount of poetic works from other Ghanaian writers that speak to the same tendency. For instance, works such as Kobena Eyi Acquah’s *Music for a Dream Dance* (1989) and Kofi Awoonor’s *Latin American and Caribbean Notebook* (1992) are organized around the motif of pan-Africanist transnational travels in quest of identity and self-knowledge. In fact, Acquah’s dream dance is nothing but a subversion of national borders in order to embrace the dream dance of Trans-Atlantic pan-Africa, just as Awoonor’s notebook is a record of cross-ocean connections beyond the old, frozen nation-space. A number of Awoonor’s personae in *Notebook* are particularly sensitive to cross-Atlantic relationships and defy the borders of the postcolonial nation-state to embrace them. For instance, the persona in “Of Niggerhood”, after making long journeys across the Atlantic, uses the mechanism of historical memory to establish kinship with the Caribbean space and the bodies in it thus:

Memory told me I’d been here before
Once upon an age
Now lost in ocean water
Companied by flying fish
Across a briefer ocean (Awoonor, 1992: 37)

Awoonor's poem is built around a transnational conception of Niggerhood that appropriates the negative historical baggage of the N-word while engaging its potentially progressive uses. Consequently, he invokes the kind of solidarity which only the wretched of the earth are capable of, but in order to make it operational, he reminds his audience about how the oceans and flying fish that once straddled the Transatlantic Slave Trade routes are also the best bridges to that new solidarity of Niggerhood. And one gets to understand this point, the poet suggests, by engaging what lies on both sides of the ocean water(s). Along the same lines of a new spirit of transnational engagement, the persona of Ama Ata Aidoo's "In Memoriam: The Ghana Drama Studio" (2004), when asked whether she feels at home in Ghana, calls attention to a marked shift in the way home is defined, with a new, transnational definition now in vogue:

I wondered how an old campaigner like you could have asked the question...and the forever pain around my heart/ jumped, roaring for attention/Because comrade/(Holy places and their desecrations aside/and not to mention the sacred duty to feel at home anywhere in Africa,/ and love every bit of this battered and bartered continent which I still, perhaps naively, call my own,)/I thought folks like you n'me had stopped defining Home from way back and have calmly assumed that Home can also be anyplace where someone or other is not trying to fry your mind, roast your arse, or waste you and yours altogether (2004: 27).

Home, as we can see in Aidoo's vision of it above, challenges the old myth making processes of the nation and emphasizes a new strategic, transnational solidarity of African individuals seeking restoration from centuries of colonial battering and bartering. And these seeking individuals, as we have seen in other cases discussed above, are also marked by the fact that they seek that restoration beyond the limits of the nation.

6.0 Conclusion

The key sentiment that runs through the works I have referred to is the tendency to identify with a conception of identity and self-realization that is willing to revise the postcolonial nation-state and its essential,

monologic narratives as the defining markers. At various points and in the opinions of various critics, the poets on whose works this paper has focused produced works that were seen as worthy of enriching our national narratives. Those readings may still be applicable, but in order to make that possible, we would have to go back and interrogate the very meaning of the nation itself in Ghanaian literature. As commentators like Larbi Korang have noted, as early as 1911 when J.E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* was published, the connection between literature and the nationalist consciousness was already in vogue. That trend, it would seem, has continued into contemporary times. But it is also important to note, as this paper has tried to do, that nationalist consciousness in Ghanaian literature and in literatures elsewhere in subaltern spaces of the postcolonial world does not necessarily coincide with mandates inherited from colonial cartographies of the nation. To perceive these literatures in such limited and limiting terms, as Chatterjee suggests, would be to risk our memories and imaginations being colonized all over again especially in times and spaces that we often insist on calling *post*-colonial. Luckily for us, the creative writers of contemporary Africa have led efforts to transcend those old stultifying notions of the nation. Consequently, much of the creative work by Ghanaian writers that is read as part of imagining the nation as conceptualized in Anderson's *Imagined Communities* is also really a process of subverting old understandings of the nation and engaging the transnational dimensions of postcolonial identities. At least, that is the kind of argument that this paper has attempted to make. And although the works of Kofi Anyidoho, Abena Busia, Kofi Awoonor, Ama Ata Aidoo and others have been used to illustrate the point, a larger body of work including those in the genres of prose and drama such as Ayi Kwei Armah's *Osiris Rising*, Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, or Benjamin Kwakye's *The Other Crucifix*, to mention a few, could easily be used to illustrate the same idea. While it may still be useful to read these works as pieces in the national literature of Ghana, their concentration on various transnational spaces and bodies raises legitimate questions about the limits and extensions of the nation and ultimately, the same works call upon us to do the hard work of re-examining the provenance and teleology of what we call Ghanaian literature.

Notes

¹ Kamau Brathwaite's concept of *nation language* which was first elaborated upon in his seminal *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984) stresses how Anglophone Caribbean identities, informed by multiple memories of "Ashanti, Congo, Yoruba, all that mighty coast of Western Africa" cannot be easily subsumed under the easy rubric of the postcolonial univocal Anglophone nation, but have to be studied with that broader multi-national historical background in mind. Brathwaite also points out how this "very complex... is now beginning to surface in our literature" (5-8). While Brathwaite's focus is very much on the language of Caribbean nationhood and its interactions with history, it is still very applicable to this study.

² The connection between national consciousness, a national culture, and literature far predates the 1950s and the title of J.E. Casely Hayford's *Ethiopia Unbound* clearly epitomizes an early version of the desire for a unifying cultural and political imaginary amongst proto-Ghanaians of the turn of the century. But as Charles Angmor points out in *Contemporary Literature in Ghana 1911-1978* (1996), a more marked "desire to cultivate the literary tradition... became a national concern" from the 1950s onwards. This movement, popularly known as the cultural nationalist movement, was led by stalwarts like Efua Sutherland and had far-reaching effects on the careers of most Ghanaian writers of the second half of the twenty century.

³ See Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1967: 199).

⁴ Kwadwo Opoku Agyemang's "A Crisis of Balance: The (Mis)Representation of Colonial History and the Slave Experience as Themes in Modern African Literature" presents perhaps the most strident call so far in African scholarship for an engagement with the history of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and its contemporary ramifications. My own argument here, framed by a recognition of Ghanaian poets who engage with the post-Slavery African Diasporan spaces and bodies in a transnational cultural traffic, is an extension to that call for the need for balance beyond the confining legacy of the (post)colonial national imaginary.

⁵ See Opoku Agyemang, "Introduction," *Cape Coast Castle: A Collection of Poems*.

⁶ Abena Busia herself has admitted to the influence of Darwish's work on the Diasporic consciousness on her own work although she at her work from a decidedly African perspective. See for instance, *Testimonies of Exile* (9).

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