

Tidalectic Memories of the Black Atlantic: Monénembo's approaches to a past that is not past in *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs cubains chantent à minuit*

Les mémoires tidalectiques de l'Atlantique noir : Monénembo et ses approches à un passé qui n'est pas passé dans *Pelourinho* et *Les Coqs cubains chantent à minuit*

Hannah Grayson

ABSTRACT: This article demonstrates how Tierno Monénembo's literary poetics set memory in motion across the Atlantic. *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs cubains chantent à minuit* were published by Monénembo in 1995 and 2015 respectively, the former set in Brazil and the latter in Cuba. He pursues his literary project to 'humaniser l'histoire' in these two novels, via a roots-tourism entry point to revisiting the persistent traces of transatlantic crossings in Francophone Latin American literary memory work. By **demoting the visual**, Monénembo reiterates a sense of disorientation that emerges in his earlier writing, yet here the motion is more a sway between **overlapping temporalities**. His continued **focus on mobility** in the postcolonial world, the recurrence of **absent protagonists**, and an **emphasis on soundscape** present new ways of remembering past experiences of suffering and solidarity.

Keywords: Memory. Black Atlantic. Diaspora. Tidalectics.

RÉSUMÉ: Cet article montre comment la poétique littéraire de Tierno Monénembo met la mémoire en mouvement à travers l'Atlantique. *Pelourinho* et *Les Coqs cubains chantent à minuit* ont été publiés par Monénembo en 1995 et 2015 respectivement, le premier se déroulant au Brésil et le second à Cuba. Dans ces deux romans, il poursuit son projet littéraire d'« humaniser l'histoire », en revisitant, par le biais d'un tourisme des racines, les traces persistantes des traversées transatlantiques dans son travail de mémoire littéraire latino-américain francophone. En reléguant le visuel au second plan, Monénembo réitère un sentiment de désorientation qui émerge dans ses écrits antérieurs, mais ici le mouvement est plutôt un va-et-vient entre des temporalités qui se chevauchent. L'accent qu'il continue de mettre sur la mobilité dans le monde postcolonial, la récurrence de protagonistes absents et l'importance accordée au paysage sonore présentent de nouvelles façons de se souvenir des expériences passées de souffrance et de solidarité.

Mots clefs: Mémoire. L'Atlantique noir. Diaspora. Tidalectique.

Introduction

'emboîter le pas aux anciens, rafistoler la mémoire...rabibochoer le présent et l'autrefois, amadouer la mer' (Monénembo 1995: 150)¹.

So read the naive aims of the dead protagonist of Pelourinho, Monénembo's 1995 novel, pre-empting similar words a decade later in Desmedida by Ruy Duarte de Carvalho (2006).

My aim in this article is to demonstrate how Monénembo's poetics set memory in motion across the Atlantic. His project to 'humaniser l'histoire' incorporates in these two Latin American texts a roots-tourism entry point to revisiting the persistent traces of

¹ [follow on the heels of the ancients, patch up memory... patch together the present and the past, soothe the sea.] All translations from French in this article are my own.

transatlantic crossings². Demoting the visual, he reiterates a sense of disorientation in a sway between overlapping temporalities. Moreover, four decades into his published writing career, these novels reveal the ongoing, transhistorical relevance of movement to the postcolonial world. Monénembo's writing, as transatlantic literature, is well placed to engage directly with transnational and diasporic crossing and exchange: "Il s'agit bien plutôt d'envisager des œuvres ou mouvements, européens ou non-européens, produits par ou reflétant des échanges, transactions, connexions entre les cultures et les littératures des continents délimitant l'Atlantique" (Jean-Claude Laborie *et al*, 2018, p.11)³.

Pelourinho and *Les Coqs cubains chantent à minuit*, were published by Monénembo in 1995 and 2015 respectively, the former set in Brazil and the latter in Cuba. Following a writing residency in Brazil, Monénembo wrote *Pelourinho* in 1995. It tells the story of a young writer from Benin gone to Bahia (Northeast Brazil) in search of his roots: he meets a number of local characters; feels disoriented in the unfamiliar space; and ends up dead. The story is told in part by an ad-hoc tour guide, as a posthumous recollection of the man's time in Brazil, in a kind of eulogy addressed to the absent protagonist. Alternately named *Escritore* and *Africano* by those he meets, (for simplicity, I will refer only to *Escritore* in this article), the protagonist seeks out his relatives. They are common descendants of the enslaved king, Ndindi-Grand-Orage who was branded with marks on each shoulder when he was sold into slavery. These marks are passed down to future generations, and allow *Escritore* to identify his relatives. Ironically, in the chaos of a backstreet brawl, they miss this common symbol, and stab *Escritore*, leaving him dead. Two narrators guide the labyrinthine narrative: Innocencio, the ironically named petty criminal, and Leda, a blind elderly woman. The two of them are inextricably linked, we discover, as genealogical ties are revealed in their alternating story. Lastly, the novel's setting in *Pelourinho* and its eponymous title draw attention to historical inscriptions in the Brazilian landscape. *Pelourinho*, a district of Salvador de Bahia, in North East Brazil, is both the memorial site of the transatlantic slave trade and

² This aim directly counters the kinds of commodification and dehumanising that Stephanie Smallwood details in her account of 'the winners' version of the story' of transatlantic slavery in *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 5).

³ [It is rather about considering works or movements, be they European or non-European, produced by or reflecting exchanges, transactions and connections between the cultures and literatures which define the Atlantic.] Université de Paris X: Nanterre. 2018. *Vers Une Histoire Littéraire Transatlantique*. Edited by Jean-Claude Laborie, Jean-Marc Moura, and Sylvie Parizet. Paris: Classiques Garnier.

one of America's oldest slave markets, and as is seen through the novel, a centre for tourism because of this very heritage⁴. 'Pelourinho' is also the term used in Portuguese to refer to Peul, or Fulani, people, a nomadic people group originating in West Africa who first came to North East Brazil during the slave trade. Additionally in Portuguese, the word refers to the pillory to which enslaved people would be tied when whipped, which is a scene directly evoked via one of the narrator's memories⁵. The painful past, of these families and the wider Black Atlantic diaspora, is set in motion through fragments as the narrators aim to reconstitute Escritore's violent final days and what engendered it.

In a disappointing echo of *Pelourinho*, twenty years later Monénembo published *Les Coqs cubains chantent à minuit* (Fermi 2016; Gasster-Carrier 2016). This text is set in Havana. In it a young Guinean-Cuban writer sets out from Paris to discover his personal history: he meets a number of local characters; feels disoriented in the unfamiliar space; and ends up banished from the country. And (perhaps unsurprisingly) the story is told by an ad-hoc tour guide as an a posteriori recollection of his time in Havana, addressed to the now absent protagonist. The text is framed as a long letter written by Ignacio Rodríguez Aponte to his friend Tierno Alfredo Diallovogui (known as El Palenque), born in the late 1970s to a Cuban father and a Guinean mother, of whom he knows little. The intrigue that drives the plot is not only Tierno's own visit to Havana, in which clues to his mother's story pass unnoticed, but Ignacio's piecing together of attentively gathered fragments of his addressee's past. The number of plot similarities in *Les Coqs* raise questions regarding originality and go far beyond the level of intertextual resonance⁶. At the same time they point to a number of common devices within Monénembo's poetics of movement.

The absence of the protagonist in each novel serves a mnemonic function. This comes both in the sense of a mystery surrounding their absence that calls to be solved, and in the impulse to a kind of dialogic recollection on the part of the narrators, much

⁴ When I leave the word Pelourinho unitalicised, I refer to the neighbourhood.

⁵ In this way, Monénembo's title and setting foreground the violence of the commodification of human beings bought and sold in slavery.

⁶ Though Bernard De Meyer makes an interesting point about the narrator's motives misleading the reader in *Les Coqs*, he underplays the replicated structure and characterisation in his discussion of the two novels' 'résonnances' (2020:5). Far more work can be done to explore the connections between these two texts, going beyond the brief references to the author's biography (he completed residencies in both cities before publishing the novels) and addressing the historical and cultural connections between them. For example, the intra-American slave trade saw at least 16 slave voyages between Bahia and Havana between 1809 and 1818. (<https://www.slavevoyages.org/american/database>).

like that in Condé's *Traversée de la mangrove*⁷. The protagonists' conspicuous absences in *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs* provoke an uncovering and retelling of stories about those no longer present. What we read are embellished eulogies to the two men (one the totally erased, aptly named, Writer (Escritore)), unofficial, fluid memories set in motion through dialogic, personalised accounts told by clashing voices. Escritore's death, and El Palenque's absence, direct "the consciousness of the group back to significant, nodal points in its common history and its social memory" (Gilroy, 198). In this way their mnemonic function opens up broader shared memories of the Black Atlantic, (namely transatlantic slavery) which this article examines. At the same time, the primacy of absence attests to amnesia, lacunae and erasure as ever-present features of historiography⁸. In placing death and absence at the very heart of these two narrative memorializations, Monénembo asserts that processes of addressing the past will always contain some omission (signalled by ellipses and incomplete conversations) and some contestation (evident in the novels' contrasting and violent narratives).

Where Audrey Small claims *Pelourinho* is based on a quest for a 'whole self', I argue that the fragmentary dispersal across Monénembo's novels denies even the possibility of such a quest⁹. What is more, the descriptive attention he pays in both *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs* to impermanence in the soundscape and the natural world, imbue both texts with an aesthetics of fluidity that counters any notions of either fixed or cohesive identity. Attending rather to the Black Atlantic diaspora emerging in this Latin American pair of novels, we see a complex cultural network that Monénembo's diegetic narrators unravel. If there is a recrossing of the Atlantic in Monénembo's lazy outtake (*Les Coqs*), there is equally an invitation to trace the plethora of oceanic crossings which lie within the two novels. In the movement of oceans, people, languages and stories there is an approach to memory work that has relevance beyond these personal stories. Indeed, the narrative antiphony of these unofficial *récits adressés*

⁷ Florence Paravy writes : « L'histoire est livrée sous la forme d'un puzzle sollicitant très fortement les capacités du lecteur à mémoriser, puis assembler des éléments distillés peu à peu tout au long de l'œuvre, souvent sous forme d'allusions, de mentions brèves et énigmatiques qui ne s'éclaireront que si une lecture particulièrement active s'emploie à retrouver tous les fils invisibles qui relient entre eux les fragments disséminés ça et là. » R PARAVY (F.), « L'absence et la trace », in : DE MEYER (B.), DIOP (P.S.), dir., Tierno Monénembo et le roman..., op. cit., p. 67-82 ; p. 69

⁸ This concern is revisited by Monénembo in *Roi de Kahel*, *Peuls*, and *Terroriste Noir*. See Chapter 5.

⁹ Audrey Small, 'Reversals of Exile: Williams Sassine's *Wirriyamu* and Tierno Monénembo's *Pelourinho*' *African Studies Review*, 57:3 (2014), 41-54 (p. 46).

gestures to other unofficial axes of collaboration across the Black Atlantic¹⁰. As I outline in this article, Monénembo's fragmentation and fluidity can be understood when we focus on dynamic, tidalectic remembering.

Tidalectic memory work

What I propose is examining Monénembo's poetics here via an oceanic approach to Black Atlantic memory. In order to uncover 'submerged histories', we must explore beyond narrow conceptions of the factual to find them¹¹. This is not to sideline official history and its imperial archive, but with a view to including modes of activating the past that are excluded from primarily formalised visual modes. In the fictional settings of these two novels (Brazil and Cuba), we pay heed to the role of cultural actors in recent histories of contested freedom. The imaginative resonance of the ocean, present in multiple ways in these novels, directs a fluid approach to memory that comes in place of visual dependency¹².

I argue in this article that Monénembo's poetics of movement in *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs* set memories in motion via an oceanic approach to the past. By this I mean to draw together the concept of tidalectics with the broad cultural notion of the Black Atlantic. Tidalectics (from 'tidal dialectics') is a concept developed by Kamau Brathwaite, whose poetry evokes the cyclical movement of the sea, and it has been expanded upon by literary scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey, alongside curator and writer Stefanie

¹⁰ Mangeon uses this term to label the narrative structure found across six of Monénembo's novels, whereby the story is addressed by the narrator to a second person addressee, who is often absent.

¹¹ Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley 'Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,' *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14: 2-3 (2008): 194. See also 'Latent Blackness: Afro-Brazilian People, History and Culture in São Paulo, Brazil', where Reighan Gillam describes Afro-Brazilians' articulation of submerged, hidden Black history and culture as 'latent Blackness': 'the idea of latent Blackness frames the ways in which Afro-Brazilians gauge the levels of awareness of Black history and culture in São Paulo and express their dissatisfaction with it.' (np.) <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jlca.12584>

¹² My thinking is shaped here by recent work in what is varyingly known as the blue humanities or critical ocean studies. This includes but is not limited to scholarship on literature and hydropower (Elizabeth DeLoughrey), wet ontologies (P. Steinberg & K. Peters), memories of the violent commodifications of slavery (Christina Sharpe), and feminist watery embodiment as a challenge to individualism and anthropocentrism (Astrida Neimanis, 2017). DeLoughrey, E. 'Towards a Critical Ocean Studies for the Anthropocene', *English Language Notes* 57:1 (2019); Steinberg, P., & Peters, K. (2015). Wet ontologies, fluid spaces: Giving depth to volume through oceanic thinking. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33, 247-264; Sharpe, C. (2016). *In the wake: On Blackness and being*. Duke University Press; Neimanis, A. (2017). *Bodies of water: Posthuman feminist phenomenology*. Bloomsbury.

Hessler¹³. Tidalectics engages an alternative historiography reflective of the backward and forward movement of the tides that keep the dialogical relationship between Africa and its diaspora going while discouraging a linear orientation. It ‘assumes the shape of an unresolved cycle rather than a forward-directed argument or progression’¹⁴. DeLoughrey explains, ‘As a geopoetic model of history, Brathwaite images the ongoing and palpable heritage of ‘submerged mothers’ who cross the seas, ‘Coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding...from the island(s) to the perhaps creative chaos of the(ir) future’ (*Roots and Routes* p.2). Bringing a tidalectic approach to memory work, we see memories not as static but in flux, moving back and forth among themselves as well as outward to their diasporas. Equally, where there has been submersion, there has also been diffraction; neither of these are recoverable, but they can be, in some way, traced. There is a constant cyclical movement of energy, memory, emotion and story with the ebb and flow of the ocean’s tides¹⁵. The oscillation conveyed in Monénembo’s descriptive writing in these texts comes from moving ever onwards whilst still reaching back. This contrapuntal temporality, heightened by a lack of bearings shadowed in memories of the past, is one of the elements of Monénembo’s poetics that unsettles expectations of coherent histories, in turn destabilising dominant memorialising practices. The destabilising of linear, colonial models of progress in this approach to historiography comes through invoking the ocean’s continual movement.

At the same time, the span of these two novels demands an approach to the past which is transnational in its diasporic reach, as well as its motions to and from the past. Paul Gilroy articulates the Black Atlantic as a ‘rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation’ (Gilroy, 4). Crucially, the Black Atlantic moves

¹³ Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. “Submerged Mothers.” *Jamaica Journal* 9, nos. 2–3(1975): 48–49; ‘Routes and Roots: Tidalectics in Caribbean Literature’ in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite* ed Annie Paul (Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press, 2007); De Loughrey *Roots and Routes: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); Stefanie Hessler, ed. *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview through Art and Science* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2018); Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Tatiana Flores; *Submerged Bodies: The Tidalectics of Representability and the Sea in Caribbean Art. Environmental Humanities* 1 May 2020; 12 (1): 132–166.

¹⁴ Hessler, p. 33. Hessler transposes Brathwaite’s term, using it as a starting point for ‘an oceanic worldview’, and briefly discusses mnemonic devices that are centred on the ocean (p.34). The aim of this chapter is to apply the term ‘tidalectics’ to an approach to memory work in Monénembo’s literature. Like Edouard Glissant, and Derek Walcott (see below), Brathwaite demonstrates the significance of the Caribbean for thinking oceanic space, and in turn for thinking relationships between humans, our environments, and our histories.

¹⁵ Stephanie Smallwood cautions against the implications of ‘a smooth, linear progression leading to a known end’ held in the phrase ‘middle passage’, p. 207.

beyond essentialist veins of traditionalism that impose a narrative of cohesion on the Black diaspora, in terms of cultural and historical common ground. At the same time, it preserves a sense of diversity whilst not situating itself outside of the global systems of injustice that also affect diasporic populations along lines of class, sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity, economics and political consciousness. An oceanic lens moves past the hampering boundaries of the nation state whilst also grounding diasporic 'structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering' within histories of material circulation (Gilroy, 3). At the same time, the Black Atlantic as a concept enacts a decentring of Europe that is encoded in Monénembo's repeated journey motif. *Escritore* and *El Palenque* travel across the Atlantic Ocean to Bahia and Cuba respectively, and as the framing device of each novel, the westbound transatlantic journey removes the metropolitan centres of Paris or London from a defining position as desired destination¹⁶. The diasporic focus centres on relationships across the global South, without Europe as centre. *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs* belong, like the work of James Baldwin and Toni Morrison that Gilroy appraises, 'to the web of diaspora identities and concerns...labelled the Black Atlantic' (218, Gilroy). Monénembo's oceanic approach sets memories in motion in these two novels to convey the dynamics of Black Atlantic pasts pervading the present¹⁷.

This oceanic memory draws on some of the transnational dynamics outlined by Michael Rothberg in his conceptualisation of multidirectional memory. He defines memory as 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive' within a collective, dialogic production of narratives¹⁸. Rothberg highlights the limits of Pierre Nora's *Lieux de mémoire*, in particular its amnesia regarding French colonial history, the impact of decolonization, and postcolonial migrations: all subjects addressed by Monénembo¹⁹. Rothberg takes these limits as a starting point for

¹⁶ '[This] indicates the (at least) two-way traffic between African cultural forms and the political cultures of diaspora Blacks; here layered onto multiple other journeys like slaves returned to Nigeria from Brazil in the 1840s... All of them are untidy elements in a story of hybridisation and intermixture that inevitably disappoints the desire for cultural and therefore racial purity, whatever its source.' Gilroy, 199.

¹⁷ In this way it places an emphasis on multidirectional dynamics that go beyond the relentlessly linear trajectory of human commodities within the slave trade (Smallwood, 6).

¹⁸ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 2.

¹⁹ Michael Rothberg, 'Introduction: Between Memory and Memory: From *Lieux de mémoire* to *Noeuds de mémoire*', *Yale French Studies*, 118/119 (2010), 3-12 (p. 6). Several other scholars have engaged further with the omissions in Nora's seminal work, not least in reference to legacies of colonialism and slavery. See *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France* ed. by Etienne Achille, Charles Forsdick

articulating a more comprehensive model for history. His proposed ‘noeuds de mémoire’ are complicated networks of reference which are always open to renegotiation, shifting the effects they carry for identity and territory²⁰.

Rothberg works effectively to account for the multiple forms and nuances of remembrance in globalised spaces, drawing attention to ‘the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance’²¹. Yet as Rothberg describes, this ‘agency entails recognizing and revealing the production of memory as an ongoing process involving inscription and reinscription’²². Indeed, by foregrounding new avenues of reading and writing memory, his approach preserves the hegemony of the written word in approaching the past. But in *Monénembo* it is the non-visual, the non-written that takes primacy. *Escritore*’s lineage writing project is derided by the other characters: ‘tu avais dû délirer une demi-heure ou davantage mais nous ne t’écoutes plus’ (150). But visual modes are surpassed in several other ways, as this chapter will illustrate, and they invite reflection on alternative modes of revitalising the past. In *Escritore*’s failed writing project, and the multiple voices who piece his story back together, there is a pointed show of the futility of historiographical endeavours that are approached uniquely through visual modes. Through his own acts of writing which highlight the complexity of telling the past in textual form, *Monénembo* insists upon constant mobility, including within a fluid approach to the past through its traces in the present²³.

Drawing the dynamism in Gilroy and Rothberg’s ideas together, I aim to augment their relevance for literary memory work by concentrating my reflections on the fluidity of the sea. Oceanic thinking as an approach to postcolonial memory work requires a paradigmatic shift in how we analyse the legacies of colonialism²⁴. This tidalectic

& Lydie Moudileno (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool: 2020). Other key texts that draw together memory studies and postcolonial approaches include *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*, by Stef Craps (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke: 2012) and *Memory as Colonial Capital: Cross-Cultural Encounters in French and English*, ed. by Erica L. Johnson and Éloïse Brezault (Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2017).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

²¹ Ibid., p. 11.

²² Ibid., p. 8.

²³ As Brezault and Johnson write, ‘the site of overlap between memory and history is a particularly explosive and productive one in the hands of postcolonial writers who work to lay claim to the past in ways that challenge established archival and historical records’ (*Memory as Colonial Capital: Cross-Cultural Encounters in French and English*, Palgrave Macmillan: Cham, 2017).

²⁴ Hofmeyr, Isabel. 2012. The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3: 584–90.

approach does not share the anti-imperial nationalism or geographical specificity of the Pacific philosophy of Océanitude, and is concerned rather with the formal and epistemological resonances of the Atlantic²⁵. It is my view that the struggling and solidarity of Atlantic pasts emerges through Monénembo's poetics of movement, where fluidity pervades. As such, the dynamics go beyond the relentlessly linear trajectory of human commodities within the slave trade that Stephanie Smallwood explores in her work on saltwater and its legacies. She cautions against the implications of 'a smooth, linear progression leading to a known end' which can be held in the phrase 'middle passage'²⁶. This is challenged not only by the repeated and iterative elements of tidalectics, but also by attention to the dominant presence of water and waves of sound. A tidalectic approach reveals that memories are set in motion in two primary ways through this poetics: through a demotion of the visual in favour of soundscape and natural world, and in the clashing presence of antiphonal narrative voices.

Non-visual modes

The repeated plot device which frames both novels, rendering the protagonists absent, sets off a demotion of the visual mode that characterises the full texts. The persisting non-visual forms of this literary memory work are a constituent element of tidalectics, as Toni Pressley-Simon outlines: 'In the context of the relationship between West Africa and its diaspora...tidalectics [is] symbolic and constitutive of the real relationship that is repeatedly manifest both visibly and invisibly across time and space'²⁷. In the contexts of Brazil and Cuba where race has been deliberately occluded in myths of racial democracy and political claims of colour blindness, non-visual modes of centering Black history and culture stand as a transversal counter to that submersion²⁸. Monénembo's use of soundscapes, water and wind constitute an oceanic mnemonic

²⁵ See Anaïs Maurer (2019) 'Océanitude : Repenser le tribalisme occidental au prisme des nationalismes océaniens' *Francosphères* 8: 2, pp. 109-125.

²⁶ Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Harvard University Press, 2008), p.207.

²⁷ Pressley-Sanon, T. (2013). Exile, Return, Ouidah, and Haiti: Vodun's Workings on the Art of Edouard Duval-Carrié. *African Arts*, 46(3), 40–53; p.40. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43307395>

²⁸ For an excellent study of Afro-Brazilian culture, and its celebration at the expense of substantive political change, see *Selling Black Brazil: Race, Nation and Visual Culture in Salvador, Bahia* by Anadelia A. Romo (University of Texas Press, 2022).

impulse in these iterations of his mobile poetics. In this his writing is reminiscent of the closing lines of Derek Walcott's 'The Sea is History'²⁹:

and then in the dark ears of ferns
and in the salt chuckle of rocks
with their sea pools, there was the sound
like a rumour without any echo
of History, really beginning.

Monénembo's and Walcott's use of text itself to draw attention to the non-visual is a formal gesture elaborated on throughout the two novels in question. The reader's sense of hearing is prompted to attune to ways of knowing through waves: of memory, water, and sound.

Compromised visibility

The blurriness that permeates these novels undermines any sense of a place as knowable. The lure of family roots and warm climes that draw Escritore and El Palenque over the Atlantic fades as they encounter the unfamiliar: dangerous, hazy, and impenetrable city space. Monénembo perpetuates this sense of compromised visibility by casting a blurry haze over the physical settings in each novel. This is in part signalled by the darkness announced in the title of *Les Coqs*, where 'minuit' signals the same obscurity of suffering and solidarity held in Achille Mbembe's essay on decolonisation, *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2013). More generally it is spread around the bars where the stories are narrated, Lluvia de Oro in *Les Coqs* and la Cantina da Lua in *Pelourinho* (both referring to light through reference to gold and the moon). The shadiness of these places stems out into an alcohol-induced opacity further afield, as Ignacio describes:

À la Lluvia de Oro, je savais que je devais juste t'accompagner, qu'au cinquième verre, déjà, tu ne serais plus là, comme disparu derrière un virage alors que ton corps se reflétait sous mes yeux, proche mais blindé, inaccessible, terriblement dissuasif. Et avec le rhum qui me brûlait l'esprit, avec le bruit de la musique et des verres, ta tête n'était plus qu'un simple masque de citrouille baignant dans le bain mauve des lumières (Monénembo 2015: 183-4)³⁰.

²⁹ "The Sea Is History" from *Selected Poems* by Derek Walcott, 2007 (my emphasis).

³⁰ [At Lluvia de Oro, I knew I just needed to stay with you, that by the fifth glass you'd already be gone, as if disappeared round a bend while your body was mirrored before my eyes, close but shielded, awfully

The accumulation of ‘comme’, ‘virage’, ‘proche mais blindé’, ‘inaccessible’, ‘masque’ and ‘mauve’ builds a picture of unattainable clarity. In this way Monénembo demotes the primacy of visual modes of knowing, saturating his novelistic worlds with compromised vision. Similarly, the city space of Monénembo’s Salvador in *Pelourinho* is permeated with the smell of alcohol, which ‘renforce l’aspect incertain, dangereux du monde’ (Auzas 2004: 34)³¹. Mãe Grande’s bar carries the stench of cachaça, and the heat of the sun makes walking from place to place an ordeal. Beneath the heavy smoke of their cigarettes, Palito, Careca, and Passarinho sit at the bar for hours trying to forget their jobless states, alongside Preto Velho whose name recalls the Umbanda spiritual entities who represent wise, charitable old African slaves³². The other-worldly is, invisibly, present (Monénembo 1995: 62). Often drunk, characters drift blurry-eyed through the streets of Pelourinho, and the newcomer, obviously, falls prey to the dangers lurking there. Ignacio, the main narrator of *Les Coqs*, also signals the unpredictable emergences of the past, situated in the typical Monénembo setting of the bar: ‘À certains moments, El Palenque, la grande histoire sort de sa sphère et vient s’accouder au troquet du coin pour trinquer avec la petite’ (107)³³. There is a habitual coming together of ancestral and present experience signalled here, through everyday rituals of bar-side conversation. With this destabilising of visual modes, the texts point to alternative, less formal approaches to knowing.

Leda and wakeful clairvoyance

Leda, one of the two narrators in *Pelourinho*, embodies a clairvoyance which aligns with oceanic memory. Connected to other spiritual realms, Leda is a former nun turned Exu priestess, drawing together diasporic legacies of Catholicism and Voudou in Brazilian Candomblé. Though her physical vision is impaired (she is blind), and the

off-putting. And with the rum burning my mind, and the noise of the music and glasses, your face was no more than a jack-o’-lantern soaking in the mauve bath of the lights.]

³¹ [reinforces the uncertain and dangerous aspect of the world]

³² Parés, Luis Nicolau ‘Memories of Slavery in religious ritual: comparing Benin Vodun and Bahian Candomblé’ in *Activating the Past: History and Memory in the Black Atlantic World* eds Andrew Apter and Lauren Derby (2010) Cambridge Scholars Publishing, p. 73.

³³ [At certain points, El Palenque, the broader story leaves its realm and comes to clink glasses at the bar with the smaller one.]

space around her crowded, she gathers together fragments from the present and from other worlds in almost prophetic narrative: 'Je suis d'un autre-monde... Certes la chambre où je vis est emplie de remugles, de cafards et de guêpes, mais c'est un vrai projecteur: je capte tout, moi, Leda-paupières-de-chouette, toutes les images émises par les vivants et par les morts' (Monénembo 1995: 124)³⁴. Leda's complicated mental state is conveyed to the reader through unsteady and heterogeneous passages of prose, as Monénembo inflects her narrative with repeated passages, relayed dialogue and song, creating a winding story that resists narrative closure. Leda's fallibility is the character form given to Monénembo's desire to humanise history here³⁵. Over any sense of cohesion comes Leda's empathy and attentiveness, and this provides a clairvoyance that spans past and present: 'Je suis une drôle de lumière, Gerová, je perçois ton manège et tout le réseau de fils que tissent les araignées sur le rebord de ma fenêtre, les intrigues du présent, la trame d'il y a peu...' (*Pelourinho*, 81)³⁶. Haziness accompanies sensitivity here, with a creative non-visual perception of how the past is present, and how both past and present are interwoven.

Leda's wakefulness and clairvoyance embodies some of the 'wake work' articulated by Christina Sharpe that makes up 'encountering a past that is not past'³⁷. It is blind Leda who provides the key links in the memory chain of *Escritore's* family story, and also insights into the broader histories of enslavement anchored in Salvador. Auzas accurately describes Leda as victim to a traumatic past (2004: 135), and the character's trauma marks her as ongoingly living in the wake of slavery (Sharpe, 2016). In *Pelourinho*, the repeated horrific story of a tortured slave haunts the text, indelible and yet incomplete. Yet in the novel's drive to piece together fragments of an unknown past, Leda also enacts mnemonic agency. As well as the excruciating personal story she stutters, which covers the castration of her father and the death of her mother in the

³⁴ [I'm from another world... Yes, the bedroom I live in is full of mustiness, cockroaches and wasps, but it's a true projector: I catch everything, I do, Leda-with-owl-eyes, all the images created by the living and the dead.] Leda's nickname signals Greek mythology's use of the owl as a symbol of knowledge and perspicacity.

³⁵ quote interview where he says he wants to do this

³⁶ [I am a strange light, Gerová, I can sense your goings-on and the whole web of threads spun by the spiders on my windowsill, today's stories, the plot from not long ago.]

³⁷ By building on the multiple meanings of 'wake', Sharpe sketches a capacious picture of Blackness and being: *the track left on the water's surface; a region of disturbed flow; a state of wakefulness; consciousness; a watch or vigil for someone who has died; grief, celebration, memory* (2016: 3-11). Leda's grief, consciousness, impaired vision, and repeated sense of disturbance encompass several of these meanings simultaneously.

favela of her childhood, Leda as a Candomblé priestess would also perform rituals which draw on memories of slavery³⁸. It is her access to other temporalities that brings that violence of the slave market to life, for example:

João inflige dix coups de suite au Nago attaché au pieu.
Une torche à la main, le vieux Blanc s'avance vers l'esclave et dit d'une voix surexcitée, chargée à la fois de fureur et d'inavouable compassion :
- Je sais ce que tu veux : crever devant tout le monde, pour te faire une gloire, et...et puis humilier comme un chien le maître que le bon Dieu t'a donné !
...
Ce n'est plus un être humain, même plus un esclave, plutôt une chose lacérée de toute part, rougie de son sang, apathique et flexible, un immense jouet de chiffon, une masse de lanières... (125-126)³⁹.

The attention to materiality in Monénembo's descriptions, renders almost tangible the connections between past experience and present memory: the repeated focus on multiple, interlaced wounds, lashes, and webs gives form to the ways these very images overlay past onto present.

Leda's narrative sensitivity and craft are reflected in her command of embroidery, where she creates intricate patterns on cloths she then sells. As she works at her sewing machine, she winds her way through past and present, shedding light on the stories she tells, revisited by loved ones who have died. 'D'ici, Leda-paupières-de-chouette voit tout, tout, jusqu'à la vie qu'elle-même a vécue, d'ici de cette chambre où Lourdes revient me voir pour me rappeler nos jeux d'enfance' (209)⁴⁰. Here again, Monénembo foregrounds tactile, affective, and divinely-attuned modes of knowing 'sous la lumière d'Exu' (211) and speaks to the embodied processes inherent in remembering. A demotion of the visible invokes the importance of invisible worlds, as Leda's repeated invocations of the

³⁸ For a discussion of these practices transatlantically, see Parés, in Apter and Derby. 'ritual segments at the end of a devotee's initiation performed in contemporary Vodun cults in Benin and in Bahian Candomblé...contain more or less explicit references to war, slave raiding, and slave selling that clearly evoke past encounters with the Atlantic slave trade.' p.72

³⁹ [João inflicts ten blows in a row on Nago, attached to the stake.

With a torch in hand, the old White man approaches the slave and says in an overexcited voice, charged with both fury and shameful compassion:

- I know what you want: to die in front of everyone, to make yourself famous, and... and then humiliate the master the good Lord has given you, like a dog!

...

This is no longer a human being, not even a slave, but rather a thing slashed on all sides, reddened with its blood, listless and flexible, a huge rag toy, a mass of strips...]

⁴⁰ [From here, Leda-with-owl-eyes, sees everything, everything, even the life she lived herself, from here in this bedroom where Lourdes comes back to see me and remind me of our childhood games.]

messenger spirit Exu convey. In this way Leda's narrative performs the double act of honouring the dead and moving the living⁴¹.

Alongside Innocencio's symbiotic engagement, which I discuss below, Leda is the one to revitalise the past, interpreting Escritore's history and drawing together some of the 'fragments arrachés' of the story's labyrinth (Glissant 1990: 83)⁴². Leda's recollections are woven according to her unpredictable flashbacks and ephemeral descriptions. For her, the past that appears as 'une fresque exposée' is her only link to the dead protagonist, and it comes to her unsummoned: 'Et voici l'in vraisemblable écheveau, pareil à une bagatelle ou aux pavés de la place, qui s'anime tout seul derrière mes paupières' (212)⁴³. As a resident of albeit fictionalised Salvador, where these histories have been submerged from public memory, this mode of evoking stories and experiences that remain unrecognised (or lie latent, to use Gillam's terms) is directly linked to the labyrinthine geography of the neighbourhood of Pelourinho⁴⁴. The hidden histories are brought to Leda's mind, even if erased from the streets like the favela in which she and Lourdes grew up (185). Leda's tidalectical recurrence of memories denotes her own porous nature as well as that of the past and its saltwater legacies⁴⁵. In Leda's narrative, flashbacks wash in and out of her monologues like waves: they leave traces of the past but disappear, incomplete.

Water

The tidalectic mode of memory presented in these two novels is, unsurprisingly, conveyed in large part through the presence and impact of the Atlantic. There are unstable topographies as in his other texts, but what distinguishes the atmospheres created in these two novels from Monénembo's other work is the use of imagery

⁴¹ [Under Exu's light.] Poet Amanda Gorman writes of wanting 'to honor those still in the water... By writing an elegy through the words of history, I hope to unearth, or unwater, the dead from beneath a mass of waves. The purpose of an elegy is to mourn the dead. But I also recognize it as a chance to move the living, to mobilize us to care.' Amanda Gorman. (July 15, 2023 Saturday). Amanda Gorman: In Memory of Those Still in the Water; Guest Essay. *The New York Times*.

⁴² [snatched pieces]

⁴³ [And here is the inconceivable tangle, like a trifle or the cobblestones on the square, that comes to life behind my eyelids all by itself.]

⁴⁴ The tangled mess and cobblestones evoke the centre of Pelourinho, which is labyrinthine and uneven under foot. For excellent studies of the public memory of Atlantic slavery, see Araujo, Ana Lucia, ed. 2012. *Politics of Memory: Making Slavery Visible in the Public Space*. New York: Routledge.

⁴⁵ See Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery* (2007).

connected with the natural world. Alongside the play of dark and light, and the persistent sense of blurriness, the imaginative resonance of the ocean plays a central role. The coastal positions of Havana and Salvador mean there is a persistent, tangible exposure to the ocean, its spray, its force. Equally in the 'womb-abyss' of the Atlantic is a permanent reminder of the seismic injustice and suffering of enslaved peoples, among them the ancestors Escritore seeks⁴⁶.

Both Havana and Salvador were major sites of disembarkation of enslaved peoples within the transatlantic and intra-American slave trades. Seen widely by historians as a site of transnational confluence and divergence, Salvador was first capital of Brazil from 1549 to 1763, and remains capital city of the state of Bahia⁴⁷. From 1558 Salvador held the first known slave market of the so-called New World. Known widely as the 'Africa of the Americas', Salvador came to be known as a Black city through a complex historical process including state centering of Blackness as a lucrative draw for tourists and a marker of distinction⁴⁸. Yet this politicised celebration of Blackness occludes both the historic violence of the slave trade, centred for a long time at the port of Salvador, and contemporary police violence against Black residents in the city⁴⁹. As for Cuba, there has been a similar absence of public acknowledgement of the one million enslaved African people deported there over three centuries of colonial administration⁵⁰. Silvina Testa explains that some engagement with Cuba's history of slavery emerged in historical and cinematic production after 1959, but that it was provoked because of contemporary needs to address racial injustice rather than a national agenda of affirmative action. This is largely because the Revolution insisted on so-called colour blindness, thus rendering invisible Black history, culture and discrimination, along with

⁴⁶ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1990), trans Betsy Wing (1997) p.6.

⁴⁷ Carlos da Silva Jr. provides a thorough account of Bahia as the primary seat of slave trade in Brazil during the 18th century (2017 in *Salvador da Bahia* edited volume by Raggi et al). In drawing out the connections between the slave port of Porto Novo (now Benin) at that time (notably with Oyó), he also traces the transformations in the ethnic makeup of those enslaved people taken to Bahia at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries (well after abolition).

⁴⁸ See (Ickes, Scott. 2013. *African-Brazilian Culture and Regional Identity in Bahia, Brazil*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.) (Romo, Anadelia A. 2010. *Brazil's Living Museum: Race, Reform, and Tradition in Bahia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.)

⁴⁹ (see Smith, Christen. 2016. *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.) and Araujo.

⁵⁰ Thousands of slave voyages also went from Portuguese, British and Dutch colonies in the Americas to Cuba. (see slavevoyages.org for an extensive database of these journeys).

any discussion of race becoming a taboo that risked accusations of counter-revolution and divisionism⁵¹. Testa gives examples of how social actors (rappers and bloggers) bring Cuba's history of enslavement into dialogue with systemic injustice they experience in the present, most notably targeting their racial difference⁵². Where Brazilian and Cuban public memory initiatives may have failed to engage with that history, fiction stands as a possible mode of approaching painful pasts. 'Ces maisons, ces arbres, ces clochers souillés d'or et de sang expriment une autre époque, avant, comment dire, avant que ne s'instaure l'ère du bluff, de l'à-peu-près, du fugitif' (*Pelourinho*, 116)⁵³.

The presence of the heavy, looming, moving Atlantic, so capable of erasure, denies Escritore the possibility of realizing the naïve intentions which opened this chapter⁵⁴. Here they are cited by the sceptical Innocencio:

'Je suis venu animé d'une vocation: emboîter le pas aux anciens, rafistoler la mémoire. Je vais faire œuvre de moissonneur: ramasser les éclats, les bouts de ficelles, les bricoler et imbriquer le tout. Je veux rabibocher le présent et l'autrefois, amadouer la mer' (Monénembo 1995: 150)⁵⁵.

In its constant motion, and in its historical losses and erasures of life, the water denies the possibility of this kind of concrete process of repair. Simultaneously, it speaks of the looming tidal returns of traumatic pasts and the relative proximity of Africa, home of both absent protagonists. 'L'Afrique non plus n'est pas loin. Elle est tout près d'ici, de l'autre côté de la mer, autant dire la porte en face' (*Pelourinho*, 64)⁵⁶. This play with the impermanence of place, past, and memory is central to Monénembo's poetics in these

⁵¹ Frank Taylor, 'Revolution, Race and Some Aspects of Foreign Relations in Cuba' (1988).

⁵² Silvina Testa, Memoria de la esclavitud y debate racial: la cuestión de la "identidad negra" en Cuba <https://journals.openedition.org/nuevomundo/58153>. Things shift in the 1990s, as she explains: 'El Congreso de l'Uneac en 1998 es en este sentido fundacional: se denuncia la poca representatividad de los negros y mulatos en la televisión cubana, y dos años más tarde, da origen a la creación del grupo de artistas e intelectuales *Color Cubano* cuyo objetivo es fomentar el debate racial en la sociedad cubana. A partir de ese momento, algunas revistas cubanas de ciencias sociales comienzan progresivamente a hacerse eco de la problemática haciendo dossiers dedicados a la temática racial.' See also 'la memoria de la esclavitud sirve de plataforma para luchar contra los estigmas de la exclusión.'

⁵³ [These houses, these trees, these towers dirtied with gold and blood reveal another era, before, how can I put it, before the era of pretence begun, of the approximate and the fleeting.]

⁵⁴ For writing on the 'heavy' Atlantic, which overflows with emotional, bodily and sacred memory, see M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) *Pedagogies of Crossings* and Toni Pressley-Sanon (2017) *Istwa Across the Water*.

⁵⁵ [I have come driven by a calling: follow on the heels of the Ancients, patch up memory. I am going to do the work of a reaper: gather up the fragments, the bits of string, to mend them and fit it all together. I want to patch together the present and the past, soothe the sea.]

⁵⁶ [Africa isn't far away either. It's close by here, on the other side of the sea, in other words, the opposite door.]

two novels and represents a tidalectical approach: reflective of the backward and forward movement of the tides that keep the dialogical relationship between Africa ('tout près d'ici') and its diaspora going while discouraging a linear or singular interpretation.

Soundscape

Music, like currents of the ocean, is harnessed to 'set in motion complex patterns of continuity and change, networks of resonance and dissonance' (Naro et al, 2007: 7). In *Les Coqs*, music fills the pages, carrying the story in melody. The atmosphere in the Lluvia de Oro bar is a heady mix of hits by Aguas del Guaso and the clink of glasses being refilled with rum. It is, quite literally, a place for drowning sorrows, 'il te faut des bars, des bordels, de la musique, du bruit' (Monénembo 2015: 183)⁵⁷. Paul Gilroy has written at length of the significance of musical culture in its vitality and complexity, holding traces of the formation and communication of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1995: 39)⁵⁸. It undoubtedly stands as a rich resource of conceptual language for theorising the Atlantic. But more than that, national histories and personal memories take form in both of Monénembo's novels in snippets of a song, just as those same songs work to unify dispersed peoples. As Ignacio explains: 'La musique est notre sang. Elle coule de l'un à l'autre le long des générations pour perpétuer les gènes et graver la mémoire. Notre musique ne fait pas que rythmer les pas de danse, elle rythme aussi la cadence de l'histoire ... Ses chansons contiennent tout : la saga des villes, l'odyssée des plantations, les idylles sanglantes, les expéditions rocambolesques et les révolutions interminables. À chacun sa manière de se tourner vers le passé. Ailleurs, on fouille les archives ; ici, il suffit de quelques vocalises' (Monénembo 2015: 94)⁵⁹. Central to Monénembo's poetics, music is a way 'de se tourner': it moves both in emotion and orientation, towards a different (though not always distant) temporality. This dizzying soundscape takes

⁵⁷ [you need bars, brothels, music, noise]

⁵⁸ For *blocos afro* (Carnival organisations) as forms of afrobaiana expression and mobilisation, see Goli Guerreiro, 'As trilhas do Samba-Reggae: a invenção de um ritmo.' *Latin American Music Review*, Volume 20, Number 1, Spring/Summer 1999, 105-140.

⁵⁹ [Music is our blood. It runs from one to another over generations to continue the genes and etch the memory. Our music gives rhythm not only to dance steps, but also to the beats of history ... Its songs contain everything: the saga of cities, the odyssey of the plantations, violent idylls, extraordinary expeditions and unending revolutions. To each his own way of facing the past. Elsewhere people search through archives; here a few songs suffice.]

precedence over visual modes of remembering in these posthumous novelistic recollections.

This structuring potential of music, to worlds beyond songs, is present too in the dialogic composition of the books, discussed below. Writing in these scenes integrates rhythm and antiphony as an essential element of the long histories of the Black diaspora⁶⁰. Equally, it reveals the ineluctable links between multiple cultural practices⁶¹. Even more so it is part of Monénembo's poetics as they explicitly counter an official, archival dependency in accessing and revitalizing the past. Fidel Castro is described by Ignacio as singing a Trío Matamoros son, *Son de la Loma*, alongside Alfonso (116), and Poète sings after burning his manuscripts, feeling his Cuban identity 'en chansons, le seul lien que nous gardons quand tout le reste est perdu' (104)⁶². As Mangeon puts it, these songs '[font] office de maillons dans la chaîne mémorielle, d'un continent à l'autre' (2020: 61)⁶³. In some ways the use of soundscape bypasses some of the representational problems of scale, depth and visibility associated with the ocean and its histories⁶⁴. In other ways, the music enacts the very tidalectic memory work the author focuses on in these texts. Monénembo's music-infused eulogies in these tales gesture to the dynamic, layered, collective memories of the Black Atlantic represented by the characters who meet in Havana and Salvador.

So far this chapter has introduced tidalectic memory as the main element of Monénembo's poetics of movement to emerge in his Latin American pair of novels, *Pelourinho* and *Les Coqs*. A repeated journey motif revisits Atlantic histories through two absent protagonists whose stories are creatively pieced together in non-visual modes of activating the past. This alternative form of historical consciousness undermines any sense of narrow, objective history in favour of openness, fluidity and return as Monénembo extends the conventional novel form. The fictional texts resist narrative closure, particularly via their soundscapes, including identifiable voices which

⁶⁰ Here Monénembo is similar to his Négritude predecessors Césaire and Damas, whose rhythmic expression of Black culture is excellently examined by Martin Munro (2010: 134–42).

⁶¹ For example, the antiphonal call and response of soloist and drummers within Candomblé devotions demonstrates the intertwined practices of music and religion.

⁶² [in songs, the only link we retain when everything else is lost]

⁶³ [act as links in the memory chain from one continent to the other]

⁶⁴ Hofmeyr, I. & Lavery, C. 'Oceanic Humanities for Blue Heritage' in *The Palgrave Handbook of Blue Heritage* ed. by Boswell, R., O'Kane, D., Hills, J. (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: 2022).

simultaneously echo other transatlantic encounters. I turn to these antiphonal voices now as the final part of this chapter.

Antiphonal voices

Paratextually, Monénembo's novels gesture to a web of intellectual and cultural Atlantic crossings by particular figures. Some are cited in the epigraphs which, in my view, act as tidalectic references to diasporic history and culture. For example, in *Pelourinho* the dedications in Portuguese to Brazilian poet Manuel Bandeira and 'the people of Bahia' sit alongside one to Dakar-based anthropologist Pierre Verger, who published, among other subjects, on Voudou and Orixá cultures in Bahia and Africa. Monénembo is also enacting an intertextual, antiphonal development of Verger's historical writing with these two novels, since in 1968 Verger published a seminal study of Black Brazilians returning to West Africa⁶⁵. In the epigraphs of *Les Coqs* the author acknowledges Samba Félix N'Diaye (with whom Monénembo participated in the Rwanda memory project) and Mangoné Niang (to whom *Peuls* is also dedicated)⁶⁶. Patricia-Pia Celerier has outlined how these pointed allusions feed into a complex system of dedications, thanks, and eulogies to be found throughout Monenembo's corpus. Bernard De Meyer notes the same, and also underlines the intertextual links to be found within the cosmopolitan library of the character named Poète⁶⁷. Celerier rightly contends that these figures enable us to map key influences on Monénembo's writing, but their significance within a wider discussion of memory has not been acknowledged⁶⁸. Mangoné Niang for instance dedicated his career to preserving and bringing Africa's cultural heritage to the fore, particularly within Niger's Centre des Littératures et des Traditions Historiques et Orales. I see the multidirectional crossings invoked by these figures as an indication

⁶⁵ 1968 Verger, Pierre. *Flux et reflux de la traite des nègres entre le Golfe de Bénin et Bahia de Todos os Santos du XVIIe au XIXe siècle*. Paris : Mouton. In the same way, Ignacio and Innocencio as protagonist tour-guides could be read to be rewritings of Jorge Amado as chronicler and unorthodox tour guide for Salvador in his novels.

⁶⁶ These references continue in the texts. *Les Coqs* starts with a quote from Guillermo Cabrera Infante and calls forth the memory of the writer intradiegetically by mentioning the pseudonym he used in the fifties, G. Cain. There are also liminary addresses to Brazilian greats such as Jorge Amado in *Pelourinho*.

⁶⁷ The notebooks of this character (who was the former lover of Juliana, El Palenque's mother) are key to unravelling the mysteries of El Palenque's past (2020: 6).

⁶⁸ Celerier, Patricia-Pia Célérier. (2017). 'Diasporic Wanderings: The Poetics of Tierno Monenembo.' *Research in African Literatures*, 48(4), 122–137; p.130.

of Monénembo's diasporic consciousness. In the question of memories of Atlantic pasts, he summons figures who acknowledge the multiple cultural forms and sources active over a long period in shaping ideas about 'the rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation [that Gilroy calls] the Black Atlantic' (4). As Celerier argues, these references 'echo the production of a wide, yet specific, network of writers and intellectuals' (20, *ibid*), in other words they are tidalectic attestations of the Black Atlantic⁶⁹.

Monénembo's return to this framework with *Les Coqs* in 2015 could suggest the writer pre-empts a wave of wider public cultural-political interest in questions of memorialisation around Atlantic history. It may be truer that the transatlantic consciousness sketched in *Pelourinho* called for further work. Either way, the in-text nods to the diaspora also contribute to the novelistic memory of Atlantic cultural and intellectual crossings. Monénembo fictionalises some of those acknowledged in the paratexts. Exiled Cuban poet Guillermo Cabrera Infante is quoted on the first fly page of *Les Coqs* and then invoked intradiegetically with the very purpose of imagining the absent protagonist, 'titubant sous la double ivresse de l'esprit et du corps' (*Les Coqs*, 13)⁷⁰. And El Palenque's father, musician known as Sam-Saxo or Samba Félix undoubtedly refers to Monénembo's close collaborator Samba Felix Ndiaye at the same time as being a fictional rendering of alto saxophonist Momo Wandel Soumah, who was a member of Keletigui et ses tambourinis, one of the major contributors to Guinean Afrobeat. Ignacio, the primary narrator of *Les Coqs*, overtly signals some of the connections between Africa and Cuba.

Nos camarades africains, nos frères, savaient qu'ils trouveraient ici un petit bout d'Afrique avec des palmiers, des tubercules, des Nègresses lascives, et une musique étourdissante qui, chez nous aussi, est parvenue à défroquer nombre de prêtres. [...] Même climat, mêmes cadences, mêmes visages, même

⁶⁹ My views on this question do not align with those of Bernard de Meyer and Sami Tchak who argue that the author is consciously positioning himself in networks of literary critics, debates about world literature, and the literary heritage of Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban writers. Rather than seeing this as a deliberate, self-positioning, I see Monénembo's novels as tracing multiple Atlantic crossings and axes of cultural collaboration, but not necessarily his own. Bernard De Meyer, 'Le global turn ou comment lire Les coqs cubains chantent à minuit de Tierno Monénembo', *Elfe XX-XXI* 8 (2019), mis en ligne le 15 juillet 2019, consulté le 02 octobre 2020. <http://journals.openedition.org/elfe/915> ; Tchak, S. (2017). 'Tierno Monénembo, ou la filiation littéraire.' *Études littéraires africaines*, (43), 63–66.

⁷⁰ [stumbling under the double drunkenness of mind and body]

idéologie. Il n'y a pas que les Européens à avoir un cousin en Amérique' (*Les Coqs*, 128 and 135).

Alongside the traces of traumatic pasts, music and religion are presented as the cultural reciprocities of this transatlantic history. Thus as an embodiment of Afro-Brazilian religious traditions, Leda revitalises the past by recalling Ignacia singing 'Éku lai lai' (p.131) just as Sam-Saxo's Dixinn Jazz brings Conakry sounds to Cuba. 'À l'origine, la musique cubaine doit beaucoup aux rythmes africains; aujourd'hui, la musique africaine doit beaucoup aux rythmes cubains' (129)⁷¹. Monénembo's threading through of historical detail, such as this reference to the 11th World Festival of Youth (1978), is significant. The politics of attendance at this cultural festival and others reveals patterns of censorship and erasure that mirror the concealment of histories of enslavement I discussed above. It is in response to these racialised practices of invisibility that I propose the non-visual modes of tidalectic memory as a crosswise subversive alternative.

This is a crucial strand of Monénembo's project in humanising history via a poetics of movement; the novels demonstrate 'une aptitude caméléonesque du personnage à se lier spontanément et profondément aux différents membres de la famille et de la diaspora africaine' (Mangeon, 54)⁷². As Monénembo builds this picture of religious and cultural movements across the Atlantic, he responds to what Gilroy calls for in *Black Atlantic*. That is, an interpretation of Black diasporic history that neither downplays the seismic suffering of enslaved peoples, nor that is overly celebratory about the diversity of Afro-descendent cultures. For Sami Tchak, 'la musique contient toutes les archives'⁷³. Monénembo's tidalectic approach to the past attends to multiple movements, and renders them present in waves of sound through these two novels. El Palenque recalls his mother singing a Guajira song, 'Yo soy el punto cubano' (by Celina Gonzalez et Reutilio Dominguez) and in this musical form, the singers' improvisation of the different lines alternates with an unvarying

⁷¹ [In the beginning, Cuban music owed a lot to African rhythms; today African music owes a lot to Cuban rhythms.] Goli Guerreiro discusses how the 1980s and 1990s saw a conscious revitalisation of African cultural practices, namely in music, fashion and religion among *blocos afro* in the state of Bahia (1999).

⁷² [the character's chameleonic ability to bond, spontaneously and deeply, with different members of the family and the African diaspora].

⁷³ [music contains all the archives] Tchak, S. (2017). 'Tierno Monénembo, ou la filiation littéraire.' *Études littéraires africaines*, (43), 63–66 ; p.64.

melody⁷⁴. What is more, the ‘ethics of antiphony’ inherent in these musical forms is extended by Monénembo into the dialogic narrative structure of both novels.

Gilroy draws our attention to the importance of music and its surrounding rituals for processes of creating and communicating which are dynamic and active⁷⁵. I argue that this ‘ethics of antiphony’ is foregrounded in Monénembo’s narrative structure. In *Pelourinho* the orality of Monénembo’s text is accentuated in the alternating narrative structure: narrators Innocencio and Leda respond to each other’s chapters, almost completing one another by attending to different details, and in their contrasting tones (the former brash and rude, the latter more tender). The resonant soundscape is heightened by the coexistence of these antiphonal narrative voices, which interplay within dynamic rituals of sound and response. This alternating of chapters between a blind octogenarian and a woozy wheeler-and-dealer, produces a somewhat disorienting effect through the text’s see-saw form: ‘l’instabilité force et déforme nécessairement le récit’⁷⁶. As well as structure, this comes from their contrasting personas, and from variation in language. Specifically, their register and lexis are ever-shifting, but also their volume, with whispers and shouts patching together some semblance of a posthumous eulogy. That said, *Pelourinho* is not Monénembo’s most disorienting text as far as reading is concerned, giving but a taste of the dizzying effects he evokes in more exaggerated attempts in *Un Rêve utile*.

Indeed, there are recognisable patterns of call and response reminiscent of antiphonal music. Leda’s hesitance is conveyed in broken stories, reported dialogue and song, and contrasts sharply with Innocencio’s coarse verbosity (eg. Leda p. 131. vs. Innocencio p. 143). Elisa Diallo remarks that

l’alternance des voix narratives [...] repose pour une part sur la construction de langages types, et la mise en relief de ce qu’on peut appeler des tics de langage,

⁷⁴ cf. pp.83 and 96, *Les Coqs*.

⁷⁵ In some ways this antiphony echoes the symbiotic, active relationship between land and sea that is illuminated by Brathwaite’s tidalectics. ‘Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of pleasure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are established between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and others. Antiphony is the structure that hosts these essential encounters.’ 110. ‘Music supplies the best illustrations of these complex dynamics because, in this vernacular, listening to music is not associated with passivity...Together [the performer and the crowd] collaborate in a creative process governed by formal and informal, democratic rules...orchestrated in active, dynamic processes. The church and its secular equivalents nurtured a caste of performers capable of dramatizing them and the identity-giving model of democracy/community that has become the valuable intersubjective resource that I call the ethics of antiphony.’ 200

⁷⁶ [instability forces and necessarily warps the story] Auzas, *Monénembo*, p.28.

qui deviennent alors des indices mis à la disposition du lecteur pour lui permettre de reconnaître les différents personnages lorsqu'ils prennent la parole⁷⁷.

These differences become recognisable as the reader follows by sound, their way through the labyrinthine text. There are sharp changes in narrative pace as threats of conflict and the hunger for money create a consistent forward movement in Innocencio's narrative. Then violent interludes interrupt the narrative flow causing structural rupture in the text; at a basic textual level leaving paragraphs incomplete and chapters broken. Leda's voice generally speaks much more slowly, and her enigmatic account in particular creates hanging suspense through the profusion of ruptures and silences, most notably when she recounts the birth of her son. Her mind wavers from memorized to imagined scenes, leaving sentences unfinished with gaps that indicate her trauma in the shortest passages of the whole novel (188–93).

I have written elsewhere that it is these secondary figures who shape the text as narrators⁷⁸. The agency of those assumed to be behind the scenes surpasses their degree of visibility and this comes as a direct affront to colonial and postcolonial acts which sought to eradicate the voice of the everyday subject. These voices, in friction and antiphony, mobilise memory by rendering Escritore's past an object of active contention, a subject to be questioned, and one that opens out onto broader histories of movement across the Atlantic. The friction between heterogeneous voices in *Les Coqs* also gestures to the transatlantic crossings of African cultural heritage.

It is important to note the function of the frictional presence of multiple languages in both novels. In Havana, Monénembo has Ignacio write the novel-letter to El Palenque in French, against a backdrop of Cuban Spanish inflected with fragments of an incomprehensible song. In the city of Salvador, Escritore's West African French hits against Portuguese, Yoruba and English he struggles to decipher. Because of the misunderstandings, disorientation and violence which occur for the absent protagonists, this polyglossia is far more about friction and incoherence than any sense of an alluring *mixité*. Indeed, the violence of *Les Coqs* (an echo of *Pelourinho*) counters exoticist

⁷⁷ [the alternating narrative voices [...] rests on one hand on the construction of typical languages and the emphasis on what we can call linguistic tics, which in turn become indications for the reader to recognise the different characters when they speak] R DIALLO (Elisa), Tierno Monénembo : une écriture migrante. Paris : Karthala, coll. Lettres du Sud, 2012, 297 p. ; p. 141.

⁷⁸ Grayson, Hannah. n.d. 'The Movers of the Text: Monénembo's Nomad Subjects.' *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 81 (3): 513–31. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X18001039>.

tendencies in a range of representational trends tied to these settings. Such code-switching allows something intangible in the soundscape to be conveyed, yet since its full semantic content is not immediately accessible to the reader or the roots-tourist protagonists, there is an insistence on the unintelligible⁷⁹. This counters overly celebratory discourses of *mesticagem/mixité* dominant in Brazil's nation building project and counters the tourist gaze onto idealised pictures of a Latin America full of vitalising potential⁸⁰. Just like Innocencio in *Pelourinho*, El Palenque ends up in a haze of dodgy liquor and backstreet violence; and in this sense the allure of Cuba's exotic *mixité* reveals itself as an illusion. The blurb on the Seuil cover of *Les Coqs*, 'Un hymne aux origines africaines de Cuba indicates a misreading⁸¹. In fact, essentialist illusions like those are shattered and we read friction, incoherence, and violence (what Fremi calls 'cette île aux vifs contrastes')⁸². Poète reads Cuban, African, Latin American, French and Persian texts, but none can save him from the realities of violence; he commits suicide whilst holding the poems of Omar Khayyâm. 'Les gens se gourent: ils s'imaginent que La Havane se résume à sa baie, au dôme du Capitole, à la façade du Nacional et aux effigies de Castro. Non, La Havane, c'est El Tosco' (Monénembo 2015: 178; El Tosco is the local heavyweight)⁸³.

These texts in no way present an exoticized or idealized picture of their settings. On the contrary, Monénembo's texts belie a concern with critiquing official discourses of *baianidade* and *créolité*, rather than painting a picture of Latin America's vitalizing potential. The realities of violence which traverse both novels shatter celebratory illusions of these cities and diasporic cultures as melting pots of *mixité* and *mestizaje*. At the same time, they refuse to separate histories of systemic racialised violence from the diverse forms of cultural expression which resound in these sites. Namely, the haze and violence is in some part an exploration of how bodies navigate space in the wake of slavery⁸⁴. This is a direct counter to Cuba's and Brazil's suppression of histories of

⁷⁹ For example, outsiders Poète and El Palenque rely on narrator Ignacio to guide them: 'c'est vers moi que tu te tournais chaque fois que tu te sentais désemparé' (*Les Coqs*, 103); and Escritore is dependent on Innocencio's streetwisdom: 'sans moi, tu serais en plein brouillard. Il n'y a que moi pour t'aider à t'orienter... Le code de la cité est dans nos mains à nous autres, les petits, les vilains, ceux qui savent tâter du nez et ramper quand il le faut' (*Pelourinho*, 61-62).

⁸⁰ See John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (Sage, London: 1990).

⁸¹ [A hymn to Cuba's African origins]

⁸² [this island of sharp contrasts] 2016

⁸³ [People get it wrong: they think that Havana can be summed up by its bay, the dome of the Capitolio, the front of the Nacional, and the effigies of Castro. No, Havana is El Tosco.]

⁸⁴ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and being*. (Duke University Press, Durham: 2016).

slavery and systemic racism, which I discussed above. Thus Monénembo's tidalectic soundscapes point to the diversity of cultural axes of collaboration across the Atlantic without falling into tropes of a harmonious *mixité*. This is something more fluid and less cohesive, to formulate 'the processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents.' (Gilroy, p.2). In the polyglossic soundscapes of *Les Coqs* and *Pelourinho*, Monénembo foregrounds the non-visual without any sense of *mixité* coming at the expense of violent histories, and ongoing experiences, of dislocation, suffering and solidarity.

Conclusion

In these two novels, Monénembo draws together links in the memory chain across the Atlantic that are reliant on the non-visual. In its place, the author foregrounds alternative modes of mobile, misty, musical approaches to the past. What forms is a tidalectic memory where the narratives set in motion past Atlantic crossings: both the historical suffering of enslavement and later cultural exchanges between Africa and the Americas. We see in *Pelourinho* and its literary echo *Les Coqs* that Monénembo's poetics of movement extends in relevance to the intractability of the past. The writer's sustained focus on impermanence and movement underscores the mutually dynamic constitutive forces at work across the Black Atlantic. As Ignacio concludes of El Palenque, 'Cuba a laissé des traces en toi. Des traces floues, mouvantes et désordonnées impossibles à interpréter, impossibles à oublier' (Monénembo 2015: 174)⁸⁵. Where *Pelourinho* continues Monénembo's phase of stylistic experimentation in the 1990s, the return to the same plot device signals a need to continue this tidalectic memory work in his writing. That said, the replicated mnemonic impulse speaks of the way the author's interest in a sense of *devoir de mémoire* will be emphatically marked by his time in Rwanda.

One final (floating) signifier from *Les Coqs* stands as a helpful point of conclusion. Sam-Saxo, the Guinean musician visiting Cuba in 1978 who turns out to be the father of El Palenque, arrives in Havana on the *Amiral Nakhimov* (p.129). As outlined above, the Festival mondial de la jeunesse is one of the unofficial axes of Black Atlantic

⁸⁵ [Cuba left its traces in you. Vague traces, moving and muddled, impossible to interpret, impossible to forget].

collaboration traced in the novel. But the ship itself encapsulates much of my argument in this chapter. The *Amiral Nakhimov* was originally a German ship, named Berlin, and was given to the Soviet Union in 1946 in the name of reparations after World War II. In July of 1978 the *Nakhimov* sailed from Oran (Algeria) to Havana, carrying over 3,000 African artists and musicians to the 11th Festival mondial de la jeunesse. Sékou Touré's sponsored musicians were among them⁸⁶. The ship later sunk in a collision in 1986. The importance of maritime history for the oceanic approach to memory that I am proposing cannot be overstated. The work of Dilip Menon (*Ocean as Method*, 2022) and W. Jeffrey Bolster (*Black Jacks*, 1998; *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) has recharted the multiple crossings, recrossings, shifts in power and distribution of wealth across the ocean⁸⁷. Elizabeth DeLoughrey has written of the need to bring together a critical engagement with contemporary naval hydro-politics with postcolonial literary research⁸⁸. This is to say little of the vast scholarship on the histories and literary representations of transatlantic and intra-American slave voyages⁸⁹. And yet in signalling this ship, via a small historical trace in Monénembo's revisited Latin American retrospective, I underscore the author's tidalectic approach to humanising histories of solidarity and struggle. As DeLoughrey has underlined, the vessel renders tidalectics visible, since it is the principal way in which land is connected to sea⁹⁰. In this one reference to a historical object, Monénembo contains the layers of tragic history, conflict, and transcultural exchange embedded in Atlantic pasts.

Understanding the importance of movement has implications for contextualizing relationships between Latin American cultural production and the Francosphère, African

⁸⁶ On independence, the Guinean government banned private orchestras and replaced them with state-sponsored groups, calling upon the nation's best musicians (Balla Onivogui, Keletigui Traoré) to serve the project of nation building. These orchestras were encouraged to develop Guinea's policy of *Authenticité*, the campaign that underpinned Touré's nationalisation of culture.

⁸⁷ See also *An Introduction to the blue humanities* by Steve Mentz (New York: Routledge, 2023), who describes "wet globalization" as operating 'through the overlapping agencies of mariners, empires, ocean currents, and animal, plant, and viral populations' (317).

⁸⁸ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, 'Toward a Critical Ocean Studies for the Anthropocene', *English Language Notes* (2019) 57:1, pp.21-36.

⁸⁹ See among others slavevoyages.org for an extensive database on this history; Hawthorne, Walter *From Africa to Brazil: Culture, Identity, and an Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600-1830* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Manning, Patrick, *Slavery, Colonialism and Economic Growth in Dahomey, 1640-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Nicola Frith and Kate Hodgson, eds, *At the Limits of Memory: Legacies of Slavery in the Francophone World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

⁹⁰ DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M. 2010. *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literature*. Honolulu: University Of Hawai'i Press.

thought, and postcolonial scholarship in the area of memory. Reading Monénembo's Latin American (un)novel pairing within a framework of Black Atlantic tidalectics, we see his poetics set pasts of suffering and solidarity in motion. 'It comes down to a double consciousness of both the multiple axes of oppression, and hence of hurt, humiliation, and pain, as well as the creative force they can generate as motors of transversal and collective transformation' (Braidotti 2011: 32). That these processes of transformation and memory are creative, fragile, patchy, and reliant on the non-visual, is without question.

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