



Unlocking Moments: The Eternal Return of Colonialism

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Behold, I continued, this moment! From this gateway, Moment, a long, eternal lane leads backward: behind us lies an eternity's must not whatever can walk have walked this lane before? Must not whatever can happen have happened, have been done, have passed before? And if everything has been there before –what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not this gateway too have been there before? And are not all things knotted together so firmly that this moment draws after it all that is to come? Therefore-itself too? For whatever can walk in this long lane out there too, it must walk once more. (Nietzsche 1978 [1883-1885], 158)

Trained as a philosopher and artist, I have been negotiating ways of incorporating my divergent intellectual interests with my artwork for decades. I align myself with continental/existential philosophy and quasi realistic/pop photography and painting. My travels in Ghana in 2001 for a two-month research project marked the beginning of my current passionate interest in African art,



society and politics. Here I use art and philosophy to reflect, through a Nietzschean lens, on my encounters in Ghana.



Figure 1 The Castle in Cape Coast, Ghana



Figure 2 "The Door of No Return"

Ghanaians call the building portrayed in Figure 1 “The Castle”; it is a dungeon with barracks turned into a castle. It was built to hold men, women and children as they awaited passage through the so-called “Door of No Return” into the bondages of slavery (see Figure 2). Once a prison and military fort, now a castle; then a castle, now a museum, a shrine, a place of pilgrimage for visitors and tourists to bear witness to the many horrors created from Enlightened idealism and Anglo egotism. Ghana’s history of slavery taints its future. The Castle in Cape Coast and the “Door of No Return” are symbols of a horrific past that overshadows Ghanaian history and its citizens’ self-identity. They contribute to a rendering of Ghanaians as poor suffering souls, caught in poverty and seemingly helpless to overcome their history of slavery and colonial rule.

I was struck by the “Door of No Return” when I first saw it, and found myself remembering Nietzsche’s “Moment”: a door with the threshold of an eye blink, though which we are always encountering the past. Understanding “The Moment” is liberating for Nietzsche, but for Ghanaians the threshold through the door to their past has been blocked with a sign that proclaims it as the “Door of No Return”. It is a powerful statement on the horrors of slavery; nothing shall be the

same after people file through this door to enter the slave ships, for either the survivors in the New World or those who remained in Africa. The Moment of slavery has passed, but the effects still linger.

To the extent that the metaphor of the “Door of No Return” denies the possibility of return, it also hinders the possibility of repair and rebirth of community within Ghana, in that Ghanaians are becoming increasingly distanced from their pre-colonial history, languages and cultures. From the moment I set foot in Ghana and at every turn I encountered young people who were preoccupied with emulating Western language, fashions, values and lifestyles, and whose foremost ambition was to emigrate to America. Their hope, the remembrance of their past, is buried under the traumatic amnesia forced upon them by slavery tied closely to European colonialism.

The Castle, which is a monument to tragic moments, has recently been revalued by Ghanaians themselves as a source of tourism income. The tables turn; a building that was once part of a machine to convert human bodies into imperial superpower is now a place for Ghanaians to earn Western cash. Especially disturbing is the shrine within the dungeon, which is occupied by a ‘priest’ who solicits donations from tourists to recompense the losses from slavery. Could there ever be enough dimes and quarters to make up for what happened to his ancestors? What was is not, what could be is, the past and future collide at the “Door of No Return”.

In fact, the door mocks the notion of no return and demonstrates the slave trade’s eternal effects, as Ghanaians continue to rely on the benefices of imperial handouts. But surely there is also the possibility of a different sort of return as Ghanaians and others of African descent return to their ancestors’ home and seek out the history found within the Castle walls. Time for Nietzsche is not a linear progression but an endless loop of past and future that meets in the moment. One reason that I find myself so drawn to photography is its ability to capture the moment, a second in time that will never be repeated in exactly the same way. I always find myself wanting to repaint, and re-imagine, that moment, to alter the existence in a way that reflects the moment in which the photograph was taken, changing the moment to reflect my connection, reflection and observation. Through the idea of the moment, Nietzsche reveals when the opening and closing of possibilities occurs. The moment is where you choose your future possibilities, which are always found in your past existence. The key to overcoming, to transcending the mundane or the scripted, is to not to fall into the trap of accepting only one possible future, and to remember that there are many past events to draw upon. I hope the people of Ghana will glimpse different, non-colonial, pasts through the “Door of No Return,” and so imagine futures that overcome the legacies of slavery and colonial oppression.

References

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1978 [1883-1885]. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for None and All*. (Trans. Walter Kaufmann), New York: Penguin.