

The Atlantic Slave Trade Was *Not* a “Black-on-Black Holocaust”

Lansiné Kaba

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Abstract: This article, which derives from the wisdom of my Koranic teachers in Kankan, Guinea, as well as the dedication of the Africanist community, discusses the question of the representation of Africa in general, and especially the claim made by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., that Africans committed a Holocaust-type crime by selling other blacks to whites. To refute this allegation, I rely on my familiarity with the literature on the quasi-universality of slavery in human history and on the Atlantic slave trade. This leads me to assert that, though painful to acknowledge, *some* Africans of the slave trade era did participate as pivotal middlemen in the brutal, ignominious, and peculiar trade that drastically changed the image of the black in the white mind. But the wars and raiding that resulted in the enslavement of millions of Africans were not fought according to any theory of racial or ethnic purity such as the one that would emerge as a key Nazi ideology. Furthermore, sound historical evidence points to the European and American origins of the slave trade.

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Far from being an accident, the slave trade was a significant part of modern European expansion. The white businessmen, ship owners, mariners, and plantation owners played the dominant role in this business, a point to which Gates—unlike W.E.B. Du Bois, in whose grand tradition he aspires to follow—pays only lip service. Therefore, the notion of a black “Holocaust” perpetrated by Africans in the era of the slave trade is a flawed and objectionable analogy which tends to “relativize” the Holocaust and to sow discord in the relationship between Africans and black people of the diaspora.

Résumé: Dans cette version de mon discours présidentiel écrit en hommage aux érudits de ma ville natale de Kankan en Guinée ainsi qu’aux Africanistes de toutes origines, je me penche sur la question du mode de représentation de l’Afrique non pas dans les médias, mais dans la pensée des auteurs. J’ai jugé utile de discuter l’opinion présentée par Henry Louis Gates, Jr. selon laquelle les Africains de l’ère de la traite atlantique qui ont vendu leurs frères aux Blancs auraient commis un crime du genre de celui que les Nazis ont perpétré au moment de l’Holocauste. Basé sur une historiographie abondante, le texte admet la quasi-universalité de l’esclavage dans l’histoire humaine, ainsi que la participation effective de *certaines* Africains dans la traite comme intermédiaires. Mais, les guerres qui alimentaient l’esclavage n’étaient pas fondées sur les principes de pureté raciale et ethnique que les Nazis allaient plus tard systématiquement appliquer. Comme l’esclavage et la traite atlantique faisaient partie intégrante de l’expansion européenne au Nouveau Monde, force est de reconnaître le rôle déterminant et primordial des Européens et des Américains en tant qu’investisseurs, navigateurs et propriétaires de bateaux et de plantations. En négligeant ces aspects historiques, l’analyse que Gates donne de l’esclavage diffère de celle de l’illustre érudit pan-africaniste noir américain, W.E.B. Du Bois, dont il aspire pourtant à suivre le bel exemple. En conclusion, l’idée d’un “Holocauste noir par les Noirs à l’ère de la traite atlantique” est inadmissible du point de vue intellectuel et même tend à “relativiser” l’Holocauste et à créer la discorde dans les rapports entre les Africains et les Noirs du Nouveau Monde.

To prepare an address for an assembly of scholars is a daunting challenge, and delivering it is a humbling experience. The choice of a topic is intimidating, too. I wonder: What to say that has not been already said in one form or another? Should I speak of some of the many current crises in Africa, or articulate some of the connections between the different disciplines that interest me? You who are honoring me with your presence count among the authorities who write on AIDS intervention and sexuality, labor and production, genocide, the collapse of institutions, state-controlled economy, privatization and debt relief, race and gender inequality, modernization, ethnicity and national integration, military rule, democra-

tization, civil society, and other important topics pertaining to Africa. Won't raising similar issues today prove a redundant exercise or worse, put you to sleep?

My address will therefore limit itself to subjects that I know best and that illuminate my academic journey and my quest for knowledge, tolerance, and spiritual peace. It is based on ideas about slavery, education, politics, leadership, and commitment to which I was exposed in my childhood in Kankan, Guinea, during the French colonial rule. Recalling my own experiences during those years of peace and serenity in the midst of major sociocultural change, I shall recount part of my intellectual and spiritual awakening. I shall also explain my reaction to the formidable challenge Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has posed to all Africanists, thereby expressing my hope for a frank and fruitful dialogue between black Africa and its diaspora, an essential condition for a united African world.

A Synopsis of an African Tradition

For nearly four centuries, Kankan, which is located in a cross-river region called Bateh—a true small “Mesopotamia” irrigated by the Niger River and its tributary, the Milo—has been the metropolis of Upper Guinea. Because its inhabitants faithfully practiced Islam and spread it among the neighboring communities, they were called “Maninnka-mori,” that is, “lettered Mandinka.” Their ancestors' contributions to West African history, from the advent of Sunjata's Empire of Mali in the early thirteenth century to the rise of Samori Touré in the late nineteenth century, have been extolled in Mandinka musical compositions and documented in various scholarly works.¹ The Maninnka-mori men of erudition were respected throughout the savanna and forest regions of West Africa for their expertise in the power of the word [*kuma*] and the pen [*kala*]. Their teaching was based on the Koranic injunction, “*Iqraa*,” announced in the sura *Al Alaq*:

Read and proclaim in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher
Who created man out of a clot of blood . . . ,
Who taught man the use of the pen,
And that which he knew not.

By establishing the sanctity and preeminence of learning and knowledge, this admonition became the cornerstone of individual and collective moral development in Kankan. Education and spirituality permeated all social activities, as the French explorer René Caillié observed during his visit in 1827 (1965:412). This civilization blended the material and spiritual dimensions of human experience so well that it attracted the attention of such writers as Edward Wilmot Blyden and Captain Louis Binger in the nineteenth century, and such important observers as Emmanuel Mounier

and Kwame Nkrumah in 1947 and 1953 respectively.² I have found that many of the ideas discussed by the elders of Kankan in their gatherings are germane to my African studies interests—notably in the humanities and in politics—as well as to the debate about the representation of Africa that exploded in 1999 following the broadcast of Henry Louis Gates’s *Wonders of the African World* television series.

Reminiscences of my formative years remind me of my indebtedness to my Koranic teachers and the other wise elders of Kankan. These men introduced me to reading and writing, and instilled in me a respect for learning and spirituality as a path to self-knowledge and social consciousness. They taught me that the purpose of life here on earth is to prepare the conditions for one’s salvation in the hereafter, and that humans are accountable to God, for whom they serve as vicars on earth. They had a strong work ethic (insisting that “Allah helps those who help themselves” [*i-jede demen, Allah li i demen*]), and they valued life with freedom and dignity, governance with order and justice. They taught that perfection is an endless quest throughout the course of one’s education and one’s life, and that both individuals and polities should be motivated by the highest ideals.

The elders also looked upon any form of despotism as contrary to reason-based Islamic ideals of governance. They knew that an orderly competition for power furthers dialogue and tolerance. Thus they appreciated the idea that power should be distributed fairly among local constituencies in order for those in power to govern with legitimacy and for the community as a whole to enjoy safety and stability. They condemned slavery as an institution that lowers the status and dignity of human beings, a proprietary relationship inconsistent with the Islamic conviction that everyone, rich or poor, is a slave of God. Because of the inherent incompatibility between their religious beliefs and slavery, conversion to Islam automatically meant manumission. The elders envisioned a good society as a large and egalitarian system of extended families based more on relations of brotherhood and mutual dependence than on blood ties. Thus my education in Kankan, and the strong beliefs instilled in me, have led me to object strenuously to unjust and inaccurate remarks about, and hasty censure of, traditional forms of African authority and politics. My particular background also serves as the underpinning of my response to Henry Louis Gates’s claim of a “Black-on-Black Holocaust.”

Representation of Africa

In general, the representation of Africa in the Western media has been inadequate and negative. This explains why those who care about the image of Africa appreciate television series such as those produced by Alex Haley, Ali Mazrui, Basil Davidson, and PBS. However, the trivialization of the continent in the media is not my main concern in this paper.³ I am con-

cerned, rather, with the general problem in scholarly writing, as in other forms of representation, that the portrayal of reality is often colored by the psyche of the researcher who perceives it. To a degree, scholarly writing is comparable to painting or any fine art in which the colors and tones, the nuances of nature or the notes of melody are so artistically conceptualized and reassembled that they create a new “reality” that has to be evaluated in its own terms. Just as two paintings of the same scenery or two songs about the same river offer contrasting impressions of the real landscape, two books of history—or two television series—often disclose different aspects of the society or the hero being studied. Every composition—pictorial, musical, or sculptural—thus appears as an art of assemblage. Unlike such works, however, an historical reconstruction must satisfy various criteria of objectivity in order to be considered truthful.

These considerations lead me to Henry Louis Gates’s representation of Africa. His travelogue has impressed me with its many superb images of the areas he visited, and also for the sympathy and candor with which he portrays the continent, qualities lacking in many other television portrayals. He has broadened the public’s interest in Africa, and this represents a remarkable achievement. Gates catches sight of scenes, details, and issues in African history that were missed in Alex Haley’s *Roots*, Basil Davidson’s historical films, Ali Mazrui’s *The Africans*, and the PBS series *The Africans in America*. Suggesting an influence of Kenneth Clark’s *Civilization*, Gates’s production inspires admiration of, and appreciation for, the highly developed cultures that existed in sub-Saharan Africa long before the coming of the Europeans.⁴ This is a message worthy of public attention and critics’ applause. But Gates’s obsession with the issue of African involvement in the slave trade—a practice which, in his mind, corresponds to the dark side of African civilization—muddles his other perceptions.

As an African-born Africanist and a participant-observer in the study of the African experience, I shall focus on Gates’s representation of this difficult, painful, and divisive question of Africa’s role in the slave trade, which he has brought to the fore. The history we both seek to bring to light—he as a literary critic and I as an historian—purports to be the perception and representation of a people’s past experiences and their aspirations for the future. Gates seems to assume that every well-crafted interpretation of an event can be viewed as a text rich in significant images, in short a “history,” because any recorded history, despite its striving for, or pretense of, truth and objectivity, involves a narrative that may be at variance with the real events. Inherent in this literary conception of history, it should be added, is the notion that such a written narrative or story on the screen is exempted from requirements of objectivity.

But although I and other historians value the significance of interpretation, this proposition is unacceptable to the extent that it implies that the historical discipline is just one more field dedicated to the study of fiction. Facts are tangible and intangible realities that shape the world, although

the living may not perceive them uniformly. What has occurred is independent of the interpretation of witnesses or authors. History is more than what is said in writing to have taken place. For example, regardless of the different interpretations of the Tondibi battle and the subsequent fall of Songhay in 1591, of Samori's saga or of Guinea's "No" vote in 1958, these facts exist, independent of historians' points of view. Because most Africanists value Africa's past and current realities, they would concur in this and argue in favor of a view of the African past rooted in the traditions of scholarship and free of whimsical interpretations.

The Wonders of the African World is challenging and disturbing on this particular level. Since its airing, it has caused an uproar among viewers well informed about Africa.⁵ The series is characterized by a studied spontaneity, a personal accent, a sui generis mood, a hidden anger, and an unsettling incongruence. This dissonance is epitomized by the contrast between the interviewer's easy-going attire and comments, even in sanctified places, as opposed to the solemn demeanor of the interviewees, as well as by the disjuncture in their dialogues. What also makes this performance odd is Gates's frequent violation of basic African decorum, as well as the insistent informality, or even antiformality, in his mode of address to members of local elites. He seems bent on questioning their moral authority, their legitimacy, and their consciousness. Thus the series becomes a corpus in itself, a fiction with its own language and significance, utterances and insinuations, but with questionable sensitivity, rigor, and commitment to pan-Africanism. To borrow the words of Roland Barthes (1980), such representation "points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*," and hence arouses a certain reaction.

The series reveals the extent to which the encounter with Africa's past, and especially the history of slavery, disturbed Gates. Hence what he says, intimates, or suggests—that is, his agenda—must be elucidated. I respect Gates for his intelligence and his many achievements, including the knack and savvy that he, better than any other contemporary scholar in the humanities, has demonstrated in becoming a successful humanist-entrepreneur. I want to evaluate not his personality, but rather his reinvention of Africa's past; certainly his perspective on Africa is one that differs from that of the African American pioneers of African studies in whose grand tradition he aspires to follow, including that of the pan-Africanist scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois. Gates holds unyielding expectations of his African brethren whose ancestors, unlike his, did not experience the "Middle Passage." His persistent questioning of his contacts in West Africa, only one of whom is an academic, is informed by his self-perception as a descendant of the Middle Passage confronting the descendants of accomplices in the ignominious export business.

By promoting the notion of the centrality of African involvement in the slave trade, Gates personalizes the history of slavery and creates the idea of a collective guilt comparable, in his judgment, with the burden Germans

have had to bear because of the Nazis’ odious crimes. In fact, he accuses Africans of the crime of black “Holocaust” in the same way that the Nation of Islam (1991) accused the Jews, an action he strongly denounced. He acknowledges that he views Africa through the lens of his own family’s story and the long history of anguish and suffering of the diaspora Africans. As he says, “It was with my head full of slavery’s facts and figures and my heart loaded with the deepest dread that I arrived in Ghana, bearing a sepia-toned photograph of Jane Gates, my family’s earliest known ancestor, a woman brought to America . . . from this very coast.” He also feels that the dreadful legacy of the African slave trade has been concealed under a fanciful mantel of black brotherhood, and he keeps asking his African interrogators, “Why did this happen to *me* (my ancestors) and not to *you* (yours)?”⁶ Overwhelmed by this story, he pays scant attention to the Europeans’ participation in the slave trade. In his emphasis instead on Africans’ involvement, he has been inspired, to a degree, by Olaudah Equiano and Phillis Wheatley, who, despite their fine memories of their respective native milieus in Africa, accepted the then dominant image of Africa, namely the premises of African primitiveness and idolatry.⁷ This problem is critical.

The Slave Trade

In what was almost a conspiracy of silence caused by a variety of reasons, the African historians of my generation tended to silence or neglect the memory of slavery and the slave trade across the Sahara and the Atlantic. They viewed these two events as parts of the “Arab mentality” or of the history of European expansion.⁸ The subject has thus been taken up by scholars of non-African background, many of whom care about and sympathize with Africa. But some of them who deal with internal problems of social structures are interested only indirectly in the questions at issue here, defining slavery as any form of traditional social dependence or exploitation. Others who focus on the Atlantic trade quantify and desensitize it; that is, they extirpate what makes it a painful problem, a true tragedy in history.

Many of these authors, who pride themselves for their neutrality, objectivity, and emotional detachment, are nevertheless ideologically driven. A. G. Hopkins (1973) and Philip D. Curtin (1969), to name only two, make no apology for paying little attention to the dramatic and evil aspect of the trade. They stress the business-transaction and “material commodity” nature of the export, and they argue that both Europeans and Africans participated in and benefited from it. Curtin (1995:15–27) goes one step further when he claims that in the wave of the contact, the diseases formerly carried by Africans (including malaria, smallpox, and syphilis in its yaws form) spread in Europe and ultimately wiped out the Amerindians. Such studies contradict the perspective held by many well-informed scholars, mainly those of African ancestry.

Out of rage or out of nationalism, and to vent their frustration, scholars and pseudo-scholars in the African diaspora who believe in race pride and unity but have done little fieldwork have become involved in historical popularizing. In many cases, however, their knowledge of African history is hardly commensurate with their indignation. The scholarly shortcomings of such works may have prompted Professor Gates to try to set the record straight, that is, to distance himself from those African Americans whose uncritical understanding of Africa makes them unprepared, in his words, "to confront the *curious ease* with which black Africans could sell other Africans to the white man."⁹ He has taken upon himself the responsibility of contrasting the suffering of African Americans with what he considers the complicity and guilt of Africans. Fortunately, today's Africans also feel the need to exhume the slave trade and to exorcize its ghost. They aspire to lay the blame where it belongs and thus to be reconciled with the victims at home and abroad, an essential condition of black solidarity in the face of centuries of slavery and vilification and the modern politics of inequality.

Some recollection of factual history may be in order here. First, slave capturing wreaked havoc and created deplorable conditions. Slavery in any form, whether for the household or the market, is and was a despicable institution and a practice antithetical to the principles of divine law that most Africans respect. But slavery was not solely an African problem. As Orlando Patterson (1982) has shown, the institution of slavery was quasi-universal.¹⁰ Most states and trade-based societies throughout the world experienced or participated in it at one time or another.

Second, it is historically true that African merchants and rulers, notably the warlords and mulatto inhabitants of the coastal regions, actively participated in the slave trade as middlemen whose services reduced the risks for white dealers. Yet despite their mutual dependence and the appearance of rational business among equals, the partnership between Africans and ship owners was not one of equality. Unlike the investors, the insurers, the shipbuilders, the dealers, and especially the mariners from abroad, the local African providers had little knowledge of the whole Atlantic system. Moreover, at a time when Africa was lagging technologically behind Europe, the slave trade, with its capital-intensive nature, could function only with the advanced technology then available in the West. Gates is simply wrong when he asserts that Africans were motivated by the allure of financial gain and that they made huge profits. The major players and beneficiaries lived in Europe and the Americas.

Third, the trans-Atlantic slave trade contributed to the Western tendency to identify all blacks with slavery, regardless of their nationality or social status and notwithstanding the universality of bondage in human history. The Atlantic slave trade became the "peculiar" institution in the sense that, unlike the Saharan slave trade, for example, which was more color-blind, it targeted only black people. In other words, it had the effect of categorizing people from disparate cultures only on the basis of one pheno-

typical trait. By making Africans de facto and de jure the people born to be enslaved, it denied their humanity, an injustice perpetrated against both past and future generations. The legacy of the Atlantic slave trade has diminished the dignity of every black person, regardless of his or her intrinsic qualities. Thus all blacks—rulers, traders, and war captives alike—became victims or potential victims. In this sense the idea of Africans as long-term beneficiaries of what Ade Ajayi has called “the greatest and longest crime against humanity” is gravely inaccurate.

The term “slave kingdoms” that Gates uses in referring to part of the west coast of Africa reflects some misapprehensions about these societies and ignores the complexity of the African external trade. Despite the size of the slave population in Ashanti, Dahomey, and other states, free-labor farming rather than slavery was the basis of the economy. The engagement of West Africans in the European-controlled slave trade was defensive rather than offensive. As the presence of the gun-carrying merchants became frequent and pervasive on the shores, the polities were seriously threatened. Local rulers had to accommodate the Europeans and develop trading relations with them in order to ensure the security of their states.¹¹ Ashanti and other kingdoms entered the slave trade not in order to exploit or victimize other Africans, but to survive the onslaught of European firearms. Furthermore, most of the individuals who participated directly belonged to the old or new elite of their society and acted primarily in their own interests.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1896), Walter Rodney (1970), and recently David Eltis (2000) have shown how the rise of Atlantic slavery necessitated an African role. Eltis in particular has analyzed the link between the Atlantic slave trade and the transformation of the conditions of labor in Europe, which led to the reduction of the supply of white workers for the New World. As the demand for slave labor in the New World propelled the “triangular” trade to its zenith, there emerged in Africa a stronger need to raise armies for self-protection, and hence to sell captives of war. The survival of the external trade, however, rested on the labor needs of a plantation economy and the financial expectations of the investors.

The slave trade disrupted and bled Africa. It undermined the viability of many states by fostering the rise of predatory, militaristic regimes devoid of any legitimacy. The sole purpose of these tyrants, whose regimes were known in Senegal as *ceddo*, was to enslave others in order to satisfy their need for firearms and luxury goods.¹² Raiding devastated the system of free, family-based production and governance. But to connect this historical contingency, as Gates does, with irreparable guilt is unwarranted. It also confuses our students and the public at large. Moreover, this kind of blaming has turned what was designed as an educational television series into a program fraught with moralism and misrepresentation. Gates has armed black people’s adversaries with arguments that can be used fallaciously to defend the notion of white innocence (or mere parity with African co-cul-

prits). He has thereby damaged the very movements for pan-Africanism and reparations that he claims to support.¹³

My aim is not to exonerate the African rulers and merchants. They may not have been aware of the New World and the horrible conditions in its mines and on its plantations, but they knew about the ropes and chains, the thirst and hunger. It is fair to criticize them, especially if the purpose, as Gates claims, is to hold all slave-traders accountable to the fullest possible extent. But painting a picture that can be used only by those who have had a long-standing interest in shifting the onus from the main culprits to Africans themselves does a disservice not only to black people but also to history. Today's readers and viewers expect a greater rigor from Gates than those of earlier generations expected from Zora Neal Hurston, for example, who was dismayed to learn from a former slave about his enslavement in Dahomey in 1859: "The white people had bought us, it is true, and exploited us here in America. But my people sold me and the white people bought me" ([1942]1997:1062).

Gates's representation of the slave trade—which is motivated, perhaps, by deconstructionist enthusiasm—amounts in practice to a condemnation of Africans and an affront to their rightful place in history as victims of European expansion and hegemony. By blaming them, he contradicts the spirit and wisdom of W.E.B. Du Bois who, along with other historians, emphasized the primordial role of Europeans in the trans-Atlantic business and was an advocate for the oppressed throughout his life. Slavery and the slave trade in their modern capitalist forms developed in the Americas under European auspices.¹⁴ In minimizing this historical fact, Gates may have created a dramatic, soul wrenching television series, but it is one that falsifies the past and damages current generations of Africans. His vision hinges more on his own motivations and ideological agenda than it does on historical truth.

Although Gates claims to respect the tenets of pan-Africanism, he does a great disservice, in the name of anti-essentialist skepticism, to the concept of race-based unity.¹⁵ He lumps together all Africans and insists that they committed an outrage by selling *his* ancestors into slavery. Not only does he polarize the relations between Africans and African Americans, he also sows the seeds of a potent discord within the African diaspora community. For example, this kind of overstatement could lead to a passionate African countercharge against today's Americans—including blacks—who, as citizens of the world's economic superpower, exploit Africans. His denial or misrepresentation of history, a grave problem in its own right, also bears in this way on issues of identity and political commitment.

Slavery and the Tyranny of Concept

Henry Louis Gates's professed "sickness" with the idea that Africans committed an inexpiable sin by selling other blacks has led him to raise a mon-

umental question, that of a black “Holocaust.” The African littoral, he claims, reminds him of what Auschwitz represents to the Jews. He distinguishes himself from the people he calls “Africa-loving African American leaders,” Afrocentrists and cultural radicals who seldom question Africa. But some of his critics wonder whether he can ever be the main interpreter of the black experience, despite his academic prominence and his dominant presence in the media. Whatever the case may be, his attitudes differ from those of the elders of Kankan whose wisdom impressed generations of West Africans of various backgrounds.

Seldom did these leaders condemn a whole group for the wrong perpetrated by a few, let alone in the distant past. Undoubtedly their judgment was tempered by the understanding that time consoles and inspires restraint. They also may have known that when the study of history is combined with a search for self-knowledge [*jede lon*]¹⁵—an endeavor that is at times challenging, at times painful—the intense subjectivity involved can lead one astray. It can also lead to bitterness, as evidenced by Booker T. Washington, who scoffed at Africans, and Keith Richburg, who describes both his uneasiness with blacks and his disappointments with Africa in *Out of America: An African American Confronts Africa* (1997)¹⁶ For Henry Louis Gates, this kind of complex, emotionally fraught endeavor may have resulted in a personal crusade that need never have been fought.

The attempt to redefine the past is not the issue. To the contrary, Gates should be applauded for his consciousness of the relevance of African history and for his compassion for his grandmother and other victims of the slave trade, a violent and painful transfer of African populations and civilization to the New World. I respect his right to express his reaction to Africa and African history as he wishes. But, following an unfortunately long tradition, he overlooks the sorrow of “the African survivors of the raiding and wars, who mourned their enslaved relatives bound for the voyage without return.”¹⁷ The woe was felt on the both sides of the Atlantic. Enslavement and uprooting were traumatizing for both the victims who made the voyage and for those who did not, including those who stayed home and those who died on the ships. They all were victims of the same tragedy. This history remains fundamental to both the African and the African American communities. The memory of slavery exists as a crucial marker in both worlds and should not be used to sever the umbilical ties of their identity. Rather, this consciousness challenges them to embrace a common destiny based on dialogue about old kinships and future commitments. Africa and her African American progeny, like a mother and a child, need one another. They need to pardon, welcome, and accept one another in order to move forward and thrive. It is disturbing that Gates uses his considerable talent and sensitivity in the service of resentment.

The Wonders of the African World suggests an analogy between the slave trade and the Nazi crimes. If such an insinuation were valid, any war fought in history could be interpreted by the vanquished as a holocaust. But such

a conclusion, to borrow a phrase of A. R. Brown (1974), would amount to a “tyranny of concept.” It also would trivialize and relativize the Holocaust, a unique episode in the history of modern atrocities. On the basis of available historical evidence, it is irrefutable that the doctrine of total exclusion and elimination that promoted Nazi genocide was completely foreign to eighteenth-century West Africa. Wolof, Fulbe, Mandinka, Akan, Yoruba, and Chokwe rulers and slave merchants were led neither by the ideology of hatred and racial purity and superiority, nor by the belief that their enemies were subhumans to be destroyed. The kings of Ashanti and Dahomey fought wars of conquest and plunder against their foes—neighbors who often shared their ethnic and cultural traditions—not wars of extermination on the basis of appearance, creed, or tradition.

Since the sixteenth century, the world has witnessed the most horrifying acts of violence and atrocity. The modern era will be remembered for the mass killings committed in the name of religion, ideology, conquest, or greed. Much brutal destruction has occurred in Africa or has been visited upon people of African descent elsewhere. Africans suffered during the four-century-long slave trade. By the thousands, they toiled and died in New World plantations. Manumission, when it came, put no end to their pain. In Southern Africa, including Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), and in the former Portuguese colonies of Angola and Mozambique, the African population experienced horrible mistreatment, including segregation and the denial of basic human rights. In South Africa the black citizens lived under apartheid, a rigorous, comprehensive, and brutal system of race separation and inequality designed to perpetuate *ad aeternitatem* their subjugation and exploitation for the profit of the white settlers and corporations. People of African ancestry paid in blood and sweat for the growth of the New World economy as well as for the increase of capital accumulation under colonial rule. They also perished in large numbers in the two World Wars on the European and Asian fronts. The independence that was won mostly in the 1960s has yet to curb the carnage of ethnic feuding, authoritarian insanity, and guerrilla or civil war massacres. In sum, Africa has been the ground of some of the worst and most massive killings.

In my judgment, these killings and ravages, though colossal and horrible, differ from the Holocaust. One must consider, first of all, the moral intent and metaphysical significance of the crime as well as the judged social dispensability or indispensability of the victims. The plantation and mine owners, or the colonial district officers, valued the labor of their slaves, or “native labor conscripts,” for the valorization [*mise en valeur*] of their respective domains. Given their investment in the slaves and the administration’s need for labor, it was beneficial to the owners and the officials to keep the laborers in conditions that allowed them to maintain and increase productivity. Although slavery, apartheid, and colonialism were oppressive, repressive, and unjust, neither one sought to expunge the slaves or the colonized from society. Rather, each in its own manner strove

to promote the reproduction of the labor force for greater economic production. Extermination was not an option in the post-sixteenth-century New World colonies.

In Nazi-occupied territories, on the other hand, the life of the “enemy of the state,” especially of a homosexual, a Jew, or a Gypsy, had no intrinsic value; the person was ostracized, declared worthless, “dispensable.” A crime against a Jew was tolerated, encouraged, and officially sanctioned, just as his or her entire identity was reduced and objectified in the yellow Star of David. In a methodical and systematic manner, the Nazi regime sought to crush European Jewry, the most egregious example in history of gratuitous crime—that is, a crime based solely upon dislike of the victims’ essence. The victims were consigned to the lowest position on society’s scale of values. Colonial domination, though enforcing a doctrine of separate and unequal coexistence between the European minority and the indigenous majority, never reached this level of barbarism.

The Holocaust is not just one example of a conflict or an atrocity, nor is it one of many historical mass murders. Auschwitz, the vivid symbol of evil in the twentieth century, was developed as a the “final solution” to “purify” Nazi-controlled Europe of all the “undesirable racial elements” whose presence had “polluted” it. The politics that brought about the Holocaust of the European Jews was a sui-generis manifestation of a long tradition of exclusion, intolerance, and bigotry that reached its apex under a twentieth-century nationalist, racist, xenophobic, and militaristic ideology. Science and technology made its implementation possible. These facts about the Holocaust are irrefutable and overwhelming. In their self-righteous fervor, the Nazis, with their gas chambers and crematoria, established a demonic system of destruction whose likes had never been seen.¹⁸ In comparison, the notion of a black “Holocaust” perpetrated during the era of slave trade by Africans is utterly objectionable: It is conceptually wrong, politically untenable, and historically untrue.

Self-Knowledge, African Studies, and African Redemption

Like W.E.B. Du Bois in the New World and others in Africa, those people whose forebears experienced slavery but who now are able to overcome the horror of the memory contribute positively to the struggle to redeem African history. They can affirm that God’s mercy extends to the whole of humankind and absolves the living from the sins of their fathers. Only with this conviction, and with this self-knowledge, can they truly be free from slavery and its aftermath. As “born again Africans” they can celebrate the triumph over bondage and join the effort to seek solutions to Africa’s problems. Self-awareness and forbearance are the prerequisites to overcoming the storms and ugliness of the past, and such an achievement is necessary before one can write or interpret history. True self-discovery inspires *la*

grandeur d'esprit, a trait of nobility that engenders understanding and tolerance, compassion and collective endeavor.

This virtue also implies that a certain commitment is demanded of us, a certain intellectual and personal advocacy that brings us closer to what we, as scholars and humans, prize and revere. As Africanists of different backgrounds and ideologies, our commitment to Africa distinguishes us from other scholars. In choosing African studies instead of another academic pursuit, we have become soldiers in what Emmanuel Mounier calls society's great "permanent guerrilla warfare" ([1947]1962:451), whose success rests heavily on the life of the mind.

This is why I hold in great esteem all Africanist scholars, including those with whom I disagree and those who have left the field, because the bricks they have laid for building the "Africa House of Learning" remain invaluable. Our collective effort to keep African studies alive, and our individual achievements in various fields, have resulted both in its firm and resilient presence in this country and its first-rate contribution to scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences. We, the students of the African experience, men and women, blacks and whites, radicals and moderate liberals, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim monotheists, belong to one single extended intellectual community that transcends status, color, and creed and advocates the antiracist humanism sung by Aimé Césaire (1939):

... my heart, preserve me from all hatred
do not make me into that man of hatred for whom I feel only hatred
for entrenched as I am in this unique race
you still know my tyrannical love
you know that is not from hatred of other races
that I demand a digger for this unique race
that what I want
is for universal hunger
for universal thirst

to summon it to generate,
free at last, for its intimate closeness
the succulence of fruit.¹⁹

Although we may and should disagree in our works, our kinship is real. It will remain as strong as our will to toll the bell not only for Africa's contribution to world history and civilization, but also, despite the torment of the past centuries, for her future promise in this era of Afro-pessimism. African studies is an energizing and liberating multidisciplinary field of knowledge.

For the positive-minded black scholars, the challenge is even greater because it involves the fundamental questions of who we are and what Africa means to each one of us. Whatever our individual responses may be, I can say that treasuring and revering Africa are imperative for our collec-

tive well-being. We must defend the image of Africa against all detractors and encourage her to unshackle herself from authoritarian regimes and rise up to her full potential. This new stage in the struggle calls not only for the affirmation of universal principles of human dignity, but also for African redemption and pride. We still live in a time when all black people, even those with wealth and social status, and despite our enormous resources of grace and dignity, are intimately acquainted with prejudice and discrimination in a global world.

By showing me the way to a nonracist humanism and to the possibility of a world free of hatred and bigotry, the study of Africa has fulfilled in me a paramount part of the teaching of my Koranic masters and elders. It has brought about a convergence between Socrates and the Prophet Muhammad, Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali and Blaise Pascal, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and the God-loving and -fearing mystic Cheikh Mouhammad Chérif, whose life and teaching made the name of Kankan spread throughout West Africa under European colonial rule.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Humblot (1921); Arcin (1968); Kouyaté (1968); Cissé and Kamissoko (1988).
2. On the basis of his knowledge of Kankan and other Muslim centers in nineteenth-century Guinea, Edward Blyden argued in his book, *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race* (1887), that Islam might be more favorable to the development of the black people than Christianity. Binger, too, heard a lot about Kankan during his travel from the Niger to the Atlantic Ocean; see his *Du Niger au Golfe de Guinée par le pays de Kong et le Mossi* (1892).

Under colonial rule, the fame of Kankan’s holy men made it a “mekka” for seekers of blessing, including customary rulers and nationalist leaders of different territories and religious affiliations. For example, during the height of the struggle for independence in the Gold Coast (Ghana), Kwame Nkrumah traveled to the city and received the benedictions of Cheikh Mouhammad Chérif and his son al-Hajj Iwa. Nkrumah returned a few months after Ghana’s independence in 1957 to thank the Chérif family. For more on Cheikh Mouhammad Chérif, see Kaba (1997).

“*Kankan nyama*,” a popular Ashanti phrase, denotes this “supra-natural” quality of the city. In 1947, the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier ([1947]1962) made similar observations during his visit.

3. The philosophical discourse that Hegel initiated in the 1830s in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* is also relevant in this context, though it, too, is not a subject I am able to explore at length. Hegel denied the historicity of African societies and people in these words: “Africa is a land of childhood, removed from the light of self-conscious history and wrapped in the dark mantle of night. . . . In Africa, history is in fact out of the question. Life there consists of a succession of contingent happenings and surprises. No aim or state exists whose development can be followed. . . . The characteristic of the Negroes is that their consciousness has not yet reached an awareness of any substantial objectivity—for example, of God or the law—in which the will of man could participate and in which it could become aware of his own being” (174-76). I insist that Hegel was not a racist, although racists can use his ideas. Though wrong, he did not give a rationalized attempt to explain what was called the “natural inferiority of the black race.” He related Africa’s “backwardness” not to such biological deficiencies as the genes or the small size of the frontal lobes and the cortex, but rather to geographical determinism.
4. Kenneth Clark’s thirteen-part BBC series, *Civilization: A Personal View*, was

broadcast in the U.S. on public television in the 1970s and shown widely in classrooms throughout the country.

5. At an impromptu panel that I chaired on November 13, 1999, during the African Studies Association annual meeting in Philadelphia, to discuss the series in response to the interest of the members, Africanists of various ranks and disciplines, including Professors Ade Ajayi of the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka of the University of Kansas, Molefi Kete Asante of Temple University, Judith Byfield of Dartmouth College, Gwen Mikell of George Washington University, and Ali Mazrui of Binghamton University, to name only a few, commented on slavery and the series, each according to his or her own perspective. Instead of the expected audience of three dozen, about four hundred people attended the panel.
6. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Wonders of the African World*, "Slave Kingdoms, Episode 2, Elmina Slave Fortress." Gates's need for apology may be an expression of the climate of public apology for past history that has developed in contemporary America. The problem, however, is that it is difficult to transfer this cultural phenomenon to Africa.
7. See, for example, Wheatley ([1773]1997:171).
8. Among the exceptions to this assertion, mention must be made in the case of the Atlantic trade of the historians of the "School of Dakar" as well as K. O. Dike (1956), Kwame Arhin (1967:65–85), K. Daaku (1970), and A. Akinjogbin (1972). A serious discussion of slavery in Africa itself is needed, given its divisive political implications. For example, Jonas Savimbi, the head of the UNITA rebellion, has made this charge against the ruling MPLA party in Angola.
9. See "Diary-Episode 2, Slave Kingdoms."
10. See also Wolfe (1997:195–231). Recall that Ancient Greece and Rome were slave societies and that Venice, during the Middle Ages, Verdun, and other towns in the Rhine region under Charlemagne, the first Frankish emperor of the West, made and sold eunuchs to the Abbassids of Baghdad. Anglo-Saxon slaves, in addition to those from central Europe (for whom the word *slavic* was coined), were in great demand in Christian Constantinople. Jews and Arabs, Christians and Muslims were enslaved. Until the eighteenth century, criminals and war captives served in Europe as galley slaves on ships. Asians, too, engaged in the enslavement of their neighbors and enemies.
11. A former slave whom Zora Neale Hurston interviewed had much to say on this subject. See Hurston ([1942]1997).
12. Numerous historians of the "School of Dakar" in Senegal, African and non-African alike, have studied this regressive aspect. For example, see Barry (1988) and Klein (1970).
13. The *Chicago Sun-Times* has placed Henry Louis Gates among the "supporters of reparation" (see Fornek 2000.) But *caveat*: Given the reparation paid by German manufacturers to Jewish families whose relatives worked in their plants and then died in the Holocaust, Gates's comments could be construed as requiring reparation from "African enslavers" to victims of enslavement in the New World; he has to be more explicit. As for pan-Africanism, it is pertinent to recall that Gates, in his earlier documentary for public television, *Two Nations of Black America*, rejects the concept of race and color-based unity. In his judgment, black America is divided into two socially different classes, and he formulates some vague responsibility for the elite. Yet, as reported years ago in the *New York Times*, if my recollection is correct, he must have felt his *négritude* after

a French couple, in the lobby of a hotel in Paris, mistook him for the taxi driver they were awaiting.

14. We will refer only to a few works. For earlier written sources pointing to the trade’s European origin, see the navigators’ own accounts or eyewitness record by Europeans who were stationed by their companies on various trading posts. For example, Antoine Edmé (Joseph) Pruneau de Pommegorge (1789) documented the French aspect of the business as well as several revolts in Gorée; I thank Sharilyn Geistfield of Minneapolis for bringing this work to my attention. Father Dieudonné Rinchon cited eighteenth-century accounts by French witnesses, including the governor of Martinique, in his *La traite et l’esclavage des Congolais par les Européens* (1929); Charles de la Roncière’s *Nègres et négriers* (1933) cast little doubt on the Europeans’ preeminent role; Gaston Martin, in his *Histoire de l’esclavage dans les colonies françaises* (1949), quoted Hilliard d’Auberteuil who lived in San Domingo in the 1760s, to document the French involvement. See also W.E.B. Du Bois (1896). Numerous visual references also help to clarify this issue. See for example, the films “A Respectable Trade” (Exxon/Mobil Masterpiece Theatre), “Roots” by Alex Haley, “Tamango” with Dorothy Dandrige, “Amistad” by Steven Spielberg (despite its controversial aspects), and “Son of Africa” (about Olauda Equiano) produced by the BBC in 1996.
15. Here, too, the tradition of W.E.B. Du Bois exemplifies the link between the various streams of pan-Africanism. The founders of this doctrine first viewed it as a concept of identity and unity based on the belief in black people’s sharing common values, despite their sociological differences. Then it became an ideology of unity against colonial oppression. It is predicated on the idea that skin color, the physical features, the history of subjugation, and the soul (however that is defined) unify the peoples of African ancestry. For the proponents of such pan-Africanism, the skin becomes an important symbol or an epidemic, if not genetic, signifier of emotions and other expressions of collective personality. Thus it becomes a “signifier” of genuine values rather than of curse and defect. From this perspective, culture is not solely a product of the environment and a set of traits learned through experience, but also a hereditary genetic marker and disposition that helps to determine the behavioral traits of the members of the group. Hence, unity is felt to be necessary and inescapable. It is felt that the mood and the creative temper of the black people, wherever they may be living, are expected to converge and to coalesce. Although arguable, this conceptual category is not racist, but racialist. It entails no hatred of peoples of different color, nor is it an assertion of superiority.
16. This book, in the genre of vitriolic, scathing, and heinous attack upon Africa, says a lot about the author’s psyche and peculiar Americanism.
17. I am quoting Naomie Hughes, a Howard University student (personal communication, Sept. 27, 2000); I thank her for reminding me of this important fact.
18. Pressac (1993) is an exceptional book on the Holocaust.
19. From “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” (1939) in Eshleman and Smith (1983:70,71).

...mon coeur, préservez-moi de toute haine
ne faites point de moi cet homme de haine
pour qui je n’ai que haine
car pour me cantonner en cette unique race

vous savez pourtant mon amour tyrannique
vous savez que ce n'est point par haine des autres races
que je m'exige bêcheur de cette unique race
que ce que je veux
c'est pour la faim universelle
pour la soif universelle

la sommer libre enfin
de produire de son intimité close
la succulence des fruits.