ACROSS CONTINENTS AND GENERATIONS: FADING FAMILY HISTORY IN YAA GYASI'S *HOMEGOING*[1]

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the transmission and disruption of family history among enslaved individuals and their descendants in Yaa Gyasi's multigenerational novel *Homegoing* (2016). Focusing on Esi's lineage, whose members are transported from their homeland to the United States through the transatlantic slave trade, this study examines how slavery and its legacies not only erase personal and familial history but also complicate the descendants' attempts to reclaim a sense of identity and belonging, leaving many generations disconnected from their ancestral roots. This analysis first investigates the role of communicative memory in preserving family history for enslaved individuals and their descendants, despite the forced separations that impede the transmission of heritage from one generation to the next, thereby severing a crucial link to the family's roots. The second part of the essay addresses how the devastating impact of slavery and its legacies further disrupt the transmission of family history, leaving many characters adrift. The analysis then considers how historical knowledge and symbolic acts, such as journeys to historically significant sites, serve as alternative means for reconnecting with lost heritage, offering some relief from the genealogical alienation imposed by slavery, even when family history remains irretrievable.

Keywords: Homegoing; Yaa Gyasi; family heritage; slavery; African Diaspora; family saga.

INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Women Chronicle (2018), Reena Saini Kallat. Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

[1] I am grateful to Professor Elisa Bordin for her valuable feedback and expertise. I also thank my husband, Giovanni, for his support and meticulous proofreading.

In her wall installation *Woven Chronicle* (2018) (figure 1), Indian artist Reena Saini Kallat employs multicolored electric wires to portray the transnational journeys of countless migrants throughout history. By depicting interwoven migration routes that transcend geographical borders and connect distant and diverse locations, Kallat's artwork highlights the global movements of different cultures, languages, and personal experiences. *Woven Chronicle* visually captures a key aspect of migration: as Chamberlain and Leydesdorff (2004) observe, "migrants, perhaps more than many people, are made by their memories of their birthplace, their homeland, those left behind" (228). Along with their belongings, migrants carry personal histories tied to their lineage, including its origins, cultural roots, and narratives related to its members, a set of recollections that can be encapsulated by the expression 'family history,' with "family" defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a group of persons of common ancestry."[2]

This ancestral background acts as a bridge between migrants' homelands and their host countries, often enduring through its transmission across generations despite the challenges of displacement and diaspora. However, various forces can hinder or entirely sever the transmission of family histories—most notably, the coerced separation of kin, particularly under oppressive systems like slavery. Frederick Douglass ([1855] 2014) poignantly notes that "genealogical trees do not flourish among slaves" (30), highlighting the precariousness of family structures for enslaved individuals in the pre-abolition United States, where their lives were subject to the arbitrary control of their owners. Within such a system, abrupt and permanent separations often occurred (Davis 2006, 201), disrupting the transmission of family history and creating insurmountable gaps in descendants' understanding of their own roots. As a result, today, many descendants of enslaved people are left with no means of tracing their lineage, ultimately facing a genealogical dead end that leads to the loss of family history. Bordin (2014, 4) further emphasizes how the transatlantic and domestic slave trade, the prohibition of legal marriages for slaves, the *partus sequitur ventrem* principle (which tied a child's

[2] Similarly, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "family" as "those descended or claiming descent from a common ancestor; a lineage."

slave status to that of the mother), and the ever-present threat of sexual violence by slave owners compound the challenges of African American genealogical research, often making it difficult to trace clear family histories and, by extension, cultural heritages.[3]

Several novels set against the backdrop of slavery in the United States have explored the transmission of family history for enslaved individuals and their descendants. Notable works include Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* (1976), Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019), and Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023). A particularly compelling example is Yaa Gyasi's debut novel *Homegoing* (2016), a multigenerational family saga in which genealogical dead ends caused by slavery profoundly shape the lives of its characters.

Born in Mampong, Ghana, in 1989, Gyasi moved to Ohio with her family at the age of two, later settling in Alabama. In her twenties, she returned to Ghana and visited Cape Coast Castle, a key site of the transatlantic slave trade that, from the late 17th to the early 19th century, served as a hub where enslaved Africans were imprisoned before being transported across the Atlantic to the Americas. The castle became a major inspiration for *Homegoing*, fueling an exploration of the devastating impact of slavery and large-scale migrations, and particularly how these events irreparably sever family bonds (Goyal 2020, 478). *Homegoing* follows the lives of fourteen characters, all descendants of Maame, an enslaved woman from a village in present-day Ghana.[4] Maame has two daughters, Effia and Esi, who are born under different circumstances in separate villages. Maame escapes captivity, abandoning newborn Effia, whose descendants remain in Ghana and do not experience forced displacement. After fleeing enslavement, Maame

[3] In *Family Tree – A History of Genealogy in America*, historian François Weil (2013) explores the unique challenges African Americans face in tracing their family histories. While it was often possible to trace ancestry back to the 1860s, researching before that period—prior to the abolition of slavery—posed significant difficulties due to the scarcity of records. The advent of the internet provided access to previously unavailable databases, helping "black genealogists bridge a huge gap and *partly* overcome record fragmentation" (200; emphasis added).

[4] Before the formation of modern Ghana, the region was home to various ethnic groups who ruled their respective territories as independent kingdoms. The Asante Empire (referred to as 'Asanteland' in *Homegoing* and throughout this article) was located in what is now central and southern Ghana, while the Fante Confederacy was established along the southern coast. The history of present-day Ghana is complex and deeply shaped by colonialism, and these few lines briefly touch only a portion of such historical landscape.

bears a second child, Esi. Effia and Esi never meet, as their lives take drastically different paths when, at fifteen, Esi is kidnapped, sold into slavery, and taken to a Mississippi plantation; in the United States, Esi's lineage is marked by family separations, which leave her descendants unable to trace their origins and reclaim their heritage due to the lasting and disruptive impact of slavery. Through her narrative, Gyasi explores the enduring legacies of slavery, offering a nuanced portrayal of how family history and heritage can be passed down or lost over generations. As a multigenerational novel, *Homegoing* captures these dynamics across approximately 250 years, weaving through diverse historical, social, and geographical settings. The storyline opens in Ghana, later shifting to the United States, where she examines the challenges of preserving family history not only in the context of plantation slavery but also in the post-abolition era, when the legacies of slavery continue to hinder the transmission of family heritage, complicating descendants' efforts to reclaim their ancestral connections. In this way, *Homegoing* reflects a genuine struggle faced by many descendants of enslaved people—a process that, as Clint Smith (2021) notes, leaves them with a deep sense of loss for the history that cannot be fully uncovered.

In line with her desire to give voice to those denied the opportunity to recount their experiences, Gyasi sheds light on the lives of enslaved people whose personal histories and heritages have often been omitted from formal historical records (Chicago Humanities Festival 2016). By intertwining history and fiction, Gyasi engages in a process of reconstruction that aligns with Saidiya Hartman's (2008) concept of "critical fabulation." This technique addresses gaps in historical records, challenging the limits of the archives by creating imaginative narratives that re-envision the lives of individuals, particularly enslaved people, whose experiences and emotions cannot be fully documented or verified. Hartman (2008) explains that critical fabulation, particularly when recounting slavery and the lives of captives, is not aimed at recovering or redeeming their lives, but rather at constructing as complete a picture of their experiences as possible by merging a critical reading of the archival materials with fictional narrative (11). Through critical fabulation, *Homegoing* provides a more holistic depiction of the past, filling the emotional voids left by official historical records and capturing the

complexities of history and its emotional resonance across generations. In this sense, literature plays a vital role in preserving and transmitting cultural and historical awareness, shaping how readers perceive the past, present, and future while encouraging deeper reflection on history itself (Erll 2011).

Focusing on Esi's descendants—the family branch continuing in the United States as part of the African diaspora—this article investigates how slavery and racial oppression not only erase familial history but also complicate the descendants' attempts to reclaim a sense of identity and belonging, addressing a gap in current scholarship. In fact, while several studies have explored the transmission of trauma related to slavery in *Homegoing*, the analysis of family history and heritage transmission has often been overlooked.[5] However, investigating this aspect offers valuable insights into the profound and lasting effects of slavery and its legacies on contemporary identities, while also highlighting the broader challenges of reclaiming heritage in post-slavery contexts. The essay's first section examines the transmission of family history through communicative memory, revealing how this process enables a connection to family roots and heritage. The second section explores how slavery and its legacies can obliterate family history, leaving individuals disconnected from their heritage, with much of it rendered irretrievable. The last section discusses how, in the absence of family history, broader historical knowledge can help bridge this gap, offering a sense of identity grounded in a shared past.

RESILIENT FAMILY HISTORY: SURVIVING THROUGH DISPLACEMENT

Esi, a young Asante woman captured by Fante slave traders in her village, imprisoned in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, and ultimately shipped to a Mississippi plantation, exemplifies the profound challenges of preserving and transmitting family history

[5] See Laura Dawkins's "'They are not only one; they're two, and three, and four'": Building a Trauma Community in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2023); Marijana Mikić's "Race, Trauma, and the Emotional Legacies of Slavery in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" (2022); Dirk van Rens's "'This Ain't the Way It's S'posed to Be': Negotiating Trauma Through Postmemory and Implication in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*" (2023).

under the institution of slavery.[6] Despite her forced displacement, Esi retains a strong connection to her Asante identity, which is rooted in the language, customs, religion, and culture to which she was exposed from birth. She passes elements of this heritage to her daughter, Ness, through communicative memory—a form of personal and non-institutional memory transmitted through informal, everyday interactions and typically lasting three or four generations (Assmann 2011). For enslaved people, communicative memory often served as the sole means of passing on and preserving family history, as official records rarely documented these details. Annette Gordon-Reed (2021) observes that very few enslaved individuals left documents that reflected their lives, resulting in an imposed anonymity that leaves their thoughts, feelings, and experiences underrepresented in historical records (chap. 1, par. 1). Official accounts of their lives often stemmed from biased records kept by enslavers or court documents in which the enslaved had little to no voice, further marginalizing their perspectives. Consequently, the family histories and heritages of many captives remain irretrievably lost. In *Homegoing*, Gyasi challenges this erasure, reconstructing Esi's family history through critical fabulation.

Esi's ability to retain fragments of her heritage provides Ness with a tenuous link to her roots, conveyed, for example, through Esi's use of her native language, Twi, in their interactions. However, *Homegoing* offers limited insight into Esi's transmission of family history and cultural heritage to Ness, suggesting that Esi may not share much of her past with her daughter. The trauma Esi endures as a result of her forced displacement and enslavement likely affects her relationship with Ness. Esi may have primarily conveyed the pain of her bondage, omitting memories of her pre-slavery life, including those connected to her family and native culture (Mikić 2022, 105). Consequently, Ness

[6] The chapter focusing on Esi opens in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, marking a pivotal turning point in her life: "Esi learned to split her life into Before the Castle and Now. Before she was the daughter of Big Man and his third wife, Maame. Now she was dust. Before the Castle, she was the prettiest girl in the village. Now she was thin air" (Gyasi 2016, 31). Such an experience of dehumanization resonates with Saidiya Hartman's (2007) assertion that "the dungeon was a womb in which the slave was born" (111). However, it is significant to note that Esi's connection to slavery predates her own capture, as her family also possessed a slave. Gyasi thus addresses the active roles that Fantes, Asantes, and other ethnic groups played in the institution of slavery (Goyal 2020, 481).

is familiar only with the traumatic aspects of Esi's existence, beginning with her experience of the Middle Passage. This event becomes an inherited memory for Ness—so intense and distressing that, despite not having directly lived it, it manifests in her dreams, feeling almost like a personal experience and leaving her with a profound, inherited trauma. This phenomenon aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory, defined as the "relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up" (2008, 106). Although Hirsch's studies primarily focus on the collective trauma of the Holocaust, the Middle Passage, as an integral part of the slavery experience, can similarly be understood as a cultural trauma, manifesting in Ness as an inherited memory.

Ness's limited knowledge of her heritage and family history leaves her disconnected from Asante traditions and culture, an estrangement that becomes permanent in a chain of forced partings. This cycle begins with Ness's separation from Esi when she is sold away, and continues as Ness is later separated from her son, Kojo, during an attempted escape from the plantation where they are enslaved. In this critical moment, Ness entrusts Kojo to Aku, an Asante woman who had previously escaped slavery, and who subsequently raises Kojo in freedom. Despite the separation from his mother, Kojo remains connected to his lineage's past and gains a deeper insight into his origins than Ness ever had, thanks to Aku, who shares Esi's cultural background and has endured similar experiences. Through Aku, *Homegoing* illustrates how non-family members can play crucial roles in reconstructing a lost family's history: although not a blood relative, Aku shares Esi's Asante heritage, and her personal memories help fill some of the gaps in Kojo's understanding of his ancestral roots. Aku's accounts of her life in Ghana, her reflections on the Asante culture and her own experience of the Middle Passage and slavery—passed on as communicative memory—grant Kojo a window into his heritage

despite the inaccessibility of his family's past.[7] In addition to the narratives and cultural insights she shares, Aku speaks Twi with Kojo, providing a linguistic link to his family heritage. Kojo's bilingualism, combined with the Asante cultural knowledge he learns from Aku, enables him to maintain a connection to his roots.

However, the transmission of family history and heritage is once again impeded with the passage of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which exposed free Black individuals to the threat of re-enslavement—a fate that Anna, Kojo's pregnant wife, experiences despite her papers confirming her free status. This results in yet another insurmountable family separation, leaving Kojo unaware of Anna's and their unborn child's whereabouts. Such an abrupt shift in Kojo's life reflects the precariousness of freedom for African Americans in the pre-abolition era, instilling a persistent sense of insecurity even among those legally free. Thus, despite his and his family's freedom, the lingering impact of slavery continues to shape Kojo's life, fracturing the transmission of the lineage's heritage passed down by Aku—this time affecting H, the child Anna is carrying when she is captured and enslaved. The structure of *Homegoing* plays a crucial role in intensifying the sense of disconnection. The novel is divided into two parts, with Part 2 opening with H, a character who personifies the unbridgeable gap that slavery can impose between individuals and their family histories.

GENEALOGICAL ISOLATION: LOST AND IRRETRIEVABLE FAMILY HISTORY

The second part of *Homegoing* marks a definitive rupture in the transmission of family history, as the lineage's past—which had previously been passed down as communicative memory despite the obstacles posed by slavery—becomes permanently irretrievable for H and, consequently, his descendants. The only piece of family history he

[7] For example, Aku's belief in the Akan gods mirrors the spirituality Esi would have likely passed on, while Aku's participation in Christian practices showcases a form of religious syncretism. Raboteau (2004) notes that, although in some areas—like Cuba and Brazil—enslaved Africans often preserved traditional religious practices, maintaining these traditions in the United States proved especially challenging, because the natural population increase among the enslaved resulted in many being born in North America, leading to a gradual detachment from African cultural traditions (92). Aku, born in Asanteland and forcibly transported first to the Caribbean and later to the United States, manages to preserve her native religion, eventually incorporating Christianity alongside it.

possesses is the knowledge that his mother, overwhelmed by the trauma of her enslavement, took her life moments before his birth. The awareness of slavery's role in the lineage's history becomes the foundation for a new family narrative, beginning with H himself. H grows up entirely disconnected from his heritage and unaware of his ancestry, embodying the condition of 'genealogical isolation' theorized by Orlando Patterson (2018):

> not only was the slave denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations [...]. He was truly a genealogical isolate. Formally isolated in his social relations with those who lived, he also was culturally isolated from the social heritage of his ancestors. He had a past, to be sure. But a past is not a heritage. Everything has a history, including sticks and stones. Slaves differed from other human beings in that they were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives, to inform their understanding of social reality with the inherited meanings of their natural forebears, or to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory. (5)

H's genealogical isolation cuts him off from any opportunity to inherit communicative memories and postmemories from his ancestors. Born into bondage, inheriting his mother's enslaved status, he remains on a Georgia plantation until the abolition of slavery. However, while emancipation grants him legal freedom, it does not ensure safety in the post-abolition South, where the racial hierarchy and subjugation that had defined slavery are quickly re-established through new systems of oppression. One such practice is convict leasing, where individuals were often arbitrarily imprisoned for minor or fabricated offenses and coerced into labor to pay off heavy fines in order to regain their freedom (Alexander 2010, 38). Convict leasing disproportionately targeted Black people, evolving into a continuation of plantation slavery under a different guise (Price 2015, 81-82). H is drawn into this system when he is falsely accused of a minor crime and, unable to pay the imposed fine, is forced to work for a coal mining company in Alabama, shifting from "once slave, once free, now slave again" (Gyasi 2016, 162).[8] His experience

[8] From Gyasi's interview with *The Guardian*: "Suffering changes and stays the same. In America, the worst was never over, just made new. That was something I was trying to trace in the novel—the trail of trauma reinvented. The history of America has involved figuring out new ways to subjugate black people since the beginning" (Kellaway 2017).

reflects the brutality of the convict leasing system, where conditions could often be as gruesome as those endured under slavery (Smith 2021, 87). H's suffering mirrors the struggles of his ancestors—though family history is lost, the discrimination and oppression he faces during his two enslavements echo their experiences. In this way, the legacy of racial injustice that affected H's ancestors persists well beyond the formal abolition of slavery; therefore, the family history newly initiated with H is marked by loss, disconnection, and struggle. H's daughter, Willie, inherits the trauma of H's experiences through communicative memory, which shapes her understanding of their family history around the painful legacies of slavery, convict leasing, and racial injustice, leaving her with no knowledge of the family history predating H.

When Willie moves from Alabama to Harlem in search of better opportunities, she encounters racial discrimination that crushes her dreams, as she struggles to secure stable housing, a fulfilling career and quality education for her son, Sonny.[9] Her situation worsens when her light-skinned husband, seeking to escape racial marginalization, chooses to pass as white, abandoning both Willie and their infant son. This intentional estrangement starkly contrasts with the previous involuntary family separations in *Homegoing*, highlighting yet another way racial oppression destabilizes African American families. This, along with many other social injustices Sonny experiences as a Black man, leads him to embrace the philosophy of Pan-African activist Marcus Garvey, who advocated for the return of descendants of enslaved Africans to the African continent to escape the racial oppression they faced in the United States, reconnect with cultural roots, and reclaim their heritage.[10] Sonny's deep desire to reconnect with his lost

[9] It must be noted that, in addition to racial discrimination, Willie also faces gender-based marginalization. Her aspiration to sing professionally is thwarted when the owner of a jazz bar tells her that only men are allowed to perform. This reflects the broader oppression of African women and the destruction of opportunities to achieve self-reliance. Their efforts to assert their existence and influence within society are obstructed by a patriarchal system that has historically commodified them, much like during slavery (Jweid 2023, 34).

[10] Early 20th-century Pan-Africanism was deeply shaped by the racial experiences of Black communities across various regions. However, these experiences, along with concepts of race, racism, and Black identity, were influenced by distinct historical and social contexts, making them far from homogeneous. By overlooking these differences and assuming race represented universal meaning for all Black people, Pan-Africanism, despite its noble aims, failed to capture the complexities and diversity of Black experiences, limiting the movement's ability to fully unite people of African descent under a singular ideology, weakening the movement's overall impact (M'Bayo 2004, 20).

heritage—"What Sonny wanted was Africa" (Gyasi 2016, 244)—reflects a need to recover a family history lost to slavery and its enduring legacies. For Sonny, Africa, in its entirety, represents a vision of cultural and spiritual healing, embodying the potential for identity restoration that he and countless other descendants of enslaved people have been denied. Although unaware of his Asante origins—and even though physical proximity to the African continent would not provide him with a detailed understanding of his family history—Sonny perceives Africa as a source of heritage and identity reclamation, a way to bridge the genealogical dead-end many African Americans experience. Inspired by Marcus Garvey, Sonny envisions Africa not only as a place free from racial discrimination but also as a site where he and the broader Black community can find a sense of belonging and resilience.[11]

Sonny's mental and emotional health deteriorates under the weight of racial oppression, economic hardship, and societal neglect; influenced by his girlfriend Amani, he ultimately succumbs to heroin addiction. Indeed, Sonny's condition mirrors what Saidiya Hartman (2007) describes as "the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment" (6). Without access to a support network or adequate healthcare, Sonny struggles to overcome drug dependence. His path to recovery begins when Willie shares her own experiences, revealing the identity of Sonny's father and the extent of the racism and discrimination she endured. This insight into his family history allows Sonny to grasp the profound impact of racism on his and his ancestors' lives, providing him with new self-awareness and the strength to confront his addiction. Reclaiming this piece of his family's history restores Sonny's sense of purpose and hope, empowering him to take a critical step toward healing and breaking free from the destructive cycle in which he was trapped.

[11] Sonny's girlfriend rejects her given name and adopts the name "Amani," which means "harmony" in Swahili. Sonny criticizes Amani for using an African name while not being "into the 'Back to Africa business'," to which Amani responds, "We can't go back to something we ain't never been to in the first place. It ain't ours anymore. This is" (Gyasi 2016, 255). Her words express a profound disillusionment with the idea of reconnecting with her African heritage. Amani's response underscores her acceptance of the inability to fully reclaim their heritage while grappling with the legacy of displacement and systemic oppression.

The profound disconnection from family history that Sonny suffers, grounded in H's genealogical isolation, sparks in him a deep desire for a sense of rootedness. Yet, as illustrated in *Homegoing*'s chapter focusing on Sonny's son Marcus, this longing can only be partially fulfilled through broader windows opening onto the past, such as history, which provides context for the experiences and hardships likely endured by their ancestors. While Sonny, Marcus, and countless other descendants of fractured families cannot trace their exact lineage, they can find meaning in a shared—albeit less personal—historical narrative. This broader historical understanding helps Sonny and Marcus fill the void left by their lost family history, offering a sense of connection to the African American experience.

REDISCOVERING ROOTS: HISTORY AND JOURNEY AS PATHWAYS TO RECONNECTION

Like Sonny, Marcus is profoundly affected by the irretrievable loss of his family history, which drives a "need for studying and knowing his family more intimately" (Gyasi 2016, 290), prompting him to pursue a PhD in sociology. Initially, his research focuses on the convict leasing system—a subject inspired by his great-grandfather H's experiences, preserved in the family through communicative memory. Marcus's project is thus deeply interwoven with his personal family history, eventually evolving into an epistemological quest fueled by both academic and personal stakes. However, as he delves deeper into his investigation, Marcus confronts H's genealogical isolation, recognizing that tracing his lineage beyond H is impossible. This realization brings his research—and his quest for familial roots—to a dead end, forcing him to face the painful reality that much of his family's history will remain inaccessible.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. (2009) explains that African Americans started being included in national censuses in 1870, after the abolition of slavery granted them legal recognition as citizens (chap. 1, par. 12). While this offers descendants of enslaved people some official records to reconstruct their family trees, tracing lineage before emancipation remains challenging, often resulting in unbridgeable genealogical dead ends. Even more complex is tracing the first generations of Africans forcibly transported to

the Americas. As Gates notes, while slave ships kept records of details of the 'human cargo' they carried, these documents rarely included the names or other personal details of the captives. Consequently, "there is no way to know what happened to those people once they stepped onto and off the boat," leaving their personal histories obscured and often lost forever (par. 13). Nevertheless, Gates highlights that enslaved Africans retained one indelible legacy: their DNA. Passed down through generations, this genetic material represents a link to the past, providing a connection to ancestral roots. In this sense, it might be argued that a genetic test could help Marcus reconnect with his ancestry and family history; since the early 2000s, with the rise of genetic ancestry testing companies, personalized DNA testing has been marketed in the United States as a valuable tool for descendants of enslaved Africans seeking to trace their heritage (Abel 2018, 1). Living in this era, Marcus might see DNA testing as an option to gain awareness of his family history. Yet, while genetic testing can reveal general ethnic background, it cannot uncover the personal identities of enslaved individuals whose names and other information were omitted from official archival documents. The extensive displacement, loss of records, and cultural disruption caused by slavery mean that genetic testing can offer only broad insights, such as connection to African regions or ethnic groups, rather than specific personal histories of enslaved ancestors. For Marcus, a genetic test would thus fall short of resolving his genealogical dead end.

Lacking the names or any information of those who preceded H, Marcus has no access to his genealogy.[12] However, studying history offers him a glimpse into the past, providing a partial remedy to the otherwise insurmountable genealogical loss. Reflecting on his research, Marcus realizes that "what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back,

[12]Comparisons between Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* are inevitable, as both novels are family sagas in which the institution of slavery plays a pivotal role in shaping the histories of their lineages. Yet, as Scacchi (2022) emphasizes, a significant difference exists in their depiction of how family history is transmitted. In *Roots*, the most distant descendant reconnects with his origins through knowledge of some ancestors' identities and words in the Mandinka language that have been passed down through the generations without hindrance, forming a family narrative and a lasting legacy. This unbroken transmission in *Roots* stands in stark contrast to the gradual and relentless erasure of the family history in *Homegoing*.

was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget" (Gyasi 2016, 295). Although history cannot restore the intimate details of his lineage, it becomes essential for Marcus, as it allows him to link his personal epistemological quest with the broader experience of African Americans. Through his studies in sociology and social history, Marcus uncovers moments that may have shaped his ancestors' lives, positioning their experiences within a larger narrative of a collective past. Historical knowledge thus compensates for the loss of Marcus's family history, even though his ancestors' names and personal stories remain beyond reach.[13] Yet, history also bears the weight of past traumas, which Marcus internalizes. Gyasi vividly depicts how these "invisible inheritances" manifest as unconscious fears in her characters (Chicago Humanities Festival 2016). Despite his genealogical distance from Esi and the fractured transmission of family history, Marcus inherits a deep, instinctual fear of water. Though not based on any personal experience, his visceral reaction—"There was something about the smell of the ocean that nauseated him. That wet salt stink clung to his nose and made him feel as though he were already drowning. He could feel it thick in his throat, like brine, clinging to that place where his uvula hung so that he couldn't breathe right" (Gyasi 2016, 248)—originates from the historical truths passed down by Sonny, who explained "that black people didn't like water because they were brought over on slave ships. What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men" (285).

Drawing on French historian Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of 'lieux de mémoire'—sites, both natural and artificial, where memory crystallizes around significant historical moments—Anissa J. Wardi (2011) observes that in African American literature, bodies of water frequently serve as 'sites of memory,' where history and memory converge (6). In this context, water symbolizes the Middle Passage, which marked the

[13]In his study of the cultural trauma of slavery and its role in forming African American identity, Ron Eyerman (2004) argues that intellectuals play a crucial part in mediating and shaping the representation of such a trauma. In this sense, Marcus, as a scholar himself, takes on this responsibility, by not only reconstructing history with his academic project, but also interrogating history's omissions and silences. While he cannot recover his ancestors' personal histories, he pieces together a broader historical framework that contextualizes their erasure. By tracing historical patterns and social structures, Marcus illuminates the enduring consequences of slavery and colonialism, recognizing how these forces continue to shape contemporary African American identities.

end of freedom and the beginning of bondage for countless Africans forcibly taken to the American continent. As the embodiment of the Middle Passage, the Atlantic Ocean becomes a quintessential site of memory, evoking in Marcus sensations that mirror the terror Esi experienced as she left the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle ("The scent of ocean water hit her nose. The taste of salt clung to her throat" [Gyasi 2016, 49]). This inherited fear connects Marcus to the collective trauma of the Middle Passage (Asempasah, Aba Sam, and Abelumkemah 2022, 8), establishing a connection to his unknown family past and ancestry.[14]

Salamishah Tillet (2012) highlights that, unlike earlier Back to Africa movements—in which "Africa" represented a potential site for political sovereignty and racial equality for African Americans—the post-civil rights era does not view the continent as a substitute homeland. Instead, Africa is repositioned within the African American consciousness as an extension of the memory of American slavery and a site of shared historical trauma (97). This shift is reflected by Marcus's visit to Cape Coast Castle; though he cannot uncover specific ancestral ties in Ghana, he gains a broader perception of collective heritage. Overwhelmed by the Castle guide's recounting of the conditions endured by the enslaved Africans in the dungeons, Marcus experiences a panic attack and rushes to the beach to escape the suffocating atmosphere. Here, Cape Coast Castle, like the Atlantic Ocean, serves as a site of memory, embodying the collective trauma that has shaped Marcus's and countless other family histories. While he cannot pinpoint his exact lineage, he understands that his roots are inextricably linked to Africa, and the weight of this shared history becomes undeniable.

Not knowing whether his ancestors were held in the dungeons of Cape Coast Castle, Marcus reflects on the broader suffering endured by countless displaced people and their descendants. This contemplation connects him to a larger historical narrative,

[14] Marcus's trip to Ghana is encouraged by Marjorie, a descendant of Effia. Although they cross paths, neither is aware that they share the same ancestral matriarch, Maame. Unlike Marcus, who struggles with the fractured transmission of his family history, Marjorie is well aware of her lineage, as her family did not suffer any forced separations. Through these two characters, Gyasi highlights the contrast between the successful transmission of family heritage in Marjorie's lineage and the lost connections in Marcus's.

enriching his sense of identity through empathy and historical awareness. In this regard, Marcus's experience echoes Saidiya Hartman's journey to Ghana, where she retraces the routes of the Atlantic slave trade, as recounted in her memoir *Lose Your Mother* (2007). Hartman reflects, "I had come to Ghana in search of strangers," (6) emphasizing her realization that recovering her lost family's history is impossible. This sentiment mirrors Marcus's own condition, where his lineage's past remains elusive; in this light, Hartman and Marcus can only bear witness to a collective suffering entwined with their ancestors' past. Ultimately, they both come to understand that, although their family histories may be irretrievable, the shared trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery remain inextricable from their—and many other descendants of enslaved people—identities.

Marcus's reconciliation with such fragmented, yet meaningful heritage is further symbolized by his immersion in the Atlantic Ocean after leaving the castle. In confronting his deep-seated fear of water, Marcus overcomes his panic, realizing that he can control his dread. This moment represents the empowerment he gains by acknowledging how the absence of a connection to his family history has shaped his identity. In *Homegoing*, the element of water, therefore, takes on an ambivalent role, symbolizing both the traumatic event of the Middle Passage and the possibility of healing.[15]

Marcus's journey of self-discovery also mirrors Sonny's inner transformation, as he begins his own process of healing from heroin addiction upon uncovering part of his family's history. Both characters' emotional and psychological recovery are profoundly intertwined with their engagement with ancestral memory. However, this does not necessarily involve reclaiming what has been lost; rather, it requires accepting the impossibility of fully recovering their lineage's history and coming to terms with the fact that

[15] This complex symbolism is deeply explored in African American literature, as Wardi (2011) highlights in her analysis of this recurring trope. A recent and striking example of this duality appears in Jesmyn Ward's *Let Us Descend* (2023), where the protagonist, Annis, experiences water in contrasting ways. As she is marched, chained to other slaves, from the South Carolina rice fields to the New Orleans slave market and eventually to a Louisiana sugarcane plantation, the rivers they are compelled to cross evoke fear and suffering. However, later in the novel, the same element that once symbolized death and terror becomes her means of escape, as Annis floats down the Mississippi River to freedom. Ward masterfully captures this ambivalence, where water serves as both a conduit toward bondage and a path to liberation. This echoes Marcus's own experience of this element, as he transitions from fearing water to mastering his fear and actively engaging with it.

their lives have been shaped by the irretrievable experiences of their ancestors. As descendants of individuals whose identities remain unknown—like many others whose ancestors' histories were erased by slavery and its legacies—Marcus and Sonny are indelibly marked by the suffering, sacrifices, joys, and struggles of their forebears. Although these histories may be inaccessible, their enduring impact continues to shape the present. Confronting this fragmented heritage, along with the broader narrative of loss and survival that comes with it, provides a path to personal healing, offering Marcus and Sonny a deeper sense of self and belonging, despite the irretrievability of their family histories.

While Marcus's ancestral past remains largely inaccessible, lost in the violence of slavery and its legacies, studying history allows him—and more generally, others confronting genealogical dead ends—to gain insights into the societal forces that shaped his ancestors' lives and, by extension, his own. Although specific identities and narratives may never be uncovered, history provides a crucial framework for situating one's lineage within a broader, shared past. Furthermore, as Marcus's journey to Ghana illustrates, travel can also play a vital role in this process—not as a means to recover ancestors' identities, but as a way to establish an emotional and symbolic connection to historically significant sites. In this way, the act of traveling extends historical understanding, offering a pathway for personal reconciliation with an irretrievable past.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has illustrated how exploring the disrupted transmission of family history in novels like *Homegoing* reveals the profound and enduring impacts of slavery on contemporary identities. Gyasi's work highlights the challenges faced by descendants of enslaved individuals in their efforts to reclaim their heritage.[16] While a complete

[16] Annette Gordon-Reed (2021) notes that "One of the many deep tragedies of American slavery is the anonymity that was forced upon the vast majority of the people who lived under the strictures of that system. Denied education—except in the rarest circumstances—and kept outside of legal marriage, property ownership, and the capacity to contract, the overwhelming majority of enslaved people left no documents that could tell us about their lives. Instead, we are left to the self-serving records of the people who enslaved them or to analyzing documents related to court

understanding of family history may often be out of reach due to the fragmentation of genealogical ties, *Homegoing* demonstrates that engaging with historical knowledge and visiting significant sites of memory can foster a deeper awareness of the shared contexts that have shaped both ancestral experiences and contemporary lives, forging emotional bonds that enrich historical understanding.

Historian Ira Berlin (2004) argues that, while history aims to reconstruct a comprehensive and coherent narrative of the past, personal memories and emotions reflect the lived experiences of those who endured it and are, therefore, indisputable (1265). In line with this, Annette Gordon-Reed (2021) emphasizes the importance of examining slavery through the eyes of the enslaved, as this offers a powerful means of understanding how a pivotal aspect of the past continues to shape our present (chap. 1 par. 5). Through critical fabulation, novels like *Homegoing* create narratives for those whose voices have been silenced, offering a more holistic and inclusive representation of a shared history. Together, these perspectives underscore the significance of emotions and personal narratives in studying the past, as they bring subjectivity and authenticity to the fore of our analysis, counterbalancing the detached objectivity of official records. Significantly, in *Homegoing*, Gyasi not only challenges the silence surrounding the lives of enslaved individuals imposed by official historical narratives, but she also sheds light on the history of a region profoundly shaped by colonialism. The novel reveals how, long before Ghana's independence in 1957, European imperialism and its legacy deeply impacted the political, economic, and cultural structures of modern Ghana. From the very outset, Gyasi illustrates the infiltration of colonial forces into Ghanaian society: Effia's family, for instance, actively participates in the transatlantic slave trade, collaborating with British traders by capturing and selling slaves. In return, the British supply firearms, exacerbating inter-tribal warfare and perpetuating the cycle of enslavement.

cases—civil and criminal—over which the enslaved had only minimal, if any, influence. So the thoughts, feelings, and words of the people most directly affected by the myriad day-to-day cruelties of an institution that treated human beings like property are underrepresented in the historical record" (chap. 1, par. 1).

Even after the abolition of the slave trade, colonial influence persisted through religious, linguistic, and economic transformations. *Homegoing* depicts how Christianity was used as a tool of ideological control, as British missionaries established churches and schools in the Asante region, teaching children that "all people in the black continent must give up their heathenism and turn to God. Be thankful that the British are here to show you how to live a good and moral life" (Gyasi 184). Language, too, became a site of colonial erasure, with English gradually establishing itself as the dominant medium of instruction. The novel also illustrates how colonial economic interests reshaped the natural environment: the introduction of cash crops like cocoa altered local agricultural practices to meet global market demands, further embedding Ghana within capitalist systems of exploitation. By depicting these historical entanglements, Gyasi reveals how colonial powers not only shaped Ghana's past and present but also influenced the recording of history, often reinforcing biased representations of events. Yaw, one of Effia's descendants, articulates this distortion when he reflects:

> "Whose story do we believe, then? We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture." (Gyasi 226-27)

Yaw's words underscore the tendency for historical narratives to be shaped by those in power, often marginalizing the voices of the oppressed. His acknowledgment of these silences calls for a conscious effort to recover the histories that colonialism sought to erase, reinforcing Gyasi's commitment to amplifying voices long excluded from official historical accounts. In this sense, *Homegoing* illustrates the deep entanglement of colonialism and slavery. The novel's structure and narration highlight this connection by juxtaposing the experiences of Effia's and Esi's lineages. While Effia's descendants initially benefit from colonial rule and the transatlantic slave trade, Esi's lineage suffers its horrors. Yet, despite not enduring slavery, Effia's lineage is deeply affected by European imperialism, becoming complicit in the slave trade, experiencing family separations, and witnessing the transformation of their culture. Gyasi illustrates how the long-term

consequences of colonialism and racial oppression extend to both the displaced and those who remain in Africa, as imperial rule destabilizes the country's inherent equilibrium. In this way, *Homegoing* reveals how racism and its structures of oppression leave no community untouched, whether through the brutality of slavery or the enduring effects of colonialism, becoming intricately woven into the histories of countless lineages.

Using critical fabulation, Gyasi gives voice to "the lives of the nameless and forgotten" (Hartman 2008, 4), crafting stories untainted by the biases and omissions of official historical records and offering a counter-narrative that resists the subjugations of slavery, racism and colonialism. The characters analyzed in this paper embody emotions rarely documented in official records, yet these fictionalized emotions foster a deeper understanding and empathy in readers. They also illustrate—albeit through fiction—how contemporary identities can suffer from the absence of personal histories and ancestral details, revealing the emotional impact of historical silences on present-day lives.

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