

Chapter IV

A Painful Notion of Time – Conveying Black Temporality in Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*

“History clings to our skin. Somehow we must remember that we remember differently.”

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi

“One must return to the site. Detour is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by return: not a return to the dream of origin[...]but a return to the point of entanglement [*point d’intrication*], from which one was forcefully turned away.”

Édouard Glissant

1 Introduction: Writing Diaspora Across the Middle Passage

In “The Time of Slavery,” an analysis of US-American ‘roots tourism’ in Ghana, Saidiya Hartman notes that “the origin identified is the site of rupture and, ironically, the fort and castles built by Europeans come to approximate home” (2002: 766). Hartman takes issue with the “facile representations of the horrors of the slave trade” that are offered by heritage tourism. She particularly faults the assumed redemption and closure facilitated by the tourist “who acts as a vessel for the ancestor” and questions that curious conflation on behalf of African Americans visiting the west coast of Africa, who act “as if the location of the wound was itself the cure, or as if the weight of dead generations could alone ensure our progress” (2002: 767–768). The metaphor of return becomes for her not only a convenient vehicle for economy-boosting ‘roots tourism,’ but also a fundamentally doomed concept, a mere placeholder for the irreconcilable desire to “mend the irreparable” (759). Hartman does not exempt herself from this impossible desire, neither in this article nor in its extended examination in *Lose Your Mother*. Regarding the inscription of a memorial plaque at Elmina castle, its call for remembering the dead by mending “ruptured lines of descent and filiation,” Hartman argues that “*grief* is a central term in the political vocabulary of the diaspora” (2002: 758). Yet she also concedes that, from a perspective where the “the identification with Africa is always already after the break,” Africa is seen, if at all, then only “through the backward glance or hindsight (763). By asking “to what end,” then, the ghost of slavery is conjured up, Hartman highlights the epistemic interstice that Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016) aims to fill.

Homegoing also mobilizes the tropes of displacement and return as both organizing principles and fundamental problems to diasporic identity. The novel traces eight generations of a family separated through the transatlantic slave

trade and their disparate positions within it, episodically juxtaposing US-American and Ghanaian Black lives. In part, *Homegoing* follows what Ferguson has called “the hegemonic mode of plotting African American racial formations,” from “transatlantic slavery, to Jim Crow, to civil rights, Black Power, and on to integration” (2011: 114). The vital difference to these forms of historical plotting, however, lies in the novel’s bifocal perspective. In that sense, *Homegoing* performs the same Afropolitan gesture as *Americanah*, lateralizing the Black Atlantic by foregrounding Africa. Rather than highlighting diasporic alienation or promising the transcendence of race, it offers a sense of kinship, solidarity, and historical redemption.

The novel’s positive or redemptive tone, however, is not achieved through the usual means, including those criticized by Hartman. The novel does not develop a soothing notion of African continuity or conjure the Gold Coast’s rich history as a simple antidote to the damaging effects of slavery. Neither is it primarily animated by the Afrocentric fantasy of return, culminating in a sense of closure, even though it emphasizes the importance of thinking through the Black Diaspora’s points of entanglement. Through its parallel structure, the novel emphasizes rather than mends the fracturing of kinship, detailing “ruptured lines of descent and filiation” and framing separation and betrayal as the diaspora’s original sin. In its detailing of by and large tragic life stories it also appears to be, in keeping with Hartman’s proposition, mobilized by a certain sense of grief. At the same time, it abounds with momentary or minor redemptive moments that bespeak its overarching diasporic desire to “reckon with the fullness of slavery,” as Gyasi candidly writes in a *New York Times* opinion piece titled “I’m Ghanaian-American. Am I Black?” Growing up as a Ghanaian American, Gyasi writes, she struggled to make sense of her identity in relation to Black Americans. Only after visiting Cape Coast Castle in Ghana – and learning about the conspicuous lacuna of slavery in Ghana’s national memory – did she develop a way to broach the subject:

I knew I wanted to write about everything I was feeling, to write about diaspora and reckon with the fullness of slavery, not just as it was centuries ago, but what it has left us, Ghanaians and Americans alike, today. I started writing with a vague but important question that I put at the top of my blank screen: What does it mean to be black in America? (Gyasi 2016b: para. 15)

Answering Hartman’s question in the moment of Afropolitanism, the novel conjures the ghost of slavery in order to (re-)install an active African role in the making of the Black Diaspora, one that reckons with the guilt of betrayal without being paralyzed by it. As such, the novel not only inquires into Black American identity, plotted through the disastrous route of the Middle Passage, but it strives

to create a sense of diasporic Black identity that re-inscribes the mutual historical imbrications between West African and American Black subjects. Gyasi's investigation of Black identity seems to resonate with Hall's definition of diasporic identifications as "the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (1994: 394). It also resonates with Clifford's definition of diasporic traditions as "a network of partially connected histories, a persistently displaced and reinvented time/space of crossings" (1994: 321). Accordingly, the questions motivating this historical novel are not exhausted by the complex node of 'how to write about slavery?' but also include 'how to write the diaspora,' meaning: 'how to write a historical novel about a transnational and ever evolving structure?'

In the context of this book, the novel is not only the latest, but also the most obvious intervention into the bleak assessment of Afropolitanism's inability to reckon "with the agency of Africans in the dispersion of diaspora: the betrayal at the heart of the symbol 'Black'" (Balakrishnan 2018: 581). Rather than indicating the repudiation of racial solidarity that Chude-Sokei identifies with newly Black American fictions, the novel is written from a position that aims to bridge the abyss of the transatlantic slave trade *and* adequately represent the rippling effect of this traumatic process. It signals an engagement with these themes not merely as truce but as a sign of active solidarity. As such, *Homegoing* is firmly grounded within contemporary diasporic discourses. In its emphasis on a particular 'feeling' toward history, it offers a very interesting riff on what Best has called an "axiom" of contemporary writing about slavery, fictional and historiographical. In *Homegoing*, too, the past is not really past but continues to haunt future generations by way of a family curse. As an investigation into 21st-century US-American Blackness, Gyasi's novel appears to trade in that very same melancholic historicism that Best argues against, Hartman employs, and Morrison has either perfected or abandoned (depending on who you ask).

On the other hand, the novel clearly defies at least some of the representational conventions that Afro-pessimist-leaning scholars like Markus Nehl declare the litmus test of writing about slavery. For Nehl, proper accounts of slavery refuse "to offer a reconciliatory interpretation of the past" (2016: 194) and instead help to "deconstruct the naïve idea of history as progress" (2016: 12). Narratives that present some form of positive closure or merely emphasize the "liberating power of the act of narration," he posits, ultimately run "the risk of playing down and trivializing the true implications and the horrors of American chattel slavery" (2016: 36). Yet *Homegoing*'s diasporic desire operates on a different level. Rather than merely revolving around the question of trivializing or foregrounding the devastating effects of slavery, the novel shifts the singular burden of 'appropriately' representing this history and focuses instead on the "liberating

power” of narrating diaspora, of finding new stories and pushing toward new ways of writing in the African Atlantic.

In doing so, the novel finds itself in the forcefield of various discourses, skillfully engaging the contents of various forms. As a sprawling family saga that projects a sense of hope and solidarity with and through the destruction of traditional kinship ties, *Homegoing* negotiates the narrative strategies of the Afro-pessimist neo-slave narrative, as well as the conventions of the ‘classical’ historical novel à la Lukács. Signaling also the self-referentiality of postmodern metafiction or the postcolonial historical novel, *Homegoing* also foregrounds the limits of this genre, particularly the ways in which the historical novel relates to the nationalist, totalizing, and teleological demands intrinsic to the project of history and the nation state. In order to provide the history of an imagined community that is not only transnational, but also outside or adjacent to linear progressive temporalities, the novel relies less on the established narrative conventions of historical fiction than on the mediation of temporality. Consequently, *Homegoing* is a historical novel that aims to provide not merely the feeling for a time, but the feeling for a feeling of time. This specific sense of Black temporality is primarily conveyed through a distinctly discontinuous structure imparting a distinctly continuous reading experience. On that view, the novel’s sense of linear historical progression – provided by the through-line of a literal genealogy – is compromised by what Édouard Glissant calls a “painful notion of time and its full projection into the future” (1996: 64).

Each of the novel’s fourteen chapters opens and ends *in medias res* and somewhat impressionistically indicates its respective historical canvas. Hence, in its progression through over two centuries, the general effect is one of fragmentation and disjuncture. Moreover, the absence of central and recurring characters not only limits its potential for readerly empathy but actually evokes a sense of what Dominick LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, has described as “empathic unsettlement” (2001: 41). Rather than fueling a sense of intimacy with a cast of familiarized characters, the chapters provide only that level of identification that is responsive to the traumatic experiences of others, without entirely appropriating their experience for the sake of narrative continuity. Regarding the novel’s specifically traumatic historical subject matter, this kind of unsettlement then “poses a barrier to closure”; it doesn’t reconcile the past as distinct and distant and “places in jeopardy harmonizing or spiritually uplifting accounts of extreme events from which we attempt to derive reassurance” (LaCapra 2011: 41–42).

The narrative nevertheless operates with elements of continuity. The urgency and temporal suspension derived from the novel’s method of fragmentation accentuates this carefully crafted continuity as the constant interplay of stasis and

event. Every chapter is set apart from the preceding one by a radical jump in either time or place. At the same time, the sense of historical and narrative progression is not entirely suspended. Time, on the contrary, is relentlessly moving forward. As each character and period recedes, nothing lasts while everything still remains the same. *Homegoing's* unusual structure is certainly noteworthy if one contextualizes it as one of the widely popular fictions emerging in the moment of Afropolitanism. As scholar John Murillo III. notes, both critics and lay audiences have perceived the lack of constant narrative threads and characters as the novel's major weakness, describing its effect as "distancing" (2017: para.3). However, he claims, these readings are unable to "grasp the essential genius of what Gyasi has accomplished here" (para. 4). For Murillo, it is precisely her "suturing of the dispersed fragments of Black life scattered across time and space into the single, if necessarily disjointed, 'whole' of *Homegoing* that makes this work so profound" (ibid.). Indeed, if one interprets the novel as an affective meditation on Blackness and temporality, its formal constraints align with what it wants to accomplish: a dizzying sense of progression counteracted by a tragic sense of temporality, recursiveness, and gridlock.

In this sense, the novel's retrospective long view of history resembles that of Benjamin's angel of history: history as a single catastrophe that keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage. While the novel's historical gaze is turned toward the past and its amassing of tragedy, the narrative cannot stay with the dead because the pronounced prolepsis of its episodic structure hurls it forward, or backward, in the simulation of progress that we have come to know as Black history. At the same time, and in keeping with Benjamin, the novel insists on redemptive openings, enabled by this very same tragic sense of history. Only by recognizing the way in which an oppressive history implicates all, in this case a reckoning with the fullness of slavery, can the desire to "blast open the continuum of history" transmute into agency (Benjamin 2003: 396).

The next section of this chapter contextualizes the novel within its particular moment, asking how the historical novel appears particularly pertinent to the 21st-century Black Diaspora. The subsequent section will examine the multifaceted "Problem of History," from notions of literariness and 19th-century imperialist plotting illustrated by 20th-century theorists like Hayden White and Georg Lukács, to the representation of traumatic limit events as problematized by Dominick LaCapra and Saidiya Hartman. I then explore how the novel foregrounds its own epistemological status in relation to diasporic history, followed by a more detailed discussion of how diasporic notions of temporality are laid out. The last section will try to integrate the problems of history and disjunctive temporality in a discussion of the novel's transmission of agency and redemption.

2 Historical Fiction Is “Having a Moment”

Listing Yaa Gyasi, Yvonne Owoor, Colson Whitehead, Chimamanda Adichie, and Peter Kimani as examples, historian Dan Magaziner notes in an article on *Africa Is a Country* that historical fiction “has been having a bit of a moment recently, especially among authors from the African continent and its diaspora” (2017: para. 1). Confirming this, Lizzy Attree asks in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: “Are we on the cusp of a new age of African literature? If so, the key to new novels from African writers seems to be the fresh use of historical fiction to articulate a new future” (2018: para. 1–2).

Homegoing indeed seems to be part of a distinct literary trend, and not only in Afro-diasporic literatures. *The Guardian*, for example, points to the success of Hilary Mantel as proof that the historical novel has finally lost its genre stigma, noting that both escapism and contemporary crises may account for its huge appeal (2017: para. 1–4). But, of course, historical fiction has never really gone out of fashion. What these cultural commentators are observing is rather the rise – and simultaneous decline – of different forms of historical fiction. Academically, there seems to be a consensus about the fact that certain forms of historical fiction have lost their purchase, while other styles have taken over. Linda Hutcheon, who in the late 1980s famously developed the notion of ‘historiographic metafiction’ in order to classify a distinct postmodernist way of writing, has since labeled postmodernism, and with it the self-reflexive historical novel, “a thing of the past” (2002: 2). After the heydays of historiographic metafiction, as Amy Elias observes, came “a distinctive move toward [...] what is now a realist historiographical perspective” (2005: 163).

The editors of *The Return of the Historical Novel? Thinking about Fiction and History after Historiographic Metafiction* likewise propose a departure from Georg Lukács’s and Linda Hutcheon’s theoretical paradigms, asserting that we have entered “a new phase” in discussing historical fiction (2017: 14). This new phase, the editors proclaim, is “becoming more inclusive, more tolerant and, above all, more diverse” (ibid.). On the cover, the editors affirm their conviction that a certain “desire for a literary experience of historical otherness has recently increased in urgency.” That said, the volume manages to include only a single discussion of a postcolonial or non-white author (M.J. Vassanji).

The “urgency” that the editors of *The Return of the Historical Novel?* make out in the current moment is certainly germane to postcolonial and Afro-diasporic historical fictions, which have long since expressed the importance of understanding “temporal difference as a fundamental category of cultural experience” (ibid. 14). If one follows the established genealogy of the African novel, already the most canonical instance illustrates this. Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is funda-

mentally invested in exposing the epistemic violence of the historical archive by imagining what appears to have been erased by a work like *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* – the fictional historiographic account that concludes the novel, written by the figure of the District Commissioner and threatening to reduce Okonkwo’s tragic suicide to “a reasonable paragraph, at any rate,” if not a mere footnote in history (*Things Fall Apart* 183). The historicist tropes adopted by Achebe are those of unearthing and countering, his fictional alternative to the colonial archive conveying what Richard Begam terms “adversarial history” (1997: 397).⁷⁶ It expresses the kind of metahistorical stance that is embodied in a proverb used by Achebe in a 1994 interview with the *Paris Review* and also taken up by Zimbabwean author J. Nozipo Maraire in her epistolary novel *Zenzele* (1996): “Until the lion learns to write, tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter” (78). *Zenzele*, written as a fictionalized letter from a Zimbabwean mother to her daughter who is studying at Harvard, also employs the metahistorical frame of intergenerational exchange, striking a tone that is at once affectionate and advisory:

So it is with us, too. History is simply the events as seen by a particular group, usually the ones with the mightiest pens and the most indelible ink. [...] Do not be fooled by the white-washed apparent objectivity of the ivory tower. Until the ivory turns to a rainbow with all countries represented, you would do well to be suspicious of the so-called “facts.” (78)

This adversarial view of history, suspicious as it is of ‘official’ historical records and dedicated to unearthing alternative histories, is still a powerfully productive metahistoricist position that hugely impacts on African or postcolonial literatures. In the Afropolitan moment of the 21st century, this backward glance appears to chafe at the simultaneous emphasis on contemporaneity and futurity. Pushing against post-independence Afropessimism and the politicization of African literature, some commentators in the African literary community have urged writers to abandon “Black and African history, with its tragedies, injustices

⁷⁶ Even though the “unearthed” past of *Things Fall Apart* cannot be read as the conjuring of an authentic, pre-colonial idyll, the long literary shadow cast by this canonical novel may have also led to some reservation concerning the subject matter, resulting instead in a push towards capturing the ordinary complexities of African (urban) contemporaneity. In a portrait of Adichie in *The New Yorker*, her Nigerian writing workshops are described as such: “She encouraged them to write ordinary stories. [...]. Others were still writing ‘loincloth fiction’: stories of a noble man caught between the white devils and tradition. ‘The Nigerian style has always been to bloviate, to put some isms,’ Imasuen says. [...] People still think that to tell an important story they must engage colonialism, or the dictatorship of the nineties” (MacFarquhar 2018: para. 29).

and wars,” in favor of lighter, less monothematic and supposedly more “literary” topics (Okri 2014: para. 6).⁷⁷

In the US, a very similar discourse answered the alleged post-racial turn and its demands on all forms of Black cultural expression, including literature. A particularly pertinent example of this is Charles Johnson’s “The End of the Black American Narrative” from 2008. Bluntly subtitled with the assertion that “a new century calls for new stories grounded in the present, leaving behind the painful history of slavery and its consequences,” the article wields Obama-infused optimism and the demographic diversity amongst Black Americans not only as proof of progress but as an obligation to abandon the “traditional black narrative of victimization” (2008: 36). Johnson advocates that 21st-century Black narratives should be “based not on the past but on the dangerous, exciting, and unexplored present” (ibid. 42).

As evidenced by the unbroken currency of historical fiction in post-colonial, African and Black American literature, and notably also in the writing of newly Black Americans like Gyasi, the 21st century certainly rejects Johnson’s counsel. If anything, and in the US-American context especially, metahistorical positionalities have become an even more crucial touchstone for Black cultural production. Most of these debates have also revealed themselves as being only superficially about abandoning the past in favor of the contemporary, but actually about the ways that past and present relate – particularly regarding the significance of past atrocities. Following Kenneth Warren’s polemic that the “retrospective” view of contemporary Black American fiction bespeaks its uselessness as literary category, as well as Stephen Best’s critique of melancholic historicism, the question is often not only whether but more importantly what *kind* of historicism adequately captures ‘the Black experience.’

In the context of African literature, the current moment is perhaps best characterized by what Lizzy Attree describes as a “fresh use” of historical fiction. This new approach does not entirely abandon Achebe’s subject matter but nevertheless differs from this ur-moment of African or postcolonial fiction. Like Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, contemporary novels like Jennifer Makumbi’s *Kintu*, Novuyo Tshuma’s *House of Stone*, or Namwali Serpell’s *The Old Drift* do not shy away from depicting a pre-colonial past or detailing the contact zone between colonizer and colonized. Yet these novels trace these historical trajectories into the (near) present, strongly indicating the presence of the past in the present. Most importantly, however, they are foregrounding historical continuities and

77 For a similar gist, see Helon Habila’s review of Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names* (Habila 2013).

counter suppressive historiographies and also reflect on the discursive impact and effects of adversarial, postcolonial, or melancholic historicisms. Both *Kintu* and *Homegoing* employ the manifest destiny of a curse that continues to traumatize and wreak havoc on the members of a family line. In *The Old Drift*, a protean swarm of mosquitos grants a long historical view on the Zambesi basin. One of its human characters thinks of history as “the annals of the bully on the playground” (98), while the narrator of *House of Stone* distinguishes between history and a more personal, “murky hi-story” (7). *House of Stone*’s author Tshuma also advocates a creative and emotional engagement with colonial history rather than a self-legitimizing or purely falsifying approach. Problematising the project of excavation itself, the Zimbabwean author warns that you cannot excavate a true history – “because every history has an agenda” (Tshuma 2019). Self-knowing and ethically engaged, these novels open up a space to explore different historicist epistemologies beyond the binary of authentic truthfulness or contingent play. In *Homegoing*, the question of how the past bears on the present often extends from the way it makes itself known – through archival traces, notions of spectrality, looping, or echoing – to the very condition of it being written.

3 The Problem of History: Historiography’s Imperial Legacies

Two-thirds into Gyasi’s debut novel, a middle-aged history teacher named Yaw finds himself questioned by a class of schoolboys. The young boys, hailing from rural parts of what is still called the Gold Coast, have already heard of this teacher and his heavily scarred face. The teacher, who is working on a manuscript titled *Let the Africans Own Africa* and eagerly awaits his country’s independence, turns their natural curiosity into a teachable moment. Under the header “History is Storytelling,” the teacher urges his students to present their hearsay version of how he got his scar, only to conclude:

This is the problem of history. We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others. Those who were there in the olden days, they told stories to the children. And so on, and so on. But now we come upon the problem of conflicting stories. [...] 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 choice 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. (226–227)

The chapter on Yaw, and in particular this passage on the narrative constructiveness of history, is crucial for understanding the novel's metahistorical stance toward the diaspora. Yaw's chapter plays on the various notions of historicity exercised in the novel, particularly the way that fiction and historiography intersect in the historical novel. The chapter reads patently metafictional, but it is also very much emplotted within the particular temporal structure of the novel, as well as its redemptive arc. It is noteworthy that, in his classroom, Yaw uses personal anecdote to arrive at a metahistorical commentary on historiography, while at the same struggling to write a proto-national history of a people. In the beginning, we are told how he is close to scrapping his manuscript, an obvious reference to the Pan-Africanist phrase *Africa for Africans*, coined by Martin Robison Delany.⁷⁸ Unable to catalyze what he identifies and admires as the "academic rage" of the contemporaneous US-American Civil Rights Movement, Yaw's book project stalls as he feels unable to muster anything but "a long-winded whine" (228). When Yaw, in conversation with his politically active friend, notes how he believes that the revolution "start[s] with ourselves" (223), the sentiment anticipates another canonical text, *Decolonising the Mind* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986). It is also, quite literally, in keeping with the novel's theme of personal family history, as Yaw is able to write his book only once he has confronted his mother and revisited the "evil" in his own home (241). In a way, Yaw exemplifies a metahistoricist position in which various forms of representing history are vying for attention. Yaw references the orality of "the olden days" as something not only unmistakably lost, but also reliant on a romanticized notion of unified meaning or mimetic imminence. As soon as we "come upon the problem of conflicting stories," the discursive influence of power reveals itself. Yet even if one remains attentive to the stories suppressed by "the one who has the power," this still creates only a "clearer" and never a perfect picture. Apart from conceding to these limitations on historiography, Yaw is also unable to write a revolutionary counterhistory of the Gold Coast. He is struggling with simply adopting the content of a form that not only imposes a nationalist narrative but also thrives on a notion of history in which Africa has no place.

Both the historical novel and historiography itself pose a particular set of problems to non-Western writers. Many of Yaw's concerns can be traced to 19th-century European thought, as well as important 20th-century discussions of this period that, unwittingly, reproduce the epistemological lacunae of that

⁷⁸ See Delany 1861. The phrase was further popularized by other Black Nationalists like Edward Blyden and Marcus Garvey.

Imperial age even as they attempt to show the fictitiousness of historiography or the historical novel's alignment with ordinary agents of history. One example of the latter is the fusing of personal with

national history, signposting "The Classical Form of the Historical Novel" as laid out by Georg Lukács in the eponymous chapter from *The Historical Novel* (1962). Positively gushing over the novels of Sir Walter Scott, particularly his *Waverly* from 1814, Lukács writes: "Scott's greatness lies in his capacity to give human embodiment to historical-social types. The typically human terms in which great historical trends become tangible" (1969: 34). For Lukács, the historical novel's verisimilitude lies not in thick or picturesque description, but in the complex way that the underlying current of historical progress – the "historical factor" – is folded back into personal, human lives (ibid. 42). In Scott's historical novels, it is indeed the realm of the personal and the familial where the political drama of history is played out. Here, "certain crises in the personal destinies of a number of human beings coincide and interweave within the determining context of an historical crisis," and thus "the split of the nation into warring parties always runs through the centre of the closest human relationships" (ibid.). In many ways, *Homegoing* also expounds the kind of "dramatic concentration of the epic framework" that characterizes the historical novel for Lukács, where the central crisis "is never a matter of one single catastrophe, but of a chain of catastrophes," bound together by people "connected and involved with one another" (ibid.).

However, the major difference between *Homegoing* and *Waverly* lies in the historical and ideological contexts of the 19th and 21st centuries, respectively, as well as the different genres and literary chronotopes from which they evolve. Lukács notes how, prior to Scott's figure of Waverly, there had never been a "mediocre, prosaic hero at the central figure" (1996: 34) and that Scott thus departs from the "Romantic hero-worshippers" who explain "the age from the position of the great representatives" (40). As the founding text on Scottish Highland culture, *Waverly* is arguably romantic in terms of its mythologized subject matter. Yet what distinguishes this "historical romance," as Amy Elias notes, is that it ultimately shows how "the mythicized Highland cultures were doomed in the face of an epistemic shift to rationalist modernity" (2005: 164). Lukács also sees the inevitability of historical progress, the way that "historical necessity asserts itself" as the defining feature of Scott's classical historical novel (1969: 64). For Lukács, as an historical materialist, this is clearly a matter of "class timbre," but the notion that the representation of historical progress is brought into productive tension with literary realism is not limited to one ideology of history alone (50). With a quote by the 19th-century German poet Heinrich Heine, Lukács draws attention to the cultural context of Scott's historical novels and points to-

ward their astonishing contemporaneous success: “Strange whim of the people! They demand their history from the hand of the poet and not from the hand of the historian” (Lukács 1969: 61).

This “strange whim,” as well as the intricate link between historiographic and fictional writing, has more or less been at the center of Hayden White’s entire oeuvre. His most well known publication *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973) and his later article “The Discourse of History” (1979) trace this link to the 19th century, where the rise of the realist novel coincides with the institutionalization of history as a discipline. For White, 19th-century historiography is fundamentally troubled by literary realism. In becoming more “realistic,” literature “fatally undermined” the claims of historians “to deal in a discourse that was realistic, transparent, concrete, and illuminative of events by virtue of the stories it told about them” (2010: 192). Because narrative fiction was not only problematizing of language itself, but also traded in the same “rhetorical mode that conventional historiography relied on to convey authority,” historiographers engaged in a more and more frantic effort to distance itself from it – a tendency White traces through to the positivist debates of the 1950s and onwards (ibid. 190). Yet it is particularly against the backdrop of the 19th century that the reciprocal relation between historiography and fiction becomes most legible.

Only a few years after the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871, Friedrich Nietzsche diagnosed that the young nation “was suffering from the consuming fever of history” (1997: 60). Scholars have extensively discussed why historiography would matter in an age that was also the intellectual and political cradle of nationalism, to the point where the mention alone might even seem superfluous. However, the fact that it is also the cradle of imperial colonialism is more easily overlooked. While both Lukács and White presuppose the central role of nationalism in their analyses, neither of them accounts for its imperializing tendencies. For Lukács, it is no surprise that the appeal to national independence and national character is “necessarily connected with a re-awakening of national history” (1969: 23), and he links this to the rippling effect of the French Revolution – an event that “for the first time made history a *mass experience*” (ibid. 20). What he lauds in Scott’s novels is indeed the way that Hegel’s “national character” is embodied by social types realizing themselves as active agents of historical change (36).

Yet where Lukács limits this historical consciousness to “a European scale” (1969: 20), he overlooks the significance of the Haitian revolution, the paradoxical relation between the Enlightenment concepts of freedom and bondage, and the particular manner that Hegel’s notion of Universal History is predicated on these lived contradictions. Hayden White, on the other hand, while noting the

Eurocentric implications behind the burgeoning concept of “proper history,” supplements his analyses with universalisms of another kind. Identifying the 19th century as a time of political and epistemic crisis, White notes how the historiography of this period is affected not only by the unresolved “truth claims” of realist writing, but also by the all-encompassing teleological arc provided by “the philosophy of history.” White cites Hegel’s eponymous lectures merely as an example of philosophy’s push toward subjecting history to some form of master narrative. It is interesting that White’s observations are finely attuned to what he describes as a “profound cultural anxiety” expressed by the 19th-century historians, a “cultural malaise” arising from the “social pressures” of industrialization that takes the form of an almost pathological obsession with history (2010: 188). For White, this obsession exceeds what he naturalizes as the fundamental desire to develop “[c]onsciousness of the past and awareness of a possible future” in order to “distinguish human beings from their animal prototypes” (ibid.). He identifies the denial of historical discourse’s “literariness” as an enduring symptom of this malaise, while remaining conspicuously silent about the racializing discourse not merely supplementing but structuring and mobilizing a founding liberal text like Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. While almost parenthetically asserting humanity’s universal desire to distinguish the human from the non-human, White’s silence is certainly telling, if not even equally symptomatic. From a postcolonial perspective that admittedly supersedes these writers, the oversights in White’s metahistorical and Lukács historical materialist accounts of the 19th century simply reproduce the institutionalized silence, or disavowal, as Sybille Fischer would argue, around the violent and contradictory condition of Western liberalism. A postcolonial reading would first historicize the category of the human and the universal in order to recognize their epistemic and illocutionary ramifications. As Lisa Lowe asserts in *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, the “modern distinction between definitions of the human and those to whom such definitions do not extend is the condition of possibility for Western liberalism” (2015: 3).

Hegel’s lectures, notoriously prefaced with the advice to “give up” the “category of Universality” when thinking about the “African character” (2011: 110), have since been subjected to much critical scholarship, yet these repercussions have played out in more or less isolated disciplines, leaving the *grand récits* of philosophy and history mostly intact. Scholars such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Sibylle Fisher, Susan Buck-Morss, and others have noted how particularly the Haitian Revolution has been systematically overlooked in historical and philosophical scholarship, pointing toward an institutionalized silence around the

flagrant incongruity between the discourse of freedom and the utter thingification of slavery.⁷⁹

In some cases, as in Hayden White's constructivist view of history, certain historiographic absences are indeed acknowledged and accredited to the limited viewpoint of Eurocentrism. Yet this justification alone fails to consider the vital role these "absent causes" might have played in the construction of (capital H) History itself. There is a mutually constitutive tension between Hegel's notion of Africa having no history and his assertion that the Spirit of History unfolds within the laws of the European nation state. The paradox that a thinker like Hegel could develop the concept of mutual recognition in the master-slave dialectic, and at the same time dismiss "the Negro" as being "capable of no development or culture" and thus fit for enslavement, fundamentally destabilizes the image Western thought holds of itself (2011: 98). This "glaring discrepancy between thought and practice" marked the large-scale transformation of global capitalism, ushering in the social context of the 19th century (Buck-Morss 2009: 22). If, as C.L.R. James observed in *The Black Jacobins*, the wealth generated by the slave societies of the Americas specifically fattened the French bourgeoisie – and with it the discourse of the 'rights of man' – then the burgeoning nation states and expanding empires of the 19th century relied even more heavily on the revenue of plunder and primitive accumulation. A certain academic unwillingness or agnological inhibition to reckon with what Buck-Morss calls simply "a certain constellation of facts," can thus be read as the avoidance of "an awkward truth" that threatens "not only the venerable narratives, but also the entrenched academic disciplines that (re)produce them" (Buck-Morss 2009: 22–23).

Yet not only the example of James's eighty-year-old publication shows that these historical entanglements have long since been exposed and critiqued. Particularly Hegel's remarks on Africa and "the Negro" have been impossible to overlook, contrary to dominant Hegel scholarship, but instead have spawned a long and often productive tradition of intellectual engagement. Indeed, many of the most influential Black intellectual writers of the 20th century explicitly or implicitly take on Hegelian concepts, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, and Aimé Césaire.⁸⁰ Considering the sheer ubiquity of Hegel's historicist theo-

⁷⁹ Trouillot 1995; Fischer 2004; Buck-Morss 2009.

⁸⁰ Du Bois, for example, referred to himself as a world historical man and extensively references Hegel's "national character" in "Conservation of the Races." Gilroy notes the following about Du Bois's Hegelianism: "Du Bois was clearly more comfortable with Hegel's view of the history of the world as 'none other than the progress of the consciousness of Freedom' than with his Eurocentrism and identification of history's theatre as 'the temperate zone,' let alone his collapsing of historical progress into the practical achievements of the Prussian state machine. It is sig-

ries, their quick absorption first into 19th-century dominant German, European, and finally US-American schools of thought, it might be fair to say that whenever a 20th-century person of African descent addressed issues of history, progress, or even freedom, the spirit of Hegel haunted their endeavors.

One reason for the tenacity of these traces was the fact that Hegel's contribution to History, what Glissant calls "a highly functional fantasy of the West," was so fundamentally tied up with the idea of the nation (*Caribbean Discourse* 64). In "The Subject in the Plot," Herman Bennett identifies the conflation of historical progress and the nation state as a particularly pervasive 19th-century plot, in which the 20th-century Black subject struggled to insert itself – often through ill-directed Black Nationalist efforts (2000: 101–124). Indeed, as Michelle M. Wright notes, the major pitfall of 20th-century Black intellectual counterdiscourses was the fact that they functioned just like other "nationalist narratives in the West" (2004: 12). Constructing a world "in which men possess the power to give birth (to other men of course!)," Black Nationalist narratives project a "linear progression of time and space that starts and stops when they want" (*ibid.*).⁸¹

Homegoing nonetheless avoids the masculinist rhetoric of (Black) national liberation, especially in its detailing of a nascent independent Ghana. Despite projecting gender balance in terms of characters, its overall emphasis on female agency manifests not only in its matrilineal structure. Read thus, Yaw's inability to produce a Black Nationalist narrative is even more significant, as are the gendered terms in which this inability is represented. Unable to channel what he identifies as an "academic rage," he is only able to produce, in his ears, "a long-winded whine" (228). Generally, it is striking how the popular Pan-African plot around Nkrumah and Ghanaian independence is hinted at yet remains

nificant that Du Bois's autobiographies are candid about the extent to which his admiration for German nationalism and the achievements of the Prussian state in particular preceded his visit to Germany. It might be worth speculating whether these dreams of order appealed to him precisely because he was an American. Certainly, the conception of freedom that guided him was deeply influenced by this body of work. Blacks are continually invited to discover the forms of freedom consequent upon yielding to the organic power of a resolute racial collectivity assured of the historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) of its political and philosophical aspirations" (Gilroy 2002: 135).

81 However, the influence of Hegelian historicism did not implicate male philosophers only. Writing about the work of African American novelist Pauline Hopkins, William Modellmog asserts: "Hegel's historiography constituted a force against which much of Hopkins's work – and that of other Black historians and novelists – struggled. Celebrating the nineteenth-century European nation-state, Hegel's philosophy affirmed a political and cultural model of nationhood to which most African 'nations' did not conform and in which African Americans were denied full participation." (2002: 99).

largely inconsequential to Yaw's personal liberation story. This kind of plotting corresponds with the novel's overall method of unfolding intimate family stories against the background of specific historical events like the War of the Golden Stool on the Gold Coast or the Fugitive Slave Act under US-President Taylor. Yet by avoiding the oftentimes-glorified Independence narrative, the novel foregrounds a particular kind of historicism. Despite its iconic Pan-African status, the legacy of Ghana is not idealized, neither in the period of the slave trade nor later. Instead, the notion of linear progress, and most certainly the idea of the nation as its principal carrier, is put into question. This does not mean that the very concrete and symbolical significance of the first independent African nation are invalidated, but the event itself is not brandished as proof that Hegel's "Spirit of History" or Marxist "Historical Necessity" finally unfold on the African continent. Moreover, *Homegoing* seems to reject what Sidney Lemelle and Robin D.G. Kelley have identified as "the gendered iconography of Pan-Africanism – Black men coming to redeem the soil of a 'Mother Country' 'raped' by Europe" (1994: 6).

Historicizing historiography means reckoning with the limitations of nationalist narratives and rejecting the kind plotting that accompanies the classical form of the (historical) novel. These considerations are also at the heart of Glissant's *Caribbean Discourse* from 1989. Glissant identifies this discourse as not simply adversarial or melancholically attached to the past, but also as an inherently creative and innovative response to the project of capital H history. For Glissant, it is indeed the role of the writer to fill in the void of a "ruined history" and counter the notion of linear progression proper to the national ideal (1996: 244). According to Glissant, the totalizing historical systems of the West have not only run their course and confronted their own limitations but have also been forcefully undermined through the eruption of subaltern histories focused on a poetics of relation rather than diachronic ascension. He writes:

If Hegel relegated African peoples to the ahistorical, Amerindian peoples to the prehistorical, in order to reserve History for European peoples exclusively, it appears that it is not because these African or American peoples "have entered History" that we can conclude today that such a hierarchical conception of "the march of History" is no longer relevant. (64)

Fighting not only for food and freedom, but also struggling against "the double hegemony of History with a capital H and a Literature consecrated by the absolute power of the written word," the people inhabiting the "hidden side of the earth" have developed other modes of narrating their past (Glissant 1996: 76).

Homegoing also provides a literary image of the African Diaspora that, as in Glissant's vision, contains not the hierarchical chronology of empires or nation

states, but the “histories and voice of peoples” (Glissant 1997: 77). Notably, *Homegoing*’s account of the Gold Coast is one of mutual entanglements and messy histories that do not necessarily unravel into discreet periods and genealogies. As a character notes early on: “Everyone is part of this. Asante, Fante, Ga, British, Dutch, and American” (*Homegoing* 98). Accordingly, the novel doesn’t construct the myth of a pure ancestral homeland or singular origin but presents the Gold Coast as a synchronic assemblage of collective histories, a complexly flavored “pot of groundnut soup,” stirred up by the British and others before them, and already intrinsically diverse, cosmopolitan, modern (98). Even though the scope and thrust of the novel could be read as epic and thus easily reduced to a mythologized quest for origin, there is no harmonious state of innocence to return to and, crucially, also no ‘classical’ sense of historical or national progress.

4 The Other Problem of History: What Cannot Be Represented

As Dalley states in his study of the postcolonial historical novel, “just as contests over the meaning of history forced historians to reconceptualize their discipline as a form of interpretative realism, so the contested nature of postcolonial pasts prompts novelists to frame their work vis-à-vis norms of plausibility, verifiability, and the dialogue with archives and alternative accounts” (2004: 8). While the metafictional and metahistorical assertion that “History is Storytelling” forms one axis of Yaw’s chapter, the other is the knowledge “that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home” at the end of the chapter (241). Encouraged by his future wife Esther, Yaw realizes that the political anger he is unable to transfer onto the page conflates with the anger transferred onto his mother – the woman who scarred his face – and that he first has to confront the history of these scars before he can ever progress as a character *and* historiographer. On the one hand, this storyline represents *Homegoing*’s reckoning with the “fullness of slavery” that starts with acknowledging the “evil” in one’s own home, but it also indicates the notion of an alternative diasporic historiography, a history of scars that registers on the body as well as in the minds of the people implicated by it. Crucially, as these scars serve as a constant reminder, their traumatic effects do not necessarily ease or cease with time. While, at one point, Yaw reflects on how “you could not inherit a scar. Now [...] [he] no longer knew if he believed this was true” (228).

In this sense, the story of Yaw’s scar in *Homegoing* is exemplary for a particular aporia of diasporic and postcolonial counterhistories. The events over which

these accounts compete with ‘truth claims’ are usually violent, traumatic incidences that pose specific problems to narrative representation. There are in fact two notions of violence that bear on these forms of historical writing. One is the actual violence of the event, as well as its rippling traumatic effect. But there is also the epistemic violence that often structures the way it is represented, or suppressed, by ‘official’ records like the colonial archive or the archive of slavery. This presents a particular problem to narrative representation. As Hartman asks: “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?” (2008: 4). The archive of slavery, she notes, often amounts to scattered scraps indicating not more than “a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history” (ibid. 2).

In the heavily symbolic system of *Homegoing*, Yaw’s scars signify the violent event that mobilizes the emplotment and temporal logic of the novel. At this point in the narrative, the reader knows how these scars came to be and that they result from his mother acting out the family trauma: the curse of two family branches ripped apart by the ‘original sin’ of the slave trade. In his chapter, Yaw is both grappling with the fact that he cannot remember and thus “doesn’t know” – that there might be, in fact, no way of “knowing” but only telling – and that this crisis of representation may either result in an endless play or the dominance of a victor’s story. Similar to Hayden White’s diagnosis of historiography’s 19th-century malaise, he is aware that all these narratives are only ever approximations of the truth. The scars, as embodied knowledge of this trauma, indicate not only an alternative form of history but also serve as the constant reminder of a painful past that is difficult to voice without re-traumatizing or perpetuating violence.

Yaw is not the only character physically bearing witness to the past; in several instances of the novel, scars speak their own language. Subjected to a vicious cycle of domestic violence, Effia can “recite a history of the scars on her body” (4) before the age of 11; by the time we reach Ness, the first descendant born into American chattel slavery, her scarred skin is already “like another body in and of itself” (74). Ness’s skin, the reader is told, “was no longer skin really, more like the ghost of her past made seeable, physical. She didn’t mind the reminder” (74). Yet what serves as a potent reminder of unspeakable pain also seals her fate when her master suspects her of hurting his son: “Ness was sure that he could see clear as day what had happened, but it was the memory of her scars that made him doubt” (79). In this sense, scars are violent reminders that often beget even more violence. They do not only indicate traumatic pasts but are potentially traumatic in and of themselves. Similarly, encountering

“the scraps of the archive,” as Hartman muses, cannot fully undo these traumas but may cause its own sense of pain (Hartman 2008: 4).

The crisis of narrative representation, while haunting the status of historiography at large, is particularly evident if one understands the transatlantic slave trade and American chattel slavery as limit events that ultimately defy or at least severely challenge representation. The particular ‘unrepresentability’ pertaining to the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery is indeed a kind of truism, already informing their earliest literary incarnations. In his antislavery tract from 1787, Ottobah Cugoano provides only the scarcest description of a British slave hold, repeatedly conceding that these horrors “cannot be well described” (1825: 123), that there is indeed “no language” to describe it and that no ear, except that of “Jehovah Sabaoth,” may truly understand the “deep-sounding groans of thousands” (125). Frederick Douglass, too, speaks of his inability to “commit to paper” what he feels apropos the “terrible spectacle” of the whipping of Aunt Hester, symbolizing his “entrance to the hell of slavery” (1845: 28). And William Wells Brown, who published his slave narrative in 1847, famously asserted: “Slavery has never been represented; Slavery never can be represented” (1969: 82). Apart from the impossibility of rendering its horrific spectacles intelligible, there are other aspects to a limit event that further complicate its representation in historical and fiction writing.

Simone Gigliotti defines the term “limit event,” as it is applied in scholarly writing about the Holocaust, as variably “the manifestation of the potential barbarism of modernity, as an extreme event of such uniqueness and incomparability that renders it incomprehensible to ‘those who were not there’, and of contested representational possibility in historical discourse, literary and visual culture, and in testimonial narratives” (2003: 166). The ‘limiting’ attributes of limit events are thus manifold; for one, they appear as ultimate limits of the social imaginary, and they also impose limits on language and representation. Yet this also means that the particular demands of a limit event problematize the very notion of relativity inherent in a radically constructivist view of history. What White elsewhere terms “imperatives of the real” will necessarily condition the range of possible responses (1987: 4). Precisely because it is so unintelligibly violent and so momentous, and because it can therefore never be contained or neatly periodized, the stakes in representing it aptly or even ‘truthfully’ are exceedingly high.

In his work on the relation between history and trauma, Dominick LaCapra asserts the particular significance of limit events in Hayden White’s thinking. The notion of an unproblematic closure, for example, as well as other rhetoric modes of storytelling that would relativize the crimes of the Holocaust thus present the historian with the difficult task of finding a morally appropriate mode of historiography that doesn’t denounce its own “literariness.” LaCapra’s concern also

lies with the notion of narrativization as fictionalization that may depart from or distort traumatic historical events by providing unproblematic closure (2001: 16). LaCapra notes: “The study of traumatic events poses especially difficult problems in representation and writing both for research and for any dialogic exchange with the past which acknowledges the claims it makes on people and relates it to the present and future” (2001: 41). The fictionalization of history writing notwithstanding, he points to what he calls an “irreducible aboutness” of historiography that, while not necessarily being reducible to the ultimate transparency of a documentary or self-sufficient research model, nevertheless distinguishes the “truth claims” of professional history writing from endlessly self-referential play (2001: 4). However, and this is significant in the context of diasporic literature, this kind of referentiality is not limited to historiography but also informs fiction writing and other works of art dealing with historical events. Rather than only thinking about the fictionalization of history – often conflated with narrativization in Hayden White’s earlier work – LaCapra is also interested in assessing the way historiography informs fiction writing. On the one hand, this approach would influence the manner in which works of art are critiqued and measured on behalf of their veracity or referentiality. LaCapra stresses “that truth claims coming from historiography [...] may be employed in the discussion and critique of art in a manner that is especially pressing with respect to extreme events that still particularly concern people at present” (2001: 14). This approach, however, also entails an extended understanding of the “truthfulness” of literary methods. As LaCapra writes, one could “argue that narratives in fiction may also involve truth claims on a structural or general level by providing insight into phenomena such as slavery or the Holocaust [...] or by giving at least a plausible ‘feel’ for experience and emotion which may be difficult to arrive through restricted documentary methods” (2001: 13).

The fact that the documentary methods of historiography pose certain limitations on diasporic fiction adds an important aspect to the idea of a limit event. Reading diasporic fictions as a form of counterhistory allows one to identify a more or less pronounced critique of so-called official records in many of these texts. This particular stance, the questioning of established historical narratives, may play out very differently but always signposts the notion of metahistoricity in diasporic or postcolonial fiction. The quasi-historiographical ending of *Things Fall Apart* is such an example, as is Yaw’s history lesson in *Homegoing*. Other texts introduce critical metahistoricism more formally.⁸²

⁸² For example, as LaCapra notes, one of the quintessential elements of professional historiog-

In their attempt to “truthfully” represent the limit events of slavery and colonialism, writers are confronted with limited archives marked not only by gaps and silences on behalf of the few witnesses, but also with cold and calculating historical records reproducing the very violence they seek to unsettle. Unsurprisingly, therefore, both fiction writers and historians have adopted speculative methods that self-consciously foreground these limitations. M. NourbeSe Philip’s long poem *Zong!*, for example, represents the erasure of enslaved subjectivities through disorienting fragmentation and literal blank spaces. Novelists like Fred D’Aguiar, David Daybdeen, or Caryl Phillips, as Abygail Ward argues, expose the “difficulty of representing slavery and the ethics involved in doing so” (2011: 7) through techniques like “contrapuntal montage” (2011: 27).

Yet another formalized response to these issues is Saidiya Hartman’s notion of critical fabulation. This method, coined in “Venus in Two Acts,” but already employed in Hartman’s earlier works *Lose Your Mother* and *Scenes of Subjection*, combines rigorous historical research with critical theory and fiction writing. Born from a double gesture of wishing to represent and narrate, and thus “save,” the life of the captive from yet another form of erasure, while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of this endeavor, critical fabulation is “a history written with and against the archive” (2008: 12). The story of Venus first appears in the chapter “The Dead Book” from *Lose Your Mother*, Hartman’s part-autobiographical, part-historiographical account of the Atlantic slave trade. Here, Hartman uses what little traces she can find about the fate of a captive girl in order to imagine her life and thus save her “from oblivion” (2007: 137). While this chapter already concedes the impossibility of reconstructing a life from a mere footnote in history (a court record stating “*the supposed murder*

raphy is the referential footnote. In order to be “truthful” and “objective,” or at least approximate this ideal, a historical text must have references. Of course, however, “notes may be used in both history and fiction in a manner that questions or even parodies a documentary or self-sufficient research paradigm” (2001: 6). We can witness this effect for example in Junot Díaz’s *Oscar Wao*, where extensive footnotes both supplement and question the main narrative, as well as Dominican, Antillean, and world history. Notably, *Oscar Wao* also introduces the particular historical lens of the *fukú*, as a stand in for both family curse and violent world history not unlike the family curse in *Homeroing*, but as with the use of footnotes, the overall effect of these metaliterary and metahistorical elements can be read as simultaneously playful and disturbing. *Oscar Wao* exemplifies how these critical historical metafictional elements seldom collapse into the utter playfulness of the “self-referential note,” that device which, according to LaCapra, announces the “limit of history and the beginning of fiction” (2001: 7). Rather, in addition to introducing alternative temporal frameworks like curses, haunting, and spectrality, theirs is an attempt to destabilize the notion of capital H History without undermining their own critical and counterhistorical thrust.

of a Negro girl”), her later essay restages what Hartman had begun in *Lose Your Mother* but more fully examines her own desire to make whole, reckoning with the necessity of its failure and further restraining her desire to give narrative closure.

For Hartman, the violent omissions of these and other sources, as well as the paradigmatic status of the limit event they circumscribe, place certain demands on the methods of narration. This results in what Hartman describes as a “recombinant narrative” that “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and “weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present” (2008: 12). Hartman, who coined the notion of the “afterlife of slavery,” pushes against reconciling a painful history through apt representation because the racializing legacy of said history “is yet to be undone” (2007: 6). Rather than being melancholically attached to the past, she claims, her project is invested in a utopian vision of the future by repeatedly problematizing the archive’s “founding violence” and its limiting effect on the present (2008: 10). She writes:

For me, narrating counter-histories of slavery has always been inseparable from writing a history of the present, by which I mean the incomplete project of freedom, and the precarious life of the ex-slave, a condition defined by the vulnerability to premature death and to gratuitous acts of violence. As I understand it, a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead, to write our now as it is interrupted by this past, and to imagine a *free state*, not as the time before captivity or slavery, but rather as the anticipated future of this writing. (2008: 4)

In terms of working with and against the historical archive in Hartman’s sense, as well as asserting the historiographical claim of ‘truthfulness’ in LaCapra’s understanding, *Homegoing* provides a range of interesting examples.

Gyasi lists in her “Acknowledgements” section not only the names of family, friends, and mentors, but also a selection of scholarly publications on transatlantic slavery, such as *The Door of No Return* by William St. Clair and *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* by Rebecca Shumway. In its detailing of historical events, if only as background to the unfolding of personal stories, the novel utilizes archival sources, for example in the figures of Quey and Cudjo, the inspiration for whom most likely stems from the historical Philip Quaque, son of a wealthy Gold Coast slave trader, and his cousin William Cudjo.⁸³ In light of these references and considering the novel’s more or less ostensive dis-

⁸³ Saidiya Hartman too, uses the archival traces of these figures to speculate on their historical reality (2007: 125–129).

plays of historical verisimilitude, or at least aspirations to a verifiable historical narrative, could one interpret *Homegoing* as a claim to ‘truthfully’ represent a history of slavery and colonialism? Only, I would argue, if the entire semiotic range of a violent limit event is taken into account. As a traumatic event, which, following both Hartman and LaCapra, continues to affect the present, the notion of representing the past ‘the way it really was,’ and thus fetishizing it as a totalized object, becomes questionable at best. LaCapra notes that “the historical text becomes a substitute for the absent past only when it is construed as a totalized object that pretends to closure and is fetishized as such” (2001: 10–11). This does not mean that historical facts or accuracies do not matter, but that the extreme violence of this event, or chain of events, troubles the kind of historicist representation that aspires to transparency or totality or strives to situate historical events in an arc of linear progress.

Counterhistories of slavery and colonialism cannot ‘prove’ how terrible these events were, at least not through ‘accurate’ description alone. For one, the ‘reality’ of this violence needn’t be disclosed and discovered, but is and was, if anything, hidden in plain sight. Both its ideology and effect weren’t felt in the periphery alone but conceived and documented at the heart of empire itself. That is why, already in the 18th century, Ottobah Cugoano found it “needless” to describe the “horrible scenes” of the slave trade “as the similar cases of thousands, which suffer by this infernal traffic, are well known” (1825: 124–125). A similar documentary fatigue affects today’s spectacles of anti-Black violence, the exasperated assertion that Black lives matter and, in the case of fiction, a particular mode of representing historical violence. In the case of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, for example, a contemporaneous novel often associated with *Homegoing*, scenes of extreme violence may cause some readers to doubt the novel’s historical accuracy. But the question of whether a particularly graphic scene of torture actually took place or not becomes irrelevant if one has only minimally familiarized oneself with the historical archive of slavery, for example, the gruesomely detailed journals of Thomas Thistlewood.⁸⁴

Furthermore, in its allegorized representations of historical events and periods, *The Underground Railroad* already questions the effects of historical realism. While the historical inaccuracies behind a neo-slave narrative like *Roots* could still compromise the claims of its author Alex Haley, Colson Whitehead acknowl-

⁸⁴ See Hall 1989. For a recent historical assessment, see Baptist, who identifies the coercive techniques of chattel slavery as modern forms of torture: “sexual humiliation, mutilation, electric shocks, solitary confinement in ‘stress positions,’ burning, even waterboarding” (2014: 141).

edges that he is interested in “the truth of things, not the facts” (Purcell 2017: para. 11). Thus, the novel provides a representation of slavery that centers not (merely) on historical detail. Rather, through its extended metaphor, the introduction of historical and historiographical text types, such as fugitive notes or almanacs, as well as the blending of historical and fictional events, renders historicism itself a subject matter. As Jesse McCarthy observes, Whitehead’s “novel doesn’t seek to reenact history, but rather to imagine and represent simultaneously the many hydra heads of a system designed to perpetuate the enclosure and domination of human beings” (2016: para. 26). In registering and commenting upon the violence of the archive, both Whitehead’s and Gyasi’s novels appear to reiterate Hartman’s question of why, despite our better knowledge, we still attend to those who were murdered by the “play of power” that is inseparable from the archives, why “at this late date we still want to write stories about them” (Hartman 2008: 11). If it is not ‘counter-knowledge’ in the strictly documentary sense of the term, these fictional counterhistories aim to do something more imaginative in their oppositional stance. In *Homegoing*, for example, history is imagined as a fold, with layers touching each other, where, as Gyasi describes it in reference to a quote attributed to Mark Twain, historical periods speak to each other “in a way that rhymes” (Bausells 2017: para. 4). This manner of folding and echoing can produce a sense of haunting, a claustrophobic tautology that is used to an effect, particularly in relation to how the violent histories of slavery and colonialism bear upon the present.

In the context of memorializing the transatlantic slave trade, an effort that unfolds, as Angela Davis notes, against the “historical tendency toward willed forgetfulness regarding slavery” (1999: 199), even some of the most pronounced anti-representational stances are tied up with a resistance, not only against cultural amnesia, but also against the legacy of those historical traces and forms of remembering that were complicit with these violent events. With regards to representing the Holocaust, Hayden White has called the most extreme response not the position of the so-called revisionists, but the assumption that no language or medium is ever able to adequately represent or explain it, least of all a historical account. Yet as Andreas Huyssen asserts, by the 1980s the public debate had generally morphed from *whether* to *how* to represent the Holocaust (2000: 65). Faced with the problem of memorializing an ever further receding historical event, debates over whether *Schindler’s List*, *Shoah*, or *Maus* are adequate Holocaust representations seemed pressing. However, prioritizing the appropriate form of remembering often loses sight of that aspect of Adorno’s often-quoted

sentiment – that no poetry could be written after Auschwitz – which points toward the ongoing and unresolved crisis of modernity.⁸⁵

The ossified historical traces – or scars – born by contemporary society still indicate the pulsating wound of absolute barbarism. It was the integral violence of racial capitalism that sanctified the decision of the slave ship *Zong*'s captain to throw more than 140 people over board in a bid to claim insurance money, and this rational violence also sustains the legal documentation of the event. Therefore, even the disintegration of meaning and representability espoused by Philip's *Zong!* is framed by a reworking of this legal document that engenders to confront modernity with its repressed legacies, resulting in what Philip describes as a "hauntological pedagogy" (Watkins para. 10). While not all contemporary representations of slavery are as experimental as Philip's, the wider implications of this kind of memorial culture – as a fundamental critique of modernity – is prevalent in many of today's artistic and theoretical responses. However, even though the metahistorical critique of these contemporary counter-histories is warranted, if not crucial, this mode of representation may also produce its own kind of limitations.

For example, Nehl's study on the "second generation neo-slave narrative" in the 21st century not only focuses exclusively on the issue of slavery in diasporic novels, thus privileging the 'Middle Passage Epistemology,' but also reiterates the morally charged dichotomy of good and bad accounts of slavery – or proper and improper historiography for that matter – from a decidedly Afro-pessimist perspective.⁸⁶ Nehl identifies "loss, dispossession and grief as defining features of the African diaspora" and charges contemporary diasporic novels with the task of representing, or at least not misrepresenting, the "true implications and the horrors" of slavery (2016: 12). Considering the representational challenges of this limit event, this is surely an enormous demand and unsurprisingly excludes quite a number of imaginative responses. Despite being anchored in a political critique of the present, this demand may also run the risk of unwittingly aestheticizing racial slavery and converting "trauma into the occasion for sub-

⁸⁵ Modernity, here, is conterminous with the social, technological, and economic transformations initiated by the French and the Industrial Revolution. For a comparative study of the term 'crisis of modernity,' see Ossewaarde 2018.

⁸⁶ Nehl concedes that both the genre of the neo-slave narrative and his distinction of generations is not uncontested or unproblematic. For a wider discussion of the genre, see Rushdy 2004; Beaulieu 1999; Dubey 2010.

limity” – a tendency LaCapra observes in a memorial culture’s heightened fidelity to trauma (2001: 23).⁸⁷

5 “An Accumulation of Time”: Writing Time as History

Homegoing is not primarily invested in aptly conveying the horrors of chattel slavery. Instead, the novel aims to capture a fuller image of the transatlantic slave trade and its resultant diaspora, tracing its ruptured lines of kinship and its forgone responsibilities, fateful entanglements, and temporal consequences. In doing this, the novel also self-referentially foregrounds its poetic potential, highlighting the ways in which only literature may be able to *make* this kind of history. In line with the Aristotelian dictum that “poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more of the universal, while history relates particulars” (Aristoteles 1995: 59), *Homegoing* contrasts several modes of writing history, subtly favoring the poetic world making of literature.

The difficulty of writing diasporic or Black history is embodied by the figures of Yaw and Marcus, who are struggling to write a book in the book, as well as the figure of Marjorie, who writes the kind of poem which unwittingly ‘gets it right,’ by exposing not only the ‘open wound’ of her family’s history, but also her desire ‘to make whole.’ Socially isolated and confused about her cultural identity, Yaw’s US-born daughter Marjorie finds solace in the books she receives from her teacher Mrs. Pinkston, who not only tells her that “in this country [...] black is black is black” but is also the only person she knows who has read her father’s publication (273). It is Mrs. Pinkston who encourages Marjorie to write and perform at her school’s Black cultural event. The end result is a poem that clairvoyantly alludes to various aspects of her family’s history and moves from the notion of two sisters being “split” and separate to being “kin” and “same” despite their vastly different experiences (282).

⁸⁷ This process of sublimation, which LaCapra sees occurring when “the excess of trauma becomes an uncanny source of elation or ecstasy” (2001: 23), can, of course, also be related to Paul Gilroy’s notion of the slave sublime. However, in my reading of Gilroy, Hartman, and other theorists focusing on the ‘founding trauma’ of racial slavery, the sublime is not merely an opportunity for a group to “transvalue” trauma into a test of endurance, allowing an “entry into the extraordinary” (LaCapra 2001: 23). Because this event is so tied up with the fabric of modern society, it is never singular but always social and political, even through its negation of social reality and orientation toward “the power of the phatic and the ineffable” (Gilroy 2002: 131). Nevertheless, I agree with critics of the slave sublime that these approaches run the risk of being not only morbid, both in the sense of social and physical death, but are also often unspecific and reifying of slavery. For these discussions, see Goyal 2003; Chrisman 1997.

Yaw's book, on the other hand, his vexed and vexing project, may at first glance represent the *mise en abyme* of the novel. His historical book project is finally completed after many years, either right before or after he and his wife Esther move to the United States. In the chapter on Marjorie, the reader is told that his "lifework" is now titled *The Ruin of a Nation Begins in the Homes of Its People*: "He'd taken the title from an old Asante proverb and used it to discuss slavery and colonialism" (270). The parallels to the novel itself are fairly obvious. While the title, *Homegoing*, alludes to the African American belief that a person's spirit will return home after death, its epigraph is an Akan proverb: "The family is like the forest: if you are outside it is dense; if you are inside you see that each tree has its own position." In terms of scope and subject matter, *Homegoing* strives to accomplish what Yaw's historical work has done, at least for himself and the Pan-Africanist teacher who has read it. Initially wrestling to articulate or represent the unrepresentable, Yaw's turning point most likely occurs when he starts investigating the source of his personal anguish and, most importantly, makes peace with his mother. When his daughter Marjorie admits that she doesn't understand his complex historical treatise, he points toward another factor: time. Marjorie remembers her father telling her "that it was something she wouldn't understand until she was much older. He said that people need time in order to see things clearly" (270).

Time is precisely the crux of the other book project depicted in *Homegoing*, the completion of which remains unsure. Marcus, Marjorie's African American contemporary, has grown up in the shadow of his absent mother's lifelong and his father's precariously contained heroin addiction, yet he has also received the critical consciousness of his father Sonny's "alternative history lessons," himself a former NAACP member and activist of the 1960s (284). Around the year 2000, Marcus is in his 20s and on the way to obtain a PhD in sociology, but his research is stalling. Marcus is painfully aware of historical injustices, the complex workings of racism, and the complicity of his nation's prime institutions, embodied also by the "beautiful but deadly silent" reading room of a Stanford library (289). The anger he feels marks him as an outsider and makes it impossible to subject his book project to the neat periodization and progressive arc of mainstream historiography or the methodical structure of a self-sufficient research paradigm:

How could he talk about Great-Grandpa H's story without also talking about his grandma Willie and the millions of other black people who had migrated north, fleeing Jim Crow? And if he mentioned the Great Migration, he'd have to talk about the cities that took that flock in. He'd have to talk about Harlem [...]. And if he started talking about the war on drugs, he's be talking about how nearly half of the black men he grew up with were on their way either into or out of what had become the harshest prison system in

the world [...] he'd get so angry that he'd slam his research book on the table of the beautiful but deadly silent Lane Reading Room of Green Library of Stanford University. And if he slammed the book down, then everyone in the room would stare and all they would see would be his skin and his anger, and they'd think they knew something about him, and it would be the same something that had justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison, only it would be different too, less obvious than it once was. When Marcus started to think this way, he couldn't get himself to open even one book. (289 – 290)

In a way, Marcus is so deeply ‘inside’ the US-American forest that all he sees is the way that racism has positioned himself and his family. At the same time, the formal constraints of his dissertation do not allow him to draw out the universal, the bigger picture of racism, but rather force him to “[relate] particulars” (Aristoteles 1995: 59). Because *Homegoing* is a contemporary novel about race that, like the other novels discussed in this study, is always at risk to be read (only) sociologically, Marcus’s book project performs quite a few things. For one, it allows Gyasi to indeed comment on the history of US-American race relations in a ‘realistic’ or ‘factual’ manner. On the other hand, and not unlike Ifemelu’s blog in *Americanah* or Julius’s historical digressions in *Open City*, these insights are qualified by their intradiegetic function within the novel, if not in content then in form. Marcus is unable to express the “true implications and the horrors” of the Black experience in a sociological text (Nehl 2016: 12), just as Yaw was unable to write his history book about the Gold Coast in the masculinist rhetoric of Black Nationalism. What finally enabled Yaw – introspection, recognition, expansion, and, above all, time – is either not applicable or as yet unavailable to Marcus.

Particularly in the context of the US, Marcus cannot insert his experience into what Bhabha, following Bakhtin, describes as the “representative authority” of a national narrative unfolding in the “fullness of time” (2004: 206). Marcus’s experience is instead marked by an impossible split, a disjunctive temporality that not only troubles “the homogeneous and horizontal view associated with the nation’s imagined community” (Bhabha 2004: 206) but also fundamentally motivates this inquiry, this “posing of a question, rather than imitation of a form of being” that Jared Sexton describes as the epitome of Black study (2011: 9). Because *Homegoing* is precisely such an inquiry, motivated by the “vague but important” question “What does it mean to be black in America?” (Gyasi 2016: para. 15), the following passage about Marcus’s desire to represent the unspeakable discloses the novel’s own modus operandi and fundamental conflict:

How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the *feeling of time*, of having been part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it – not

apart from it, but inside of it. How could he explain to Marjorie that he wasn't supposed to be here? Alive. Free. (295–296, emphasis added)

Homegoing's fictionalization of the intertwined histories of slavery, colonialism, and institutionalized racism is not necessarily about telling but rather about showing a different kind of history and about adopting a distinctly metahistoricist 'feel' for history. And it claims to do so, as the reflection on failed or complicated book projects suggests, ultimately more successfully than either the historical treatise or the sociological dissertation. While emphasizing the general value of literary imagination, the novel also distinguishes between its own labor and that of poetry. While Marjorie's poem is shown to capture the essence of this story in both vivid and transient imagery, *Homegoing* is able to provide more than the elevated world making of metaphor and mimesis. In its narrative progression, it also provides a sense of this world in its unfolding over time. In its effort to capture the feeling for a feeling of time, *Homegoing* draws on the crucial significance of temporality in the making of the Black Diaspora.

In "Afro-Modernity," Michael Hanchard affirms the central role of Afro-Modern counterhistories, distinguishing between the metahistorical positionalities of *tabula rasa* and *tabula blanca*. For the former, African history simply needed to be unearthed and reconstructed, often in accordance with the Herskovitzean model. The latter approach conceived the history of African-New World peoples as fundamentally severed from Africa and instead often systematized around issues of resistance and mobilization.⁸⁸ The reconstruction of a usable past often formed the "first pedagogical project" undertaken by Afro-Modern thinkers and activists, yet even those suggesting a more radical epistemological break with Africa had to reckon with a shared notion of temporal disjuncture imposed by the twin histories of slavery and imperialism (Hanchard 1999: 251–252). The reason behind this, Hanchard writes, was the fact that the "temporal consequences of racial inequality were to be experienced and felt across African and Afro-diasporic contexts wherever a person defined by their phenotypic proximity to

88 Stressing the notion of African continuity and survival in the New World, Melville Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) represents one of the most important paradigms in diaspora studies. His work intervened into scholarship that had disputed the existence of African survivals, such as E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) or Charles S. Johnson's *Shadow of the Plantation* (1934). Later contestations were rather leveled against romanticizing and essentializing views of African continuity and survival, thus stressing the notion of cultural hybridity and the severing yet also transformative effect of the Middle Passage, such as Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic*.

the indigenous peoples of sub-Saharan Africa inhabited the same territorial realm with whites” (ibid. 252).

Adopting an analytical lens that allows one to view racial politics outside of essentializing or phenotypic terms, Hanchard therefore suggest the notion of racial time, because time, “when linked to relations of dominance and subordination, is another social construct that marks inequality between various social groups” (1999: 253). Hanchard lists several instances of racial time that mark the imposed time structures experienced by the slave or the disparate colonial time relations affecting African nation states, and that also apply to the temporal configurations in *Homegoing*.⁸⁹

There is, for example, the notion of sameness and repetition that overrides the temporal experiences of numerous characters in the novel and that Hanchard links to the temporal constraints of slave labor in the Americas. Because, theoretically, “no time belonged solely to the slave,” time becomes utterly devoid of meaning, locking protagonists in feelings of eternal stasis, repetition, or endless waiting (Hanchard 1999: 256). The sentiment of Ness, the first family member born into slavery who, when asked how her day went, rhetorically replies, “Ain’t all days the same?” (*Homegoing* 71), is echoed by the Harlem jazz singer and future mother to Marcus, Amani, who answers Sonny’s “Long day?” with: “Ain’t all days long?” (250). Sonny, in turn, quits his job with the NAACP housing team after the futility of his work is exposed by a young boy who, after reporting his family’s dire living conditions, confronts him with another rhetorical question: “You can’t do a single thing, can you?” (246). The realization that this boy and his family might wait forever, that in the most ‘advanced’ and ‘progressive’ city of the world they would receive decent housing “only *after* those same services were provided for whites” (Hanchard 1999: 263), accentuates Sonny’s prior doubts that even if his political work will ever affect any change in America, this change might not be much different but “mostly the same” (*Homegoing* 244).

Several passages in the novel refer to this paradoxical experience of time – the return of the ever same – and signal Hartman’s notion of the “incomplete project of freedom,” where each ostensibly progressive historical event fails to undo the afterlife of slavery (2008: 4). One character in *Homegoing* also speaks

⁸⁹ Hanchard’s essay is used exemplarily for a variety of theorizations of racial, colonial, or Black time. Similar discussions of these themes can be found in Gikandi, where he describes the “history of the African self as a struggle with the problem of modern time” (2011b: 86). They also appear in Gilroy, particularly in the chapter “Not a Story to Pass On: Living Memory and the Slave Sublime” (2002). See also the concept of distinctly racialized political time in the US in both Reed 2014, and English 2013, or the notion of disjunct temporalities in Bhabha 2004.

of the Civil War as a war that “may be over but it ain’t ended” (158); a father contemplates his young daughter’s night terrors, fighting in her sleep against “Intangible evil. Unspeakable unfairness” and has a sense of “where it started, but when, where, did it end” (210). Here, the continuity of racism appears to be the ‘changing same’ that affects Black people’s lives right until the (more or less) contemporary moment.⁹⁰ Despite being born in the post-Civil Rights era, it is Marcus who still feels like he is nothing but “an accumulation of these times” (286).

In a political sense, the notion of futility, of ineffectual or insufficient change, translates into what Martin Luther King, criticizing the political doctrine of gradualism, described as the “pain of progress” (qtd. in Hanchard 265). Knowing well that the time spent and lost in waiting for freedom could never be regained, King nevertheless suggested that Black people should receive some form of compensation, similar to military veterans, for lost time (ibid.). The most literal instance of lost time in *Homegoing* is experienced by the character of H, who is “doing time” in a chapter detailing one of novel’s lesser known episodes of American history – the convict leasing system in Alabama. Around the 1880s, H is sentenced to 10 years of grueling work in the coalmines for an offense as petty as it is fictitious. While H nevertheless manages to somewhat ‘make up’ for his lost time by finally reconnecting with his girlfriend, starting a family and working the mines on his own accord, it is not only his ultimately fatal case of the black lung that reveals how deeply this unjust experience has been etched into his body.

The chapter on H is an interesting meditation on materiality and embodiment that could be related to Fanon’s Black intervention into a purportedly universal model of subjectivity, such as his observation that the “Negro suffers in his body quite differently from the white man” (2008: 106).⁹¹ For Fanon, the process of racialization substitutes Merleau-Ponty’s corporeal schema with a “racial epidermal schema” and prevents the Black man from suffering in and as a lived

⁹⁰ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) wrote about “The Changing Same” in reference to a distinctly Black cultural tradition, most noticeable in music. Gilroy picks up this phrase extensively, for example, when he writes: “The syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons for resisting the idea that an untouched, pristine Africanity resides inside these forms, working a powerful magic of alterity in order to trigger repeatedly the perception of absolute identity. Following the lead established long ago by Leroi [sic] Jones, I believe it is possible to approach the music as a changing rather than an unchanging same” (2002: 101).

⁹¹ Fanon counters Sartre’s existentialist notion of the body as a form of “suffered” imprisonment that nevertheless provides the facticity of our “being in the world” – as a body belonging “with the ‘lived’” (Sartre 1965: 339).

body, because awareness of his body is only ever gained in a third, objectifying perspective that conflates his identity, “at the same time,” with his body, race, and ancestors (2008: 84). However, this emphasis on collective identity should not obscure Fanon’s explicitly gendered position, who self-admittedly “[knew] nothing about” the “woman of color” (2008: 138).⁹² In this sense, the literal imprisonment of *H* also signifies the metaphorical imprisonment of the racially objectified *and* gendered body, and this intersectional position severely affects the way *H* not only suffers but perceives (in) his body.

Exemplifying the ways in which the social discourses of race, gender, and time intersect and affect the Black male body, the story of *H* highlights the particular vulnerability of Black American masculinity. This vulnerability becomes especially evident if we relate this character to his ancestor Sam and his descendant Marcus. Exceptionally strong and huge, *H* has unwittingly inherited the genetic disposition of his grandfather and the gendered stereotypes that conscript *Kojo* from the very moment he is brought into the symbolic system of racial slavery: “He is the large, muscular body of the African beast, and he refuses to be caged” (80). Coming “straight from the Continent,” Sam is commanded to “marry” Ness and, railing against his circumstances, his rage turns him into “the animal he’s been told that he is” (*ibid.*). In the historico-biological system of racism, *H* does not simply resemble his grandfather in stature. He also bears the mark of the ‘Black Buck’ stereotype. Predictably, *H* is falsely accused for “studyin’ a white woman” (158).

An extremely strong and tireless worker, *H* accomplishes almost superhuman feats in the mines, earning him the nickname Two-Shovel *H*. But of course, as he two-handedly shovels his and another man’s quota of coal, the shovels extending from his body only make it more apparent that despite his exceptional gift for mining, he is far from being superhuman, or human for that matter, but a mere tool and thus both exploitable and fungible. After that experience, *H* has his first emotional break down because he cannot “feel his arms” (163). This sense of thingification and alienation, blurring the boundaries between the organic and the inorganic, also extends to the way *H* imagines his body in relation to others: “Sometimes as he slept the chains would rub against his ankles in such a way that he would remember the feeling of *Ethe*’s hands there, which always surprised him since metal was nothing like skin” (162). When *H* is released, he showers and tries to scrub away the ‘mark’ of his experience,

⁹² See “The Woman of Color and the White Man” in *Black Skins White Masks*. For in-depth discussions of Fanon’s gendered position and relation to women, see, for example, Chow 2010; Sharpley-Whiting 1998.

but it has already seeped into his skin, determining not only how the world perceives him but affecting his own perception of the world. Soon, H realizes that he will never be able to “go back to the free world, marked as he was” (167). Because he has only known sharecropping and coal mining in his life, he is unable to conceive of his Blackness outside of the material conditions that have produced it. Remembering Ethe, all “he could think was that her skin was the color of cotton stems. And he missed that blackness, having only known the true blackness of coal for nearly ten years” (166). When H finally reconnects with Ethe, embracing the “full weight of her body” that was “not the same weight as coal,” the fact that Ethe’s body reacts differently to the material he has “spent nearly a third of his life lifting,” anticipates his return to a world populated by bodies not things, as precarious and momentary as this family idyll may be (176).

Deprived of a decade of his life, his body irreparably damaged and his future as an ex-con narrowly predetermined, H nevertheless experiences a brief moment of temporal contingency following his release. He muses on how “easy it was for a life to go one way instead of another” (171) and wonders whether he could now become “a new kind of black man altogether, one who got to use his mind” (168). Referenced, here, is the notion of the “New Negro,” an expression that, as Hanchard points out, circulated within the Harlem Renaissance and constitutes a temporal discourse adopted by the political vanguard of almost every Black post-emancipation movement in the New World. This discourse centered on the desire “to rid themselves and their communities of any vestiges of enslavement” (Hanchard 1999: 260).

While H, after being rendered pure material and ruined for any other professional path, will never lead a “life of the mind,” *Homegoing*’s particular mode of “rhyming” historical periods gives a fairly definitive answer as to whether newness may also signify freedom. The hopeful notion attached to the passing of time is countered by H’s great-grandson Marcus, whose life chances, despite being a Ph.D. student at Stanford, are still predetermined by a racial imaginary manifesting itself as “legends, stories, history, and above all *historicity*” (Fanon 2008: 84). The same deadly fiction that put H in jail for “studyin’ a white woman” (158) can still decide over his fate if he, studying the injustices of the convict leasing system, expresses his anger in a public outburst. Despite being admitted into the highest ranks of that which constitutes the public sphere, Marcus is always precariously perched on the margins of it – like a distinguished Harvard professor who, perching on his own front porch, is arrested for attempted bur-

glary.⁹³ As Marcus muses, the fact of “his skin and his anger” would lead “everyone in the room” to “think they knew something about him,” and that “something” would be the same “that had justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison” (290). Obviously, the through-line connecting H and Marcus is more than their genetic makeup. It is that makeup’s very real vulnerability toward what Claudia Rankine has described as the paranoia, rage, and violence of the white imagination.⁹⁴

Despite his disadvantaged childhood, Marcus may have escaped the school-to-prison-pipeline but, *qua* skin color and just like “nearly half of the black men he grew up with,” he could still be conscripted into the prison-industrial complex (189). Marcus is struggling to fully describe the future repercussions of the convict leasing system – his family history and the object of his study. But he is fully aware that the history of “what had become the harshest prison system in the world” is rooted in slavery (289). As H is drawn into the early beginnings of the prison industrial complex, his sentence is only a barely disguised attempt at further extracting slave labor under Jim Crow laws. In exposing these historical links, *Homegoing* reiterates what scholars like Angela Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Michelle Alexander have extensively documented and critiqued, and what Ava DuVernay’s Oscar-nominated documentary *The 13th* (2016) has brought to the big screen.⁹⁵ Named after the constitutional amendment that abolished slavery “*except as a punishment for a crime,*” the film details the enormous legal, cultural, political, and economic efforts that went into maintaining and even exacerbating the fact that certain human beings are continuously made into exceptions. It is noteworthy that DuVernay, who is most known for the historical drama *Selma* (2014), departs from a historicist position that views American history, and particularly the latter half of the 20th century, as marked by some form of teleological progress. Instead, her more recent documentary seems to emphasize how many cards are indeed stacked against this progress, both collectively as a nation and individually, as an inheritor of that nation’s history. When DuVernay poses in a T-shirt inscribed with the words “I am my ancestor’s wildest dream,” one can hear this sentiment echoed by *Homegoing*’s final chapter on Marcus, who wonders “how [he] could explain to Marjorie that he wasn’t supposed to be here. Alive. Free” (296).⁹⁶ If, following

⁹³ Of course, I am referring to the infamous arrest of Professor Henry Louis Gates in 2009.

⁹⁴ See Thrasher 2016: para. 22. Also, as Rankine writes in *Citizen: An American Lyric*: “Because white men can’t/police their imagination/black men are dying” (2014: 135).

⁹⁵ See Davis 2003; Wilson Gilmore 2007; Alexander 2012.

⁹⁶ It also alludes to the final lines of Maya Angelou’s poem “Still I Rise” (1978): “Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave/ I am the dream and the hope of the slave/ I rise /I rise /I rise.”

Hayden White's reading of Auerbach, all history is an act of redemption, emplotted through reverse causation, what happens to a people who, in the words of Audre Lorde, "were never meant to survive" (1995: 109)? Or to frame the question differently: If, as White asserts elsewhere, "in choosing our past, we choose a present," what kind of past would a people claim to arrive at what many Black Americans see as a catastrophic present? And how, to reiterate Marcus's question, could one ever explain how that feels?

6 "The Gnarled Fingers of Fate": Curse Temporalities and the Question of Agency

In 1913, W.E.B. Du Bois commissioned the artist Meta Fuller to produce a sculpture in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the abolition of slavery. The sculpture, today located on Harriet Tubman Square in Boston, carries the title *Emancipation* and is inscribed with the following sentence: "Humanity weeping over her suddenly freed children, who, beneath the gnarled fingers of Fate, step forth into the world, unafraid." Fuller elaborated on the idea behind her sculpture:

I presented the race by a male and female figure standing under a tree, the branches of which are the fingers of Fate grasping at them to draw them back into the fateful clutches of hatred [...]. The Negro has been emancipated from slavery but not from the curse of race hatred and prejudice. (qtd. in Rubinstein 1990: 202)

Reading the stories of sharecropper H or Harlem heroin addict Sonny, familiar in their typicality, readers are confronted simultaneously with what was and what shall be, each event foretold and anticipated by the course of history. While the techniques of flashbacks and foreshadowing aren't particularly noteworthy for a historical novel per se, it is important to read the novel in the context of African and diasporic notions of temporality, particularly those affected by today's bleak political assessment. The historicism employed by *Homegoing* depicts Black lives as ruinously doomed by "the curse of race hatred and prejudice," their destinies unfolding under the shadow cast by this fate. Moreover, diasporic narratives have always indicated alternative temporalities – out of necessity. Writing about the rise of what he calls the "recent historical novel," Manshel notes how this current genre "suggests that recent history is a period defined by insistent states of emergency. World-historical catastrophe punctuates both narrative time and historical time: a particularly useful function in an age of forever wars and 'slow death' threats like climate change" (2017: para. 12). As a transatlantic history of slavery and colonialism, *Homegoing* is necessarily positioned

within a temporality in which the catastrophe has always already happened, investing in characters long since subjected to various forms of slow death. Therefore, the notion of history as curse or fate often translates into a somewhat post-apocalyptic temporality that is not exclusive to diasporic New World narratives, but as the following passage will briefly address, is also an important feature of the African novel.

We can find this post-apocalyptic temporality in the tragic ending of *Things Fall Apart*, framing not only Okonkwo’s death but also *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* as mere footnotes in capital H history (Achebe 1958: 183). It also appears in the so-called petro-magic-fiction of contemporary Nigeria, portraying the insidious effect of what Rob Nixon has called “slow other violence” – meaning “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space” (2011: 2).⁹⁷ Another striking example would be Jennifer Makumbi’s *Kintu*, a contemporary Ugandan novel with an interestingly bifurcated publication history and an ever growing, enthusiastic readership.⁹⁸ Similar to *Homegoing*, the novel follows several generations of one family and employs curse temporality as a historiographic device.

Kintu is often singled out for providing a rich historical panorama of Uganda that bypasses the history of colonialism. As the “great Ugandan novel” it is often praised, *Kintu* stretches far back into the history of the Buganda kingdom and connects it, by way of a family curse resulting from a father accidentally murdering his foster son, to contemporary post-Idi-Amin-Uganda. Yet even though the colonial period is skipped, the temporality of colonialism cannot be undone. This is apparent in the epigraph taken from the writings of colonial explorer John Hanning Speke (1827–1864). Speke professes “accurately to describe naked Africa” in a passage reminiscent of Achebe’s District Commissioner, but not only non-fictional, but ultimately more mythical than the Commissioner’s of-

⁹⁷ See Jennifer Wenzel’s “Petro-Magic-Realism: Toward a Political Ecology of Nigerian Literature,” where she lists writings by Ben Okri and Karen King-Aribisala. A more recent exemplar of this theme can be found in Chinelo Okparanta’s short story “America” from *Happiness Like Water*, where the lesbian protagonist, instead of moving toward the progressive promise of liberal America, decides to stay and submit herself to the murky and obfuscated futures generated both by the heavily polluted Niger delta and her homophobic environment.

⁹⁸ After winning the Kwani? Manuscript prize in 2013, *Kintu* was first published by Kwani Trust in Kenya the following year. Only after it had become a huge success was it picked up by American and subsequently British publishers. The novel is a striking exemption of what Akinwumi Adesokan has bemoaned as the process of “reversed extraversion” characterizing African fiction that only gains traction in the author’s “historical contexts” after it has become successful in “the West” (2012: 2).

ficial prose (Speke 1863: xiii).⁹⁹ This epigraph is followed by the novel's prologue, set in 2004 and detailing the brutal, and coincidental, public execution of Kamu Kintu, who is mistaken for a thief and kicked to death by an angry mob. The scene, eerily reminiscent of the one detailed in Teju Cole's *Every Day Is for the Thief*, sets the stage for the novel's epic, multigenerational sprawl. The murder, it suggests, is just another instance of the curse haunting every descendant of the mythical ancestor Kintu Kidida. At the end of the prologue, as market vendors discuss the significance of Kamu's murder, linking it to other violent incidents and peddling both "fate" and "the curse" as explanations, one woman adds another dimension (*Kintu* 7). Regardless of a family line being cursed, she concludes, "that is what happens to a race that fails to raise its value on the market" (ibid.). The notion of reification and commodification inherent in this comment reiterates the actual horror unfolding in Kamu Kintu's execution, who, in becoming a thief, ceases to be human:

The word *thief* started to bounce from here to there, first as a question than as a fact. It repeated itself over and over like an echo calling. The crowd grew [...]. Angry men just arriving asked, "Is it a thief?", because Kintu had ceased to be human.

The word *thief* summed up the common enemy. Why there was no supper the previous night; why their children were not on their way to school. *Thief* was the president who arrived two and a half decades ago waving "democracy" at them [...]. *Thief* was God poised with a can of aerosol *Africancide*, his fingers pressing hard on the button. (4–5)

The always-precarious distinction between the human and the non-human is a core theme of the novel, not only because *kintu* is also the Bantu word for 'thing,' but also because Makumbi is certainly aware of how, as Mbembe describes it, "discourse on Africa is almost always deployed in the framework (or on the fringes) of a meta-text about the *animal* – to be exact, about the *beast*" (2001: 1). Reading the prologue in conversation with the epigraph conveys this distinction also in terms of temporality. What the angry crowd in contemporary Kampala feels robbed of is a functioning future, the notion of freedom and agency that appears to be awarded to full humanity. All they can hope for, as racialized and unchanging objects, is to raise their global market value. At the same time, the market woman's deadpan commentary implies that today's squalor provides the retrospective rationalization of yesterday's curse, as "that is

⁹⁹ It goes: "I profess accurately to describe naked Africa [...]. If the picture be a dark one, we should, when contemplating these sons of Noah, try and carry our mind back to that time when our poor elder brother Ham was cursed by his father, and condemned to be the slave of both Shem and Japheth; for as they were then, so they appear to be now – a striking existing proof of the Holy Scriptures."

what happens.” The novel’s epigraph by Speke suggests a similar sense of pre-determination through the biblical hermeneutics of *figura* and fulfillment. Referencing the myth of Ham and naturalizing a state of enslavement for Africans, Speke asserts that “for as they were then, so they appear to be now – a striking existing proof of the Holy Scriptures” (Speke 1863: xiii).

Utilizing Speke’s travelogue and the Hamitic myth as an ironic intertext, *Kintu*’s pre- and post-colonial history of Uganda nevertheless problematizes the lasting effects of these kinds of quasi-theological, ‘scientific’ writings. As Patrick Wolfe notes in relation to the secularization of the theological discourse during the Enlightenment period, the naturalized discourse of race functioned as a key component to this process. Wolfe writes that, whereas “the Rousseauian vision of improbability through education recast the Christian possibility of grace (in the case of Jews, of conversion), race could also endow debasement with the fixity of a curse” (2015: 9). The problem, then, is not so much that Africa and Africans have been written *out* of History, but that they have also been produced and enveloped by it in a manner that nullifies agency: Blackness as curse or fate. The logic of figuration as racialization imposes not only a scripted past, present, and future, but it does so, most importantly, by inscribing this fate on the body.

As Wolfe observes, besides functioning as a stratifying element that installs hierarchy by (de)valuing difference, race is a classificatory concept that links material and immaterial spheres, rendering it “not a negotiable condition but a destiny, one whose principal outward sign is the body” (2015: 7). As metahistorical device in Afro-diasporic fictions, curse temporalities are thus slightly distinct from haunting and spectrality because they open up questions of relationally, futurity, and agency. Who inherits the curse? What is the difference between a curse and the course of history? And can it be undone? For Benjamin’s historical materialist, turning toward the past holds the most promise for exploding the linear time of progress – a progress that continues the subjugation of the marginalized and that holds past, present, and future hostage. In that sense, Benjamin inverts the teleology of messianism, which thrives on the notion of future redemption. Rather than abandoning the concept entirely, however, he proposes a messianism without the singular savior provided by the course of history, where instead each moment, when viewed through the lens of an historical constellation, may reveal its “*weak* messianic power” (Benjamin 2003: 390).

As one literary critic observes, Gyasi expertly utilizes the novel’s particular temporal structure to summon “the fantasy of retreat into love and family, and then to show how history will, inevitably, trample that dream” (Miller 2016: para. 10). And indeed, repeatedly, Black life is represented apart from loss, dispossession, and grief – particularly in the chapters set on the Gold Coast. Yet ultimately, these moments are enveloped by the deterministic force of race in/as

history. In spite of this ambiguity, however, *Homegoing*'s affective bedrock engenders a sense of potential redemption that does not function as mere gimmick or narrative device, made sweeter by its deferral, but represents a weak messianic possibility. Because, as Gyasi has noted in an interview, "a great way" to think of the novel's chapters is to understand them as "love stories," the romance of redemption is indeed built into these individual snap shots in time, rather than an all-encompassing, grand historical arc (Owens 2016: para. 82).

Within *Homegoing*'s temporal framework, the promise of redemption is not plotted as progressive history but becomes a question of personal agency and introspection lying dormant within each historical moment. At the same time, the generally tragic plotting of its historicism questions a certain "pat liberal notion of human rights" which, according to Walter Johnson, underlies most scholarship on slavery and that tends to emphasize "'independent will and volition' against the possibility of 'dehumanization'" (2018: para. 8). It is therefore insufficient to read the novel as either "fulfillment" or "effect," as Julien outlines it in "The Extroverted African Novel": "If the African novel is construed as a site of fulfillment, it is linked to human agency and self-fashioning. If it is an effect, it is part of a necessary trajectory, merely a product of historical forces beyond writers' control" (2007: 668). *Homegoing* indeed employs and critiques simultaneously, by straining at the limits of both metahistoricist perspectives.

One example of this is the way in which the novel constantly evokes and re-voices universalized notions of agency and historical change. In "What is a Historical System," a lecture given to an audience of biologists, Hayden White describes a people's historical past as a fiction that is ultimately more malleable than genetics yet is often interpreted in a similarly deterministic sense. For White, the difference between biological and historical systems lies in the latter's "choosing capacities" (2010: 132). He states that "historical systems differ from biological systems by their capacity to act *as if they could choose their own ancestors*" (ibid.). Most importantly, this act will determine the future behavior of a group, allowing for something of a historic opening with every generation that either chooses or does not choose to accept the transpired fiction of origin. The novel's chapter on James, for example, allows for such an opening to occur. James is already the product of complex cultural entanglements on the Gold Coast. Named after his grandfather James, the Governor of Cape Coast Castle, he is the son of Asante princess Nana Yaa Yeboah and Quey, the only child of Effia the Beauty, the cursed Fante girl who was married to the Governor. Born 1807, the year the slave trade was officially abolished, James nevertheless grows up as heir to the illegal, yet unceasing business of the trade. However, the signs point toward a power shift on the Gold Coast that – as James has

come to realize – will replace the physical shackles of slavery with the new “invisible ones that wrapped around the mind” (93).

James is unable to fully fathom the role provided to him by his social position and ancestral history until the structures he takes for granted are questioned by Akosua, leading to his very own sense of crisis. Due to the episodic structure of the novel, the chapter on James provides only a short glimpse into a particular historical period, the Gold Coast on the brink of large-scale colonization, which threatens to engulf his personal story. As Europe enters into industrialization, James’s cards will be drawn by the markets’ invisible hand. His thoughts anticipate the shift from mercantilism and its trading post system to the new set of global relations determined by industrial economies. This new system, as Wolfe notes in *Traces of History*, will soon have “dispensed with the Native middleman and introduced the logic of production into the heart of Native societies, requiring either their removal or their transformation” (2015: 8).

This interplay between historical structure and individual agency arising from personal crisis is precisely the node that White identifies as the breeding ground for new historical systems. White asserts that in the same way in which sociocultural systems do not “die,” but are “simply abandoned,” new sociocultural systems are in fact “constituted by living men [sic] who have decided to structure their orientation in new ways” (2010: 131). When James first meets Akosua at the funeral of his grandfather, the Asantehene, their encounter is determined by their vastly different social positions. As part of the royal family, James is seated in “a single-file line of people beg[inning] at James’s grandfather’s first wife and [going] all the way into the middle town square” (*Homegoing* 96). Even though James has never lived in Asanteland and barely knew his maternal grandfather, power and lineage set him apart from the villagers, who are excepted to condole with the royal family by shaking each and every person’s hand. The girl Akosua, once she reaches James, politely refuses to “shake the hand of a slaver” (96). Knowing about the Asante’s role in the slave trade, James is astonished by her answer: “If the girl could not shake his hand, then surely she could never touch her own” (96). Intrigued, he later sets out to find her, allowing her to elaborate: “It is how we are all taught to think. But I do not want to think this way. When my brothers and the other people were taken, my village mourned them as we redoubled our military efforts. And what does that say? We avenge lost lives by taking more? It doesn’t make sense to me” (98). James is deeply impressed with Akosua and her conviction to break the mold and become her “own nation” (98). He decides to become a small-scale farmer with Akosua, sacrificing the privilege of “family name and power,” a privilege built in large parts on his father’s and grandfather’s work in the slave trade. War, the other great historical mechanism, presents him

with a chance to opt out of the future provided for him. It is the “roving eye” of Mampanyin the “witch doctor” that sees James in Efutu, where the “never-ending Asante-British-War” (105–106) will be waged and where James will stage his own death in order to emerge on the same social footing as Akosua: “She had nothing, and she came from nothing” (99).

Notably, Hayden White’s consistently male agent of change is made female in James’s chapter. Not only Akosua, but also Mampanyin and his grandmother Effia, bearer of the original curse, encourage him to try “to make a new way” (107). Effia places hope in learning to be a different person, one that invents “new ways” and does not merely continue “with the old,” yet she describes this as a mere possibility (*ibid.*). The further course of the novel continues to challenge this possibility, as the story of James and Akosua, while allowing them a humble degree of personal happiness, fails to break the tragic and violent “cycle” of the curse that is said to haunt the family “for as long as the line continued” (3). The ideology of race runs contrary to other ideological shifts, which White or Lukács would describe as the result of a crisis leading to a break with a theretofore-naturalized order. In its mediating of what Mbembe calls that “*opaque and murky domain of power*” that operates on human/non-human distinctions and plunges “human beings into a never-ending *process of brutalization*,” the ideology of race does not dramatize or merely exacerbate, but actually overdetermine this family drama (2001: 14). While acts of betrayal, violence, and separation brought on by the ethnic conflicts of the Gold Coast create the necessary conditions for the curse, it is the different yet entangled roles in the institution of slavery that connect the bloodlines of the two half-sisters begotten by Maame – who can easily be interpreted as another figure for Mama Africa. The fact that this shared family history of slavery and colonialism has transmuted from simple acts of wrongdoing into a many-headed system fatefully shapes the destinies of all of Maame’s children. At the same time, the fact that the imagined community of *Homegoing* is a community brought together by fate also creates the conditions for unity and the possibility for redemption.

7 Forgive Your Mother? Memory, Redemption, and the Sense of an Ending

Homegoing exemplifies how the history of institutionalized racism scripts Black American lives like a preordained fate similar, but also crucially different, from a religious narrative structured around collective enslavement, emancipation, and

redemption.¹⁰⁰ Yet its structural emplotment is impossible to undo through an individual liberation narrative, as in Kojo's successful flight to the North, H's release from prison, or Sonny's battle against addiction. In line with many critical race theorists and political commentators, the novel proposes that historical change is cursory and futile as long as it unfolds under the same social symbolic. As Hortense Spillers writes in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe":

Even though the captive flesh/body has been "liberated", and no one need pretend that even the quotation marks do not *matter*, dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither tie nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is "murdered" over and over again, by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise. (2003: 208)

Through its painful notion of time, *Homegoing* effectively conveys the afterlife of that limit event that unmistakably shaped the modern world, but it doesn't paint an entirely glum or hopeless scenario. The fact that Zadie Smith, for example, can endorse the novel as a "beautiful and healing read" speaks to the fact that Gyasi's novel somehow defies the "unflinching paradigmatic analysis" of US-American Afro-pessimism and its deep-seated mistrust of the reparative or recuperative as a mere lifeline of the dominant order.¹⁰¹ While the notion of linear historical progress is questioned, if not thwarted, by the novel's temporal representations of Black history's *longue durée* as marked by predetermination, belatedness, waiting, or erasure, it still manages to generate future-oriented moments of hope and potentiality.

Homegoing represents history as a painfully realist form of tragedy, and it also utilizes the epistemological possibilities behind a genre like romance. As Goyal notes, romance "as a form that can harmonize seemingly irreconcilable opposites – helps black Atlantic writers collapse distances of time and space

100 Analyzing the counterhistorical thrust of what he calls "race struggle" in *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault notes: "And the history – or counterhistory – that is born of the story of the race struggle will of course speak from the side that is in darkness, from within the shadows. It will be, the discourse of those who have no glory, or of those who have lost it and who now find themselves, perhaps for a time – but probably for a long time – in darkness and silence [...]. This also means that this new discourse is similar to a certain number of epic, religious, or mythical forms which, rather than telling of the untarnished and unclipped glory of the sovereign, endeavor to formulate the misfortune of ancestors, exiles, and servitude" (2003: 70 – 71).

101 Frank Wilderson uses the term "unflinching paradigmatic analysis" on several occasions (e.g. 2010: 54).

to imagine a simultaneity of experience” (2010: 9). By connecting two family lines not merely through naturalized essence and genealogy but supernaturally through a curse that is of course also a bond, the novel’s parallel focus enables a sense of Black diasporic simultaneity not unlike the “meanwhile” of Benedict Anderson’s imagined community. Yet where, as in Anderson’s model, this community adheres to the delimitations and assumed sovereignty of the nation, *Homegoing*’s temporal configurations are better defined by a sense of historical heteronomy, temporal haunting, or the “prefiguring and fulfillment” inherent in Benjamin’s notion of Messianic time, than by the kind of simultaneity that is “transverse, cross-time [...] and measured by clock and calendar” (Anderson 1991: 24). Rather than realizing the imagined community of Africa and its diaspora in a narrative that, “in keeping with the scale and diversity of the modern nation, works like the plot of a realist novel,” *Homegoing* engenders to create continuity and unity with and through a fragmented, alternative temporality (Bhabha 2004: 226). It is precisely the impossible desire for unequivocal belonging and rootedness that motivates and connects the narrative strands. By querying the correlation between its imagined community and the teleological narratives of national history, the novel projects a sense of hope and redemption outside of those dominant temporal and narrative frameworks. Unlike the temporal and spatial confinement of Anderson’s “meanwhile” and somewhat analogous to Gilroy’s notion of the slave sublime, *Homegoing*’s hopeful openings are atypical, atemporal, and ateleological.

As Gilroy writes in *The Black Atlantic*, the slave sublime is marked both by the desire to express the “unsayable” truths of slavery (2002: 37) and the eschatological or revolutionary concept of the Jubilee, which emerges “in black Atlantic culture to mark a special break or rupture in the conception of time defined and enforced by the regimes that sanctioned bondage” (ibid. 212). Like Gilroy’s tentatively utopian notion of the politics of transformation, these moments abandon the representational constraints of “occidental rationality” that characterizes the demands of the “politics of fulfillment.” The utopian promise of a politics of transformation is instead “magically” made audible through music, song, and dance, revealing “the hidden fissures of the concept of modernity” by conjuring and enacting “the new modes of friendship, happiness, and solidarity that are consequent on the overcoming of the racial oppression on which modernity and its antinomy of rational, western progress as excessive barbarity relied” (2002: 37–38). Some of *Homegoing*’s minor redemptive moments likewise occur through music, explicitly imagined as both antidote to and result of racial oppression and indexing a vision of liberated Black life after the Jubilee. Yet the distinctly otherworldly nature of this vision not only unfolds in a theological context. It is also imagined as potentially enacted, concrete utopia. While argu-

ably carrying an element of the eschatological, the non-directedness of these openings in *Homegoing* also occurs through what in Benjaminian terms could be described as the messianic pull toward a profane order “erected on the idea of happiness” (2003: 305).

Willie’s voice, for example, is described as “one of the wonders of the world,” stirring in her grandson Marcus “all the hope and love and faith that he would ever possess” (290). Willie’s attempts at becoming a jazz singer in 1920s Harlem remain unsuccessful. After a series of tragic events, she dares to sing again only in the context of her local church, channeling the happy memory of her father “coming home every night” (221). After her husband Robert decides to pass for white and deserts her and Sonny, Willie eventually meets the poet Eli, who fathers her second child, writes poems called “Jazz” or “Flight,” and, as a partner, is just as volatile and restless. In the final scene of her chapter, the profane and ever evanescent notion of home and belonging is juxtaposed with the novel’s recurring tropes of disjunctiveness, instability, and fugitivity, highlighting the precarity of these momentary recourses into the homely against the backdrop of what Orlando Patterson has described as “natal alienation” (1982: 5). The “hope and love and faith” of Willie’s voice, however, derives both from memory and a promised utopian elsewhere, and it is also described as the kind of beauty that is extracted from pressure. As a child, singing at her father H’s union meetings, she imagines “that the sound came from a cave at the very bottom of her gut, that like her father and all the men in front of her, she was a miner reaching deep down inside of her to pull something valuable out” (201). Further marking the secularism inherent in that indexical utopian relation, Willie’s son Sonny later states that “his mother didn’t have to wait for Heaven for her reward. He could see it; she was already wearing her crown” (251).

Here, *Homegoing* employs familiar tropes of American Black life defined by social death and an aesthetic of sublimity conditioned by unimaginable hardship – most popularly embodied by the mythical “vibranium” in Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* and described by Teju Cole as “that obdurate and versatile substance formed by tremendous pressure,” an “embodied riposte to anti-blackness, a quintessence of mystery, resilience, self-containedness, and irreducibility” (2018: para. 51). A somewhat similar notion can be found in the writings of Fred Moten, a theorist who equally examines Black aesthetics in and through the legacies of slavery. Moten’s Black Optimist stance is therefore often cast, not necessarily as an antagonist to Afro-pessimist theories, but as something of a middle ground between a guileless celebration of Black culture and an Afro-pessimist avowal of Black culture’s ontological relation to slavery and social death. Moten examines this contradictory stance in “The Case of Blackness,” where he asks: “How can we fathom a social life that tends toward death, that enacts

a kind of being-toward-death, and which, because of such tendency and enactment, maintains a terribly beautiful vitality?” (2008: 188). Like Gilroy’s notion of the revolutionary potential of the slave sublime, the knowledge of freedom is thus derived from the condition of absolute unfreedom. Or, as Moten writes, it becomes intelligible only through this condition: “This is the knowledge of freedom that is not only before wage-labor but before slavery as well, though the forms it takes are possible only by way of the crucible of the experience of slavery (as forced and stolen labor and sexuality, as wounded kinship and imposed exile)” (2003: 227).

This dual concept of a freedom both anticipated and remembered may also be conveyed in the temporal and spatial coordinates locating Africa in the diasporic imaginary. Reviewing the prevalent notion of death and suicide in Black literature, Gilroy notes how the “turn towards an African home [...] may also be a turn towards death” (2002: 208). This aspect speaks to the forced dislocations of Black Atlantic modernity and fundamentally affects its notions of temporality and futurity, as Simon Gikandi observes in *Slavery and The Culture of Taste*. While, for “philosophers of modernity from Hegel to Habermas, modernity has been conceptualized as an ‘an epochal concept’, one that marks a break with a previous period and thus privileges the future as the site of fulfillment,” the “African slave’s trajectory in the temporality of modernity and the forms of social identity associated with it” were “dominated by fear of the future [...] an acute sense of regressive time” (2011b: 87). The “slaves’ notion of the future,” Gikandi writes, “was that of a space of death” (ibid.). In this particular epistemic coupling, Black Atlantic temporalities do not only frame the future as unsure or fatally scripted, but Africa itself comes to signify either the realm of a lost past or a future after death.

Homegoing clearly strains at this narrow mapping of the Black Atlantic. Despite the mythical content of its title, Africa is imagined and historicized as an active presence instead of a living memory. In its mobilizing of a return narrative however, the novel comes dangerously close to reiterating the romanticized redemption narrative that diaspora theorists such as Gilroy and Hartman have argued against, and that has also been repudiated by literary responses such as Caryl Phillips’s *Crossing the River*. Drawing on the analogous framing of Africa as static and archetypal and its irrevocable abandonment as the diaspora’s originary moment in both Gilroy’s *Black Atlantic* and Phillips’ novel, Goyal observes how those influential diasporic discourses that center hybrid and anti-essentialist models of diaspora often tend to reify and essentialize the African continent in turn (2003: 5–38). While *Homegoing* obviously differs from these models by providing rich insights into the history of the Gold Coast, a crucial difference also lies in its particular vantage point regarding notions of redemption and

agency. Whereas both Gilroy's slave sublime and the story line of *Crossing the River* allocate the possibility for redemption in the New World, *Homegoing* allows for a much more balanced and indeed more complicated view. Both narrative threads, in the US and on the Gold Coast, incorporate the above-mentioned openings for historical and personal change. If anything, the Gold Coast provides a less tragically fated notion of futurity. This sense of a redeemed past and future, however, does not simply occur through the familiar tropes of a return narrative that casts Africa in the role of a lost and regained homeland. There are three scenes in the novel that most notably employ the theme of redemption, and it is worth considering them in more detail.

The first is the scene of forgiveness between Yaw and his mother Akua that may in an exemplary way stand in for the larger notion of guilt and forgiveness in the African diaspora. Akua suffers from the family curse through Maame's vivid nightmares but also most violently acts out this trauma by somnambulantlly setting fire to her hut, killing two of her children and scarring Yaw. The pain and pent-up rage characterizing Yaw's estranged relationship to his mother can be framed in the familiar diasporic narrative of Africa and her diaspora and its addressing of Africa's historical guilt and complicity in the slave trade. In this sense, Akua's words spoken to Yaw are clearly directed to another context and another time:

"There is evil in our lineage. There are people who have done wrong because they could not see the result of the wrong. They did not have these burned hands as warning."

She held her hand out to him, and he looked at them carefully. He recognized her skin in his own. "What I know now, my son: Evil begets evil. It grows. It transmutes, so that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home. I'm sorry you have suffered. I'm sorry for the way your suffering casts a shadow over your life, over the woman you have yet to marry, the children you have yet to have [...]. When someone does wrong, whether it is you or me, whether it is mother or father, whether it is the Golf Coast or the white man [...]. No one forgets they were once captive, even if they are now free. But still, Yaw, you have to let yourself be free." (241)

While there is a certain universalized notion of guilt established here, a tendency Goyal also detects in the multiple perspectives of *Crossing the River*, it does make a difference that Akua is represented not only as repenting. Her recognition of guilt, her reckoning with the past and its consequences, also renders her an active agent of change and enabler of a radically different future. Right before Yaw meets his mother, he begrudgingly considers the danger of exacting forgiveness without the recognition of guilt, here in relation to the colonial instrumentalization of Christianity:

Esther had been the one to encourage his homecoming. She said it had something to do with forgiveness, but Yaw wasn't certain that he believed in forgiveness. He heard the word most on the few days he went to the white man's church [...] and so it had begun to seem to him like a word the white men brought with them when they first came to Africa. A trick their Christians had learned and spoke loudly and freely about to the people of the Gold Coast. Forgiveness, they shouted, all the while committing their wrongs. [...] Forgiveness was an act done after the fact, a piece of the bad deed's future. And if you point the people's eye to the future, they might not see what is being done to hurt them in the present. (237–238)

It matters that the novel's most explicit moment of redemption, or at least its signaled willingness to work through historical trauma, occurs in the context of the Gold Coast and between the descendants of former slavers. Even if one were to frame the exchange as the more traditional one between Africa and her enslaved children – a reading surely possible considering its pronounced anachronisms – it differs from those accounts in the active role it provides for Akua. It is she who initiates the redemptive moment, “running her fingers along the ruined skin that [Yaw] alone had touched for nearly half a century.” Undeterred “by the anger in his voice,” she touches “all of it,” fully taking in the consequences of her acting out the family trauma (239). In Phillips's novel, the voice of the African father who has sold his children into slavery remains fixed and unchanging, such that the “novel cannot imagine a productive or dynamic role for Africa beyond that of celebrating the determined survival of its descendants in the New World” (Goyal 2003: 22). Instead, the novel presumes “the never-ending guilt of the African father and his one and only role as passive witness” (ibid.).

Homegoing's focus on the moral entanglements between Africa and her diasporas marks a distinct discursive position in the moment of Afropolitanism. While the novel's efforts may be read as continuation of the cultural work of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Dilemma of a Ghost* and *Anowa*, it is also a significant intervention into those contemporary diasporic discourses unfolding under the sign of Afropolitanism that are engaged in disentangling Blackness and Africanity. If anything, *Homegoing* can be credited with reckoning with the question of unity and kinship in a way that does not bypass the question of guilt. In fact, as an inquiry into ‘what it means to be Black,’ the novel suggests that – even though the racial category of Blackness does not apply or at least unfolds differently on the continent – Africa cannot or should not disavow its role in the genesis of racial slavery and thus divest itself from historical and contemporary agency. Regardless of whether one reads the novel as an Afropolitan intervention or a Pan-African continuation, it highlights the crucial significance of African voices in the ongoing and globalized construction of racial formations.

In the diasporic model centered by Philips or Gilroy, Africa must recede into a monolithic and mythical past in order to make sense of Black modernity and double consciousness. But *Homegoing* not only places an African history teacher at the core of the narrative. It also renders Yaw and Marjorie the characters who, through different modes, shoulder the responsibility of writing a joint history of slavery and colonialism and who can even begin to imagine it. Marcus, in contrast, is so overdetermined by the particular emplotment of Black Western modernity and overwhelmed with surviving and thriving in a racist society that he does not even know where to begin.

The telling of global and American Black history through an African point of view – in the manner of a self-inscribing, participating observer of the Afropolitan moment – corresponds with a larger epistemological shift within the Black Diaspora. More than 70 years after its completion, Zora Neale Hurston's ethnographic account *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"* was published in May 2018. In the late 1920s, Hurston conducted a series of interviews with the last known person to have been brought to the US from Africa, Cudjo Lewis. The fascinating and, as Alice Walker writes in the foreword, often "harrowing" account is mostly told in his own vernacular and details Cudjo's memories of West Africa, the Middle Passage, the few years he spent on a plantation in Alabama, and his long life after Emancipation (Hurston 2018: x). Walker's foreword alludes to the reasons why Hurston's book could not be published at the time. Through his longing and painful memories of "the Afficy soil" and his unflinching account of the atrocities he had suffered at the hands of other Africans, Walker notes, "[w]e are being shown the wound," something that may have sat badly with the romanticized notion of Africa espoused by Black Nationalist intellectuals (ibid. x). In a way, and despite its archival discovery being a mere coincidence, the text's contemporary release thus appears serendipitously timed, as if the present age were better equipped to reckon with the historical complexity of diasporic entanglements told from the perspective of an African in America.

Those "who love us never leave us alone with our grief," Walker writes. "At the moment they show us our wound, they reveal they have the medicine" (ibid. ix). And the healing balm, in the case of Cudjo's eventful life, is that "though the heart is breaking, happiness can exist in a moment, also. And because the moment in which we live is all the time there really is, we can keep going" (xxii). *Homegoing's* examination of guilt, love, and kinship in the Black Diaspora works in a similar way. In facing the moral and systemic repercussions of historical wrongs, it details the painful course of a story foretold, but it counters this fatal script by providing momentary openings of profane happiness, exploding the continuum of history. The medicine it offers may also be found in the

rich and detailed history of the Gold Coast, not because it is embellished for mythical effect, but because it ascribes agency – then and now. The novel is particularly hopeful in its rendering of strong female characters like Akua or Akosua, who repeatedly want to “make new,” regardless of the tenacious structures into which they are thrust. In fact, every chapter includes at least one moment in which a central character is faced with the possibility of defying the heteronomous burden of history, despite being unable to actively undo it. The tension that arises from these opposing forces corresponds with what Tina Campt in *Listening to Images* calls the “quotidian practice of refusal”:

The quotidian practice of refusal I am describing is defined less by opposition or “resistance,” and more by a refusal of the very premises that have reduced the lived experience of blackness to pathology and irreconcilability in the logic of white supremacy. Like the concept of fugitivity, *practicing* refusal highlights the tense relations between *acts* of flight and escape, and creative *practices of refusal* – nimble and strategic practices that undermine the categories of the dominant. (2017: 32)

Homegoing's history of Africa and the diaspora is viewed in constellation with today's bleak assessment of the future, structures of feeling that cannot but maintain their pessimism regarding the state of the world. But *Homegoing's* ability to “heal” and “make whole” springs from illustrating a historical moment with that very same pessimist yet hopeful urgency. Tragically fated as these characters' ambitions might be, they are rooted in the desire to “make new,” to change the reified structures of oppression and with them the tragic course of history. This view is in line with the melancholic yet defiant position of Benjamin's historian. As Sami Kathib describes it in “The Messianic Without Messianism”: “The paradoxical hope of the hopeless ones is derived and discontinuously transferred from the past. And it is only this openness to the past that can give rise to a future, which is not the mere continuation of the past” (2013: 3). By turning toward these historical moments of weak messianic potentiality, *Homegoing* limns possibilities for new futures, but it also highlights the limits of its own imaginary.

Hence, the most traditional narrative of redemption in the novel, the story of Marcus's visit to the slave dungeons, does not provide its anticipated sense of closure and forgiveness. In this scene, the problematic sense of emotional transference noted by Hartman and LaCapra does not occur. Despite the sense of fulfilled family destiny that it evokes, an identification with the dead is hindered in the same way in which Marcus's return itself is not framed as a progress narrative per se, at least not one that culminates in the visit to the dungeons. Instead of identifying Elmina castle as the site of healing, the final chapter of the novel represents this locale through a set of troubling, unresolved questions, particu-

larly for Ghanaians themselves. Marjorie reluctantly takes Marcus to the dungeons, telling him that this is “what the black tourists do when they come here” (297). While this highlights their different positions, it also points toward the lack of Ghanaian memory culture regarding the slave trade. The chapter is told from Marcus’s point of view, but he can sense Marjorie’s uneasiness about the “dirty skeleton of a long-past shame” they encounter in the dungeons of the Castle (298). When the guide tells them about the fact that British soldiers often married local women who then lived above the enslaved – an image Gyasi credits for sparking the idea for the novel – Marjorie shifts uncomfortably and Marcus avoids her gaze: “It was the way most people lived their lives, on upper levels, not stopping to peer underneath” (298). Referencing the heavily classed reality of contemporary Ghana, its colonial origins, and the role that elites played in the slave trade, the dungeons seem to take on a larger significance for Marjorie than they do for Marcus. Similar to Aidoo’s play *Anowa*, the novel’s addressing of Ghanaian amnesia around the slave trade is also a critique of the social stratification that made both the trade and the ignorance surrounding it possible.

Querying notions of kinship, moral debt, and tradition becomes particularly significant in a novel that largely operates in a genealogical logic. Its underlying critique of national memorial culture on both sides of the Atlantic also translates into a subtle critique of the national imaginary in general – as an inherited and unquestioned structure of norms and traditions.¹⁰² Akosua, the girl who initially refuses to “shake the hand of a slaver” and who pledges that she “will be her own nation,” most notably wants to transcend the traditions of a society that renders her either complicit or one of the “expendable and defeated” that made up the historical fodder for the trade (Hartman 2007: 2). Akosua wants to undo the nightmare of the ancestral order, not only because she is someone who, in James’s eyes, “had nothing, and [...] came from nothing,” but because she decides that imagining beyond nations is the only way to end the cycle of violence (99). The fact that James reiterates and then acts upon her notion of becoming “one’s own nation” – that together they cultivate their own “small-small” version of happiness (104) – highlights the performativity and fictitiousness be-

102 The question of memorializing national guilt is surely central to all the writers discussed here. While Adichie explores this most explicitly in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, both *Homegoing* and *Open City* address this question rather explicitly. It might also be of no small significance that both novels include German characters, most obvious in the Julius’s German mother, but also through Marjorie’s boyfriend Graham, who grew up in Germany but “didn’t wear the country on his sleeve the same way she wore Ghana on hers” (277).

hind any notion of kinship. As Ruha Benjamin writes in “Black AfterLives Matter”:

All kinship, in the end, is imaginary. Not faux, false, or inferior, but [...] a creative process of fashioning care and reciprocity. Is it any wonder that black people, whose meta-kinship threatens the biological myth of white supremacy, have had to innovate bonds that can withstand the many forms of bondage that attempt to suffocate black life? Cultivating kinfulness is cultivating life. (2018: para. 51)

Homegoing, despite its focus on family ties and genealogy, equally develops a notion of extended or meta-kinship across space and time – or what Dimock calls “an alchemical overcoming of distance” (2007: 144) – and subtly questions the limitations of biological or national lineages as vehicles for diasporic imagining. The novel thus creatively mobilizes the “racial myth,” what Mitchell calls the “temporal dimension of the racial medium” (2012: 25) or what I call race in/as history. Plying the strands of racial myth as “a real force in history” (Mitchell 2012: 22), the novel also provides an understanding of how bloodlines “are not drawn with syringes but with stories, portraits, and family trees” (ibid. 26). That being said, the ambivalent project of transposing the novel’s major symbols – two lineages, two nations – into the image of one family and its shared destiny is also encapsulated by how the novel strains against the conventions of a historical novel, nationally emplotted as it is, by writing about the history of a transnational community characterized by a reciprocal and ongoing process.

The novel chooses to look at the past in order to redeem or undo the conventions of national time standing in for a dubious sense of progress. Its narrative progression into the near present nevertheless poses a problem for its sense of an ending and further confronts it with the national emplotment of History. While, particularly from an Afro-pessimist viewpoint, it might be easier to envision the end of the (nationally ordered) world than the end of anti-Blackness, the difficulty to plot history outside of the nation affects all kinds of diasporic narratives. As Bennett contends, the study of the African Diaspora, via its focus on mobility, transnationalism, and dispersal, may offer an attractive “new lexicon,” but it should not delude itself concerning the pervasiveness of the established historiographical script (2000: 106).

The final scene of the novel thus reiterates the notion of feeling beyond the nation and envisions a redemptive moment as atypical as it is atemporal. No sense of healing occurs as Marjorie and Marcus are touring the dungeon. Marcus feels sick and realizes that he does not want to be there, that the dead remain inaccessible for identification – not least because “[n]o one called them by name” (*Homegoing* 299). What he feels, instead, is the desire “to be somewhere

else, anywhere else” (ibid.). Pushing through the *Door of No Return*, Marcus faces his lifelong fear of open water:

Marcus started running to the beach. Outside were hundreds of fishermen tending their bright turquoise nets. There were long handcrafted rowboats as far as the eye could see. Each boat had a flag of no nationality, of every nationality. There was a purple polka dotted one beside a British one, a blood-orange one beside a French one, a Ghanaian one next to an American one. (299)

In a final scene both exuberant and profane, the novel’s sense of closing and its anticipated sense of redemption occur on the shores of a possible cosmopolitan future, a literally colorful diaspora, with an image of ships as beacons of transnational diasporic difference, connected through an ocean bed littered with Black bodies. By somewhat redeeming the barred sense of healing evoked by the dungeons as a “site of injury,” one could certainly put the novel to task for intimating a rather sickly-sweet sense of closure in the Atlantic Ocean (Hartman 2002: 767). Apart from seeking the reasons behind this in the “embarrassment of plot” that haunts all historical narrative, there is of course much to be read into the symbolic significance of the Atlantic (Onega 1999: 282).

Similar to what Dimock notes in *Through Other Continents*, oceanic kinship is imagined as “anything but straightforward,” but instead as “oblique, centrifugal, laterally extended, taking the form of arcs, loops, curves of various sorts,” and revealing that it is in fact non-adjacency that provides an “unexpected ground for kinship” (2007: 145). What Dimock asserts in reference to creolization also befits the ending of *Homegoing*. Here, the novel finally abandons even its own abandonment of patrilineal claniship in the form of matrilineal cultural transmission across a transnational imaginary, in favor of something even less landlocked and genealogical. As Dimock writes:

Since it is these far-flung arcs that integrate the globe, that turn distant populations into distant cousins, we might want to rethink the meaning of “ancestry” itself. Rather than being land-based, patrilineal, and clannish, it is here oceanic, flotational, a large-scale and largely exogenous process of “drifting.” [...] Ancestry here has less to do with origins than with processes. (2007: 145).

Yet instead of proposing this diasporic image as an entirely rootless, free-floating model of atomized becoming, one could also interpret the novel’s ending as a move similar to Glissant’s notion of transversality that renders diasporic history a “subterranean site of convergence” (1996: 66). Here, the legacies of this fateful ocean render its depths “not only the abyss of neurosis but primarily the site of multiple converging paths” (ibid.). Responding to E. Kamau Brathwaite’s assertion that “The unity is submarine,” Glissant writes:

To my mind, this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.* And so transversality, and not the universal transcendence of the sublime, has come to light. It took us a long time to learn this. We are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship. (1996: 66–67)

Glissant proposes a sense of diversion – in his case via the *métissage* of the Caribbean – and conversion that allows a rhizomatic understanding of diaspora constantly creating its own point of origin. Similarly, instead of centering the slave hold as the only site of origin, thus irrevocably cutting ties and eclipsing African agency and history, *Homegoing*'s ending proposes a diasporic imaginary sustained by “[s]ubmarine roots, that is floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions of our world through its network of branches” (1996: 67).

In Glissant's theorizing of a poetics of relation, the singular linearity of filiation is replaced by a multiplicity of rhizomatically arranged roots. With reference to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome, Glissant writes: “The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other” (2010: 11). This play on, or alteration of, the concept of ‘roots’ or rooted identity is not quite analogous to Gilroy's, and subsequently to Clifford's, supplementing the term with “routes” as a move away from monolithic genealogies and fixed origins toward a more fluid, active mode of movement and becoming. In her reading of Glissant, Goyal describes the notion of free-floating roots as a “fitting alternative to the rootlessness advocated by Gilroy and others insofar as Glissant's image retains subterranean connections even as it eschews fixed origins” (2003: 29). Goyal also emphasizes the concretely political, material dimension of Glissant's image. For Glissant, the subaltern “struggle against a single History” is not only mobilized by the desire to understand itself and its own history, but also by an acute awareness that this struggle proposes “in an unprecedented way a reevaluation of power” (1996: 93).

Like race, history literally matters; it may be a fantasy, yet one that is “highly functional” (1996: 64). In many ways, *Homegoing* is the kind of historical fiction that provides an anchor in what British-Ghanaian artist and director John Akomfrah has called the “sea of amnesia” that constantly surrounds us. In an interview about his 2015 film *Vertigo Sea*, he explores why history indeed matters, as the very ballast that prevents the mental slippage of a dangerous surplus of fiction:

I was compelled [...] to make *Vertigo Sea* because you're sitting there, listening to someone referring to quote/unquote migrants as cockroaches. [...] How do people migrate from being human beings to cockroaches? What do you have to forget? What's the process of amnesia that allows the kinds of forgetting that builds into hierarchies in which there are beings and non-beings? (00:06:07–00:06:44 min)

In many ways, the struggle against race in/as history counters its fatal myth-making powers by composing other myths and writing other stories. Yet, in grappling with that legacy, this endeavor often expresses itself in the paradoxical desire to render both real and transient, constantly writing that into existence what it wants to surpass. Like Glissant's notion of transversality as the kind of multiplicity that supplants hegemonic or totalitarian roots by cutting across linear routes with a rhizomatic structure, *Homegoing's* ending proposes 'no nationality' through the sign of 'every nationality.' While the novel may anticipate or promise transcendence, what it really provides is a (renewed) sense of cross-cultural communication, a model for diaspora that focuses on points of entanglement rather than rifts and fissures. In its juxtaposing of Ghanaian and US-American history, *Homegoing* endeavors to not only understand, but also to enrich and expand the meaning of Blackness and the diasporic imaginary in the 21st century. Similar to what Akomfrah describes as his search for a third meaning through the techniques of fragmentation and montage, the novel explores this dialectic exchange as a form of movement. It is precisely that friction conducted through nodal points of connection, or *décalage*, that allows the diaspora to move forward.