

Ethnic American Literatures and Critical Race Narratology

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Marijana Mikić

The neo-slave narrative has emerged as a crucial genre of contemporary African American literature. By adopting and adapting what Charles Johnson calls “one of the oldest literary forms indigenous to the American experience” (xv), contemporary Black writers (re)negotiate American slavery and its aftermath through their literary imagination. In their 2020 collection *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination*, Bertram D. Ashe and Ilka Saal suggest that millennial interrogations of slavery build on and reimagine established traditions and conventions “in both content *and* form ... seeking to intervene politically and poetically in established discourses of slavery and black identity” (8). Yaa Gyasi—born in Ghana and raised in Alabama—belongs to this new generation of Black writers who experiment with textual form to explore slavery’s legacies in relation to evolving definitions of Blackness and trauma.

Gyasi’s debut novel *Homegoing* (2016) portrays the experiences of a single family throughout several generations—from eighteenth-century Ghana to the present-day United States. The use of shifting focalization enables Gyasi not only to portray the affective experiences of different Black characters but also to reveal the multigenerational effects of both trauma and resilience for the descendants of enslaved Africans who grapple with various forms of racial oppression that are rooted in slavery’s legacy. In so doing, the novel imaginatively interrogates cross-generational epigenetic inheritance through both literary form and content.

Recently, much has been written about the nascent science of epigenetics which studies changes in genetic expression that are caused by environmental factors and potentially transferred across generations.¹ Mansfield and Guthman describe epigenetics as a “non-determinist science ... of variation – of difference – that moves toward a notion of biological difference as part of the warp and weave of space and time” (4). In the context of contemporary discussions about race and racism in the United States, “[e]vidence that cultural trauma in past generations may leave traces in the epigenome may serve to validate offspring experiences *or* to imply a legacy of damage” (Lehrner and Yehuda 1773, emphasis mine). Considering the long history of biological racism and eugenics, concerns that epigenetic research may yet again be co-opted “to make claims about

the acquired inferiority of specific populations” should be taken very seriously (Meloni 26).² At the same time, as Josie Gill points out:

epigenetic studies have the potential to work against the more traditional inscription of race as genetically real; for rather than consolidating racial categorizations, or fixing race as a deterministic essence, epigenetics reveals how the experience of being racialized influences genetic development and inheritance.

(123)

Studying *racism*'s embodied consequences may therefore offer an important counter-narrative to definitions of *race* as a biological fact and contribute to a better understanding of how living in a racialized environment may cause epigenetic changes which impact emotion and behavior. The research field of epigenetics is still in its infant shoes and, as Lehrner and Yehuda suggest, “[a]s with the experience of trauma itself, the narrative we tell about its meaning has much power in determining the consequences” (1773). This is why ethnic American fiction may contribute to the broader cultural narrative around these emerging scientific findings.

Working across literature and science, this essay examines Gyasi's interrogation of the embodied and emotional legacies of slavery and anti-Black racism which reverberate across generations and through social environments which continue to be racialized. Taking a cue from Gill's *Biofictions: Race, Genetics and the Contemporary Novel*, I argue that Gyasi's neo-slave narrative offers “a means of thinking through the implications” of epigenetic science (126).³ Like Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*, *Homegoing* models “in its narrative structure, a way of living with ‘a new form of racialization based on processes of becoming rather than on pre-given nature’” (134). By presenting the characters' experiences through various spatiotemporal junctures, *Homegoing* invites readers to understand how emotional trauma and resilience impact characters intergenerationally, and it offers them a means of comprehending the effects and affects of slavery, colonialism, and institutionalized racism.

Racism, Trauma, and Epigenetics

Race is a social construct, but experiences of racism have real and often traumatic effects on the mind and body. It is therefore no surprise that psychological research has long shown that “racial trauma can result in significant psychological and physiological damage in people of color ... including PTSD” (Williams et al. 181). Some of the most common symptoms of PTSD—Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—include fear, anxiety, recurrent nightmares (which lead to re-experiences of trauma during sleep), a sense of a shortened future, and a variety of mental and physical health problems (180). While the trauma that individuals belonging

to racial and ethnic minority groups continue to experience in a white supremacist society may be evoked through first-hand experiences of racial violence and experiences of vicarious trauma in relation to the overwhelming presence of racial discrimination against people of color, they may also be impacted by the legacies of historical trauma.⁴ For Black Americans, the “meaning and memory of slavery and the failure of emancipation,” argues Ron Eyerman, is “the primal scene of cultural trauma” (98). In this context, Resmaa Menakem notes that “the multiple forces—genes, history, culture, laws, and family—have created a long bloodline of trauma in African American bodies” (11). Menakem, however, also points out that “[b]esides trauma, there is something else human beings routinely pass on from person to person and from generation to generation: resilience” (50). Drawing on findings in neuroscience which “reveal that the human brain always has the capacity to learn, change, and grow,” Menakem observes that “[f]or 400 years, with many successes and many failures, we [African Americans] have sought to counter new and old trauma with both the resilience we were born with and the resilience we grew and taught each other to grow” (51). This emphasizes that Black Americans have always responded to racial injustice with resistance and perseverance, even as racial injustice has historically been the cause of much loss and suffering.

Epigenetic studies similarly show how responses to environmental influences may produce both negative and positive effects for individuals and successive generations. Neuroscientist and epigeneticist Rachel Yehuda and her colleagues debunk common misconceptions that epigenetic marks are permanent and solely negative. Instead, we need to think of them as “potentially enduring but also malleable” (Yehuda et al. 5); and we need to recognize that the transmission of trauma effects may well involve “resilience, flexibility, and wisdom in survivors’ offspring, not just vulnerability and damage” (2). While Yehuda et al. call for cautionary interpretations of preliminary findings, they also point to the potential that epigenetic research has for “contribut[ing] meaningfully to the social and cultural narrative” by, amongst other things, “validat[ing] suffering that has been dismissed or trivialized” (5).⁵ Indeed, the reconstructive historical project at the heart of the neo-slave narrative allows readers to rediscover and reclaim silenced experiences and (potentially biological) memories in relation to Black trauma and Black resilience.

By exploring the affective and traumatic grip of the racial past on the racial present, *Homegoing* foregrounds the ways in which socially constructed ideologies of race impact the minds and bodies of racialized individuals across generations. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Gyasi observes: “I think trauma is inheritable ... Suffering changes and stays the same. In America, the worst was never over, just made new. That was something I was trying to trace in the novel – the trail of trauma reinvented.” In mapping the spatiotemporal continuation of racialized trauma, the first question *Homegoing* asks is: How did we get here? The

second question that the narrative asks as it moves from the distant past toward the present century is: How do we envision a future which makes possible positive (epigenetic) change and a reckoning with, and healing from, the historical and continued impact of racialized trauma on Black Americans and communities of color?

In my analysis of the novel, I pay special attention to how Gyasi negotiates the possibilities and consequences of epigenetic inheritance through the representation of her characters' *parallel* affective experiences. In his account of "affective narratology"—which posits that emotions are at the root of narrative structure—cognitive narratologist Patrick Colm Hogan suggests that "[w]e understand various component stories ... as relevant to one another not only insofar as they intersect but also insofar as they have salient [emotional] parallels" (*Affective* 109).⁶ Hogan argues that "our minds operate in such a way as to link certain sorts of property or circumstance," because parallelism is "a function of our cognitive architecture" (109). By presenting the same or similar emotions and emotional memories in various chapters—each focalized through a different Black character—Gyasi draws on the parallelism that is fundamental to cognitive processing in order to provide "different perspectives on a complex moral or political issue" (107). Importantly, the causal and emotional intersections between the chapters and character experiences show how the "epigenetic background enables and constrains how learning and socialization happens" and how "[p]revious experiences exert an affective pull (or push, if negative) towards producing a certain set of characteristics or consequences" (Meloni and Reynolds). Through her spatiotemporally expansive literary imagination, Gyasi thus traces the cross-generational epigenetic transmission of emotional trauma and resilience triggered by slavery and anti-Black racism.

Emotional Trauma and Resilience in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

The novel begins in eighteenth-century Ghana, focalizing the first two chapters through the half-sisters, Effia and Esi, whose lives take very different turns. While the former gets married to the British governor of the Cape Coast Castle, the latter is being held captive in the women's dungeon below the castle before she is forcibly taken across the Atlantic on a slave ship. The novel subsequently moves back and forth between the two family lines, relating the multigenerational effects of colonialism and slavery for Effia's descendants in Ghana and Esi's descendants in the United States. In relation to Esi's storyline—which I focus on in this essay—the neo-slave narrative positions the dungeon as a crucial locus of trauma:

Esi was kicked to the ground by one of the soldiers, his foot at the base of her neck so that she couldn't turn her head to breathe anything but the dust and detritus from the ground. The new women

were brought in, and some were wailing so hard that the soldiers smacked them unconscious. They were piled on top of the other women, their bodies deadweight. When the smacked ones came to, there were no more tears. Esi could feel the woman on top of her peeing. Urine traveled between both of their legs.

(Gyasi 30–1)

By focalizing the passage through the character of Esi, Gyasi invites contemporary readers to imaginatively relocate to the dungeon and experience with her the claustrophobic atmosphere and the dehumanizing treatment that she and the other African women experience at the hands of British soldiers.

Subsequently, the chapter positions her experiences in the dungeon in stark comparison to her life before she was kidnapped. Esi lived “in bliss” as the daughter of Big Man, a respected Asante warrior, and Maame, a former Fante slave (31). When their village was attacked, prior to Esi’s forced relocation to the dungeon, her mother gave her a black stone. Whereas Esi cannot hold on to her stone in the dungeon, Maame previously left behind the same gift for Esi’s half-sister Effia, a child born of rape, before she set the Fante village on fire to escape enslavement.⁷ While Maame’s descendants will long feel the repercussions of trauma—both old and new, inherited and sustained—the stone which Maame gives to Effia and which ultimately finds its way to the last descendant in Esi’s storyline signifies a remarkable sort of inheritance. According to Mar Gallego, it “discloses their will to survive despite the very adverse circumstances,” thereby symbolizing “generational healing” (10). In revealing how one stone got lost while the other traveled across time and space to twenty-first century America, the neo-slave narrative cues readers to imaginatively reconstruct Black family histories and recognize the past’s grip on the present.

The reading experience of *Homegoing* demands a collapse of distinctions between past, present, and future. This becomes particularly obvious when Esi receives the black stone—the same one her mother gave to her half-sister Effia before—and she feels

as though she were seeing her [mother] for the first time. Maame was not a whole woman. There were large swaths of her spirit missing and no matter how much she loved Esi, and no matter how much Esi loved her, they both knew in that moment that love could never return what Maame had lost . . . Esi would inherit that unspeakable sense of loss, learn what it meant to be un-whole.

(Gyasi 42)

By foreshadowing an intergenerational transmission of trauma effects, the passage negotiates the growing evidence in support of epigenetic inheritance of parental trauma. While it starts as an internally focalized

passage, it transitions to what appear to be the words of an external narrator who first reveals what both of the characters know and then looks ahead into a future in which Esi will have inherited her mother's pain and grief. Trauma, as Hogan reminds us, is "first of all, a disorder of *emotional response*" (*Personal* 105, emphasis mine). Not only do aversive experiences of enslavement and rape disrupt Maame's own emotional responses and her sense of self, but the narrative communicates that the effects of trauma will be transmitted to her daughter.

Readers, in fact, get to observe Esi's "un-wholeness" as the novel transitions to the consciousness, time, and place of her daughter, Ness, whom we encounter years later at a plantation in the American South:

Ness's mother, Esi, had been a solemn, solid woman who was never known to tell a happy story. Even Ness's bedtime stories had been ones about what Esi used to call "the Big Boat." Ness would fall asleep to the images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing; no land, no people, no worth.

(Gyasi 70)

Through Esi's alienation, caused by her forced displacement from home, the neo-slave narrative offers a way of understanding slavery's negative impact on what Hogan calls "the subjective spatiality of human activity" (*Affective* 29). For neurobiological reasons, home is the "center toward which we tend, and against which we experience all other places" (30), which is why the disruption of place attachment negatively impacts Esi's sense of self and safety as well as her attachment to her daughter. According to Daniel J. Siegel, "communication within attachment relationships is the primary experience that regulates and organizes the development of those circuits in the brain that mediate self-regulation and social relatedness" (31). Indeed, Ness herself who was

born during the years of Esi's unsmiling ... had never learned how to do it quite right. The corners of her lips always seemed to twitch upward, unwillingly, then fall within milliseconds, as though attached to that sadness that had once anchored her own mother's heart.

(Gyasi 72)

By foregrounding how the relationship to a traumatized parent may contribute to the transference of trauma effects in the critical period—in which the human brain is particularly sensitive to environmental influences—*Homegoing* narratively reconfigures one central way in which epigenetic change may be triggered.

While every chapter of the novel focuses on an individual character's experiences, the relationships among the chapters—which draw attention to the ways in which slavery harms and erases family ties—become visible to "the time-traveling reader" (Maus 55). By narrating how the

un-wholeness inherited by Maame is exacerbated by Esi's forced displacement from home which impacts both her sense of self and her relationship to her own daughter Ness, the novel shows how "the body becomes a placeholder for memory and trauma, accounting for personal and cultural behavior (of both Blacks and whites) and explaining why trauma persists, transferred from one generation to another" (Schreiber 2). This gives readers the opportunity to bear witness to the detrimental impacts of the cultural trauma of slavery on Black individual and collective identity, but it also "reinforces a sense of control by reproducing an imagined wholeness" (42) through its literary-imaginative recovery of the past.

In addition to the risks associated with the inheritance of parental trauma effects, the hostile environment that Ness grows up in viciously reinforces aversive emotional experiences. After Ness and her husband attempt to escape plantation slavery, they are recaptured and Ness is forced to watch her husband's lynching before she is sold to another master. Their horrendous tragedies, however, give their son Kojo the freedom that was denied to them in their own lives, highlighting the enormous resistance against ownership and oppression that enables individual and generational survival. Subsequently, the chapter focalized through Kojo, or Jo, reveals that he lives as a free man in Baltimore with his wife, their seven kids, and Ma Aku—the woman who helped Ness with the escape. Jo loves his job as a caulker and he does not feel, like Ma Aku does, that "there was something evil about them [freed Black people] building up the things that had brought them to America" (Gyasi 111). What makes him "always jumpy," however, are the constant police interrogations of the Black boat workers (111). Jo's anxiety is evoked by the omnipresence of anti-Black racism which continuously makes him feel as though "a threat is possible" (LeDoux 10). Furthermore, his present anxiety is likely affected by the lack of parental attachment in Jo's childhood. According to Schreiber, "familial circumstances dictate either the continued repetition of trauma or the ability to re-create the self," which is why missing attachment relationships may contribute to producing a "sense of fear and impending harm" (12). These experiences disrupt Jo's own psychological well-being, but his anxiety also affects his children.

Jo, who is aware of the importance of positive attachment relations for the development of emotional safety and a coherent sense of self, feels like "[b]eing a good father" is a debt he "owed to his parents, who couldn't get free" (Gyasi 115). Since he aims to honor his parents' efforts, Jo is devoted to teaching his children how to be resilient and how to survive in the world with enough "grit" (115). When Jo's anxiety about racial policing is exacerbated by the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, he desperately makes his "children practice showing their papers" in case they are stopped by a federal marshal, but they do not comprehend the gravity of the situation since "Jo had worked hard so that his children wouldn't have to inherit his fear, but now he wished they had just the tiniest morsel of it" (125). Here, Jo laments the seemingly lacking inheritance of fear in

his children who have been relatively sheltered from racialized trauma in their own lives.

One of his daughters, however, experiences regular “night terrors ... [sometimes] so bad she would wake herself up to the sound of her own screams or she’d have scratches along her arms from where she’d fought invisible battles” (120). When Jo watches her move her legs as if she were running during sleep, he thinks:

Maybe Baluah was seeing something more clearly on the nights she had these dreams, a little black child fighting in her sleep against an opponent she couldn’t name come morning because in the light that opponent just looked like the world around her. Intangible evil. Unspeakable unfairness. Baluah ran in her sleep, ran like she’d stolen something, when really she had done nonessomething other than expect the peace, the clarity, that came with dreaming. Yes, Jo thought, this was where it started, but when, where, did it end?

(120)

This passage, focalized through Jo’s consciousness, points to the temporal continuity of trauma and the “inability to distinguish present time from the time of the traumatic wound” (Dubey and Swanson Goldberg 599), while it also negotiates the effects of inherited trauma through dreaming. Trauma theorist Cathy Caruth notes that trauma is “a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated, intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviors” (4). Additionally, psychologist Natan P.F. Kellermann suggests that the “general tendency for having frightening nightmares may well be epigenetically transmitted” even though there is no evidence yet on whether “specific past memory can be epigenetically transmitted or not” (35). Using Jo as the focalizing consciousness of his daughter’s sleep disturbances, Gyasi suggests that the inheritance of (grand)paternal trauma manifests itself in Baluah’s nightmares. In so doing, the novel encourages readers to bear witness to histories that cannot be ignored because they continue to evolve. The nested storytelling structure—Jo witnessing the embodiment of inherited trauma in his daughter’s dreams—illustrates how racialized trauma moves through time, space, and bodies, thereby critiquing the disruptive effects of slavery and racial oppression.

The narrative subsequently moves on to the story of Jo’s son, H, and his experiences of the convict leasing system, which attempts to turn the formerly enslaved into second-class citizens after the abolition of slavery. Whereas the conditions of H’s forced labor in the coal mines bear resemblance to Ness’s work for the “master of Hell” during slavery, the repeated emphasis on H’s enormous strength links him to Ness’s husband, H’s grandfather, Sam, who was purchased because of his “large, muscular body of the African beast” (Gyasi 80). H’s inherited strength manifests itself when he saves a white man’s life in the coal mines by shoveling

“double-handed[ly]” to fill both of their quotas (163). Due to lost family connections, the erasure of which is reflected in his “unfinished” name, H himself is unaware that his strength links him to his grandfather, but the parallelism at the root of the novel’s structure draws readers’ attention to the different ways in which not only trauma but also resilience and strength are passed on. Such instances in the novel emphasize the positive effects of epigenetic inheritance, pointing to the ways in which African Americans have always responded to racial inequality by building resilience and strength for themselves but also for future generations.

In a subsequent chapter, the narrative transitions to H’s grandson, Sonny, who is reading W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* in a jail in the 1960s after being arrested after a protest march. He does not know “[h]ow many times [he] could pick himself up off the dirty floor of a jail cell,” but he knows that the “practice of segregation meant that he had to feel his separateness as inequality, and *that* was what he could not take” (244). In his psychoanalytic conception of the repetition of trauma through psychic experiences, Sheldon George argues that:

by pinning lack to racial identity slavery has not only arisen as a representative of the constitutive trauma of subjectivity, but it has also conflated social losses with psychic lack for many African Americans, making it possible for them to experience losses suffered at both the personal and the historical/racial levels as attacks upon being.

(117)

He adds that “stereotyped, racist notions of personal identity ... seek traumatically to overlay and stifle these [African Americans] subjects’ productive and enabling fantasies of wholeness and self” (117). Not only does Sonny’s “un-wholeness” affect his personal identity, but his sense of self is also intertwined with a more collective memory and identity, which invites readers to draw parallels between his experiences and that of his ancestors.

Importantly, Sonny’s psychic experiences of race as a Black man in the United States are closely entwined with his *bodily* experiences: “he knew in his body, even if he hadn’t yet put it together in his mind, that in America the worst thing you could be was a black man” (Gyasi 260). Sonny likely carries in his body various forms of trauma, including the epigenetic effects of his ancestors’ trauma, the effects of his personal experiences of anti-Black racism and his inability to initiate change through activism, and the effects of vicarious trauma experiences triggered by the prevalence of racial violence. His chapter is marked by the seeming impossibility of persevering and re-creating the self in the face of trauma. According to Hogan, such story developments, which are “formed by the opposite of the overarching goal,” are based on “the nature of human emotion systems and the aesthetic goal of intensifying emotional response” (*Affective* 95). Even though Gyasi presents a wide range of

characters, who are all facing (consequences of) the same antagonist—racism, Sonny’s inability to cope with the aversive emotional effects of racialized trauma enhances the emotional intensity of the narrative.

Not only does Gyasi negotiate the precarity of protest through Sonny’s experience, but she also communicates the detrimental impact of the crack epidemic on African Americans by showing how drug addiction destroys Sonny’s health and his familial relationships. Importantly, his mother Willie unearths the historical forces that shape modern, more subtle forms of racism that continue to criminalize Blackness and warns him:

You keep doin’ what you doin’ and the white man don’t got to do it no more. He ain’t got to sell you or put you in a coal mine to own you. He’ll own you just as is, and he’ll say you the one who did it. He’ll say it’s your fault.

(Gyasi 262–3)

Her words unveil the inherently racist strategies of the War on Drugs as a war against communities of color, while also promoting Black agency and an understanding of the Black body as much more than a site of trauma and oppression. Willie participates in the oral storytelling tradition of Black ancestors, who, according to Toni Morrison, “are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (62). The chapter examines how Sonny comes to better understand the ways in which racism and racial histories affect his mind and body, while the hopeful ending shows that he is ready to use that knowledge to overcome the aversive effects of trauma. This reflects not only the transformative value of his mother’s words, but it also foregrounds the importance of individual and collective strategies of resilience that counter the adverse effects of personal, inherited, collective, and historical trauma.

Homegoing ends with a final chapter set in the twenty-first century and focalized through Sonny’s son, Marcus, who is a doctoral student at Stanford University. In an art museum, Marcus remembers the peculiar emotions he felt when he got lost in a museum as a kid and was then stopped by an elderly white couple who tried to help him:

Marcus had felt as though at any moment the man would lift the cane all the way up toward the ceiling and send it crashing over his head. He couldn’t guess why he felt that way, but it had scared him so badly, he could start to feel a wet stream traveling down his pant legs. He’d screamed and ran from one white-walled room to another.

(Gyasi 288–9)

The passage draws parallels to a scene in which Ness protects a little girl from being hit with a cane by the master’s son and also to Esi’s

situation in the dungeon when she feels another woman's pee traveling down her legs after the British soldiers "kicked [them] to the ground" (30). These parallels suggest that Marcus's inexplicable experience of fear in the museum is triggered by an epigenetic memory inherited from his ancestors. Zovkic et al.'s neuroepigenetic study indeed shows a bidirectional relationship between epigenetic mechanisms and "the formation and maintenance of fear memory" (61). The epigenetic embodiment of fear may, in turn, impact the activation of an emotional memory "without a corresponding representational memory" (Hogan, *What* 51). "In that case," suggests Hogan, "we may experience the emotion but not understand why we are experiencing it" (51), which helps to explain Marcus's fear experience and his lack of comprehension thereof. Even though his own flight response remains incomprehensible to him, through his reliving of his great-great-great-(great)-grandmother's fear, Marcus's body becomes "the locus of multiple temporal and environmental junctures which coexist" (Gill 134). By drawing on emotion and emotional memory to create an epigenetic dialogue between the characters' experiences, Gyasi thus shows how the traumatic effects of slavery reverberate across multiple generations.

All the injustices directed toward Black people and his own family throughout history render Marcus's decision to focus on a specific aspect of institutionalized racism in his dissertation near impossible. Contemplating the United States's troubled history of racial oppression in relation to his family history forces him to control his rising anger:

[I]f 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.

(Gyasi 289–90)

The revelation of Marcus's subjectivity through free indirect discourse reveals his acute awareness of the racial gaze through which others read his anger. In the wake of slavery, Black people have routinely been cast as pathologically angry. Such stereotypical definitions have, in turn, repeatedly been used to justify and perpetuate white violence. Through the insight into Marcus's internal process of emotional self-policing, Gyasi draws attention to the negative effects of what Sue J. Kim, in her analysis of racial anger, describes as "the fear and dismissal of black rage, particularly black *male* rage" (49). The representation of double consciousness—which Du Bois defines as "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (8)—shows how Marcus's internalization of the "angry Black man" stereotype disrupts both emotional response and expression. This interrogation of the affective grip of history invites all

readers, Black and non-Black, to confront the continued legacies of a traumatic racial past.

Finally, at an Afro-Caribbean party, Marcus meets a girl named Marjorie who wears the black stone necklace that she inherited from Effia, the sister of Marcus's great-great-great-great grandmother, Esi. When they visit Cape Coast Castle together, their journey is as much about remembrance as it is about overcoming the fears that have been passed down to them from their ancestors. Marcus fears the ocean and Marjorie fears fire, but they are invested in "a reliving of the traumatic experience" in order to "completely escape from trauma physically and mentally" (Schreiber 40). When they swim in the ocean, looking at "the vast expanse of time and space" (Gyasi 300), Marjorie places the necklace that she inherited around Marcus's neck, joining the long-separated family lines and bringing *Homegoing* full circle. Gyasi communicates, as does Butler in *Kindred*, that the characters' "biological inheritance – the trauma of racialization and its consequences – cannot be ignored but must instead be understood in order to both live with and move beyond it" (Gill 133). The present-day trip to the slave castle foregrounds the burdening effects of ancestral trauma, but more importantly it allows the characters to reconnect with their family histories in order to forge new paths toward healing.

Homegoing uncovers the affective legacies of slavery by establishing direct parallels between the characters' emotional experiences at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Furthermore, the narrative ending restores a sense of "normalcy" which "does not have the aspect of instability of the beginning" (Hogan, *Affective* 81). Esi's storyline begins with dehumanization and forced displacement which fundamentally disrupts normalcy. This is followed by an intergenerational exploration of the effects of this disruption through the focalized experiences of a vast number of Black characters, focusing on trauma as well as resilience. Finally, the novel ends with a special emphasis on Black resistance by narrating how the present-day characters strive to restore a sense of normalcy and stability that insists, as Jesse McCarthy does, "that we lift each other and rise together with the spirit of history at our backs." Gyasi's storyworld, like the storyworlds of many ethnic American writers, reimagines and re-members the racial past to disrupt its ongoing legacies in the present.

Conclusion

Each chapter of Gyasi's neo-slave narrative is focalized through a different Black character, focusing on individual experiences of trauma, struggle, and resistance. Simultaneously, the novel encourages readers to trace the emotional histories of Black trauma and resilience by drawing parallels between the chapters. *Homegoing* not only creates a literary space for those marginalized voices "that have hitherto been evaluated

and circumscribed by the authorial narration of white supremacy and patriarchy” (Kim 26), but it also brings to light the ways in which slavery, colonialism, and institutionalized racism are *felt* across time and space. The novel, much like Marcus’s dissertation, aims to capture

the feeling of time, of having been a 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.
(Gyasi 295–96)

Importantly, *Homegoing* ponders this temporal continuity through the characters’ embodiment of their ancestors’ memories and feelings, thus narratively reconfiguring the meaning and implications of emerging epigenetic findings.

While epigenetic research provides growing evidence that exposure to trauma may lead to potentially enduring and inheritable changes in gene expression, the very fact that environmental influences can impact gene expression is a case in point for epigenetic plasticity. Yehuda and Lehrner suggest that “changes to the epigenome might reset when the environmental insults are no longer present, or when we have changed sufficiently to address environmental challenges in a new way” (253). By representing the effects of epigenetic inheritance as enduring but also as malleable, Gyasi lays bare the emotional and embodied effects of racism and racialization, while also reflecting the non-determinism of epigenetics. Esi’s storyline acts as a powerful testament to the individual and collective resilience of African Americans in the face of the continuing repetition and reinvention of anti-Black racial oppression. The portrayal of the ongoing presence of bodily effects triggered by past experiences of racism encourages readers to challenge racial progress narratives that give social currency to “post-racial” ideologies and direct attention away from the continuous reproduction of trauma and inequality. Gyasi’s imaginative rediscovery of Black histories presents a strong “case for reparations,” as Roxane Gay points out in her review of the novel, and a strong case for reimagining Black futures. *Homegoing* offers not only a means of understanding the complex entanglements between racism, emotional trauma, and epigenetic embodiment, but it also highlights the role that ethnic American literatures may play in shaping the stories we tell about epigenetics and race.

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Notes

- 1 Research in epigenetics suggests that parental trauma effects may be intergenerationally transmitted through changes in gene expression, but not in the DNA sequence itself. Studies have first shown the involvement of epigenetic mechanisms in the intergenerational transmission of stress effects in

animals and subsequently also in humans. For a useful research overview, see Yehuda and Lehrner.

- 2 For a discussion of epigenetics and race, see Kuzawa and Sweet; and Sullivan.
- 3 Gill examines works by Alex Haley, Kazuo Ishiguro, Zadie Smith, Colson Whitehead, Salman Rushdie, and Octavia E. Butler, arguing that “the novels both intervene in and respond to the language, images, theoretical frameworks, methodologies and narrative structures deployed by genetic science” (5). By “develop[ing] their own biofictional narrative forms,” the novels “enable us to apprehend how genetic science functions narratively, rather than neutrally or objectively, within the racialized contexts in which it is embedded” (5). The ways in which science is narratively constructed in political and cultural as well as literary narratives matter greatly because “the avowed anti-racism of contemporary genetics is ... not impermeable to the older scientific ideas and contemporary socio-political racisms which press upon it” (5).
- 4 Tynes et al. have, for example, shown that experiences of vicarious trauma in relation to the recurring violence against unarmed people of color correlate with high rates of PTSD in African American and Latinx adolescents.
- 5 Yehuda and Lehrner observe that the

state of the science in relation to human offspring at present is that, whereas some neuroendocrine and epigenetic alterations have been documented in connection with maternal and paternal trauma exposure and PTSD, studies have not yet conclusively demonstrated epigenetic transmission of trauma effects in humans.

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- 6 Drawing on research in affective neuroscience, Hogan’s account of affective narratology posits that narrative structures are to a great extent governed by human emotion systems, which are both biologically fixed and socio-culturally and historically determined. His post-classical narratological framework offers an exciting alternative to the linguistically oriented theories of classical narratology.
- 7 Not only does Gyasi portray Maame’s enslavement and the loss of her children as the root of all trauma, she also does not shy away from scrutinizing West Africa’s complicity in slavery.

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