

Transnational Traumatic Memory and African American Community-Building in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

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Abstract

This article examines trauma writing and community building in *Homegoing* by contemporary Ghanaian-American novelist Yaa Gyasi. The novel juxtaposes divergent traumatic histories experienced by diasporic Africans in both Africa and America, and distinct collective identities shaped by these memories through a parallel generational narrative. It is found that against the backdrop of large-scale African immigration to the United States, the two strands of traumatic memory converge and clash in America, revealing how the legacy of colonialism in Africa shapes both the trauma narratives and community identities constructed by native African Americans around slavery and its legacies. This article argues that the novel envisions a mode of diasporic solidarity that simultaneously looks back to Africa while remaining grounded in the realities of American society to establish a heterogeneous and inclusive African American community.

Keywords: Yaa Gyasi; *Homegoing*; trauma; African American community

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Introduction

In the article “What, Then, Is the African American?,” Violet Johnson (2008) poses the question “who is African American.” She suggests black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are “othering” themselves, either self-consciously or passively, in order to challenge the master status of African Americans with deep roots in the United States. Though the American racial order tends to homogenise and classify all African Americans into one group, new African American immigrants remain committed to “the creation of ethnic groups within a racialized American ethnicity [by producing and reproducing ethnic culture], thus shattering the erroneous, even if enduring, notion of a monolithic black America” (Johnson 2008, 77). This reveals the tension between racial categorisation and ethnic self-definition, a tension that finds literary exploration in *Homegoing* (2016), the debut novel of Ghanaian-American writer Yaa Gyasi (1989–).

The novel begins with the forced separation of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, due to the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, constructing two parallel yet intertwined narrative threads. Between them, Esi’s lineage is ensnared in slavery and its legacies in America, while Effia’s grapples with the epistemic violence of colonialism in Africa. They share the same African ancestry, but follow significantly different historical trajectories, thus enduring distinct forms of trauma and ultimately shaping separate collective identities through the construction of traumatic memories. These differences become especially pronounced in contemporary America amid the influx of new African immigrants, intervening in and reshaping the debate over the question “What is African American?”

Since its publication, *Homegoing* has received significant critical acclaim and scholarly attention. In 2016, it was selected for the National Book Foundation’s 5 Under 35 award by Ta-Nehisi Coates, and in 2017 it received the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award and the American Book Award. Scholars have also conducted in-depth research on it, mainly focusing on the following two themes. Some interpret it from the lens of trauma. For instance, Dirk van Rens analyses the novel’s “postmemory” narrative from the aspect of postcolonial trauma, arguing it takes “a confrontational approach to the traumas caused by slavery and its legacies” and thereby demonstrating a deviation from what Stef Craps calls “normative trauma aesthetics” (van Rens 2023, 768). Marijana Mikić applies an interdisciplinary approach to explore the “epigenetic inheritance” of trauma across generations under slavery and its legacies in the novel, suggesting the novel “traces the cross-generational epigenetic transmission of emotional trauma and resilience triggered by slavery and anti-Black racism” (Mikić 2023, 103). Others examine the issue of identity in the novel. Sarah Heinz points out that during the slavery period, whether staying in Africa or being sold to the United States, African people could not form an identity as “home is elusive, fluid, and far from unproblematic, but at the same time, home is something longed for and desired” (Heinz 2020, 121); Cecilia Addei and Felicia Annin then bring out “how slavery broke African kinship ties and left the characters in a form of identity crisis” (Addei and Annin 2024, 523). In addition, due to the novel’s transnational perspective, Nonki Motahane, Oliver Nyambi, and

Rodwell Makombe focus on African American women and discuss “the evolution of African and African American identities formed out (and in spite) of historical processes associated with the racialization of belonging in America” (2021, 17–18). These existing studies have achieved fruitful results in two important research themes: political aesthetics of trauma, suggesting trauma writing not only critically exposes the cruel nature of Western colonialism, but also highlights the resistance and resilience of African Americans; and identity formation, exploring both identity crisis and the construction of African diasporic identity. However, they have not systematically compared the differences in traumatic memories and cultural identity construction between African people and native African Americans from the perspective of trauma narrative.

Given this, this article aims to fill this gap by exploring the dynamic interplay between trauma and identity in the novel. In the analysis, this article experiments with classic Western trauma theories (by Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and others), originally developed in Holocaust studies, to establish their (in)applicability in the African context. At the same time, postcolonial trauma critiques (by Stef Craps, Sam Durrant, and others) are also employed to examine the limitations of universalist trauma models and to highlight alternative modes of witnessing in non-Western settings. Furthermore, the concept of epigenetic trauma proposed by Amy Lehrner and Rachel Yehuda is analysed to provide a new material basis for the invisible transmission of trauma in American postcolonial contexts. Drawing on these trauma theories, this article makes a systematic comparison of the different traumatic experiences between African people and native African Americans, as well as their selective interpretations of traumatic memories and identity construction, in order to examine their divergent political demands and cultural identities.

Historical Trauma of Colonialism in Africa

The novel *Homegoing* traces the traumatic history of enslavement endured by African people in the eighteenth century through the stories of the half-sisters Effia and Esi. During this period, Western colonialism in Africa was well established. Colonisers developed a comprehensive system of slave production and sale with Africa as its supply base: They obtained enslaved people by attacking villages or inciting tribal wars, and built castle fortresses along the West Coast to systematically coordinate the scale and routes of the trade in enslaved people, ultimately driving the trade to its peak. According to United Nations statistics, “Some 12 to 20 million Africans were enslaved in the western hemisphere after an Atlantic voyage of 6 to 10 weeks” (Sherman-Peter 2022).

The trade in enslaved people tightly connected Africa, Europe, and North America, driving the formation and prosperity of a global capitalist network. In this process, not only European but also African slaveholders and traders excluded enslaved Africans from social relations and family lineages by declaring their social death—“the definition of the slave, however recruited, as a socially dead person” (Patterson 1982, 5). This

reflects the practice of “necropolitics” as described by Achille Mbembe: “[T]he ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003, 11). Across different societies, the criteria for distinguishing “who must die” varied. As Saidiya Hartman notes, “In Ghana, kinship was the idiom of slavery, and in the United States, race was” (2007, 73). In other words, European colonisers marked enslaved Africans as “savages” based on race and skin colour, while African collaborators categorised them as “strangers” in accordance with non-kinship ties. As socially dead, enslaved Africans were abandoned, presenting a state of living dead. They struggled in “the narrow isthmus between illness and recovery, death and survival, mental coherence and insanity” (Smallwood 2007, 34), and continued to suffer the violence of life reduction imposed by traders on enslaved people. As a result, they “provided the answers the slave traders needed: the Africans revealed the boundaries of the middle ground between life and death where human commodification was possible” (Smallwood 2007, 34), and were ultimately reduced to “part and parcel of the life of the commodity” (Hartman 2007, 68). As a form of human commodity serving capitalist development, this became the total sum of their existence.

The transatlantic trade in enslaved people inflicted profound trauma on African people. Drawing on Cathy Caruth’s definition, trauma not only refers to physical injury, but also “describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth 1996, 11). In the context of the trade in enslaved people, this catastrophic event caused grave physical trauma. In *Homegoing*, while attacking and capturing villagers, traders in enslaved people left brutal wounds upon them, stabbing with knives and spears and burning with fire. And during the transportation of enslaved people, the traders “slapped their legs with sticks, making them move faster. For almost half of that week, they walked both day and night ... They were all packed into a dark and damp cellar. ... Now the waste on the dungeon floor was up to Esi’s ankles. There had never been so many women in the dungeon before” (Gyasi 2016, 44–46). Such treatment violently strips enslaved Africans of bodily autonomy, transforming their bodies from sites of personal agency into objects marked by external violence—whippings, branding, scars, which manifest their subjugation. Furthermore, confined to a harsh and enclosed environment filled with faeces, their physical open wounds continued to worsen, sharply increasing the risk of infections and diseases such as skin ulcers and dysentery. In such conditions, the lives of enslaved people were under extreme threat, with mass death the inevitable outcome. According to statistics, “twelve million or sixty million had been sentenced to death” in the trade in enslaved people (Hartman 2007, 31).

Beyond corporeal abuse, the trade in enslaved people also imposed a heavy psychological burden on Africans. In the novel, those captured, such as Esi, frequently experienced pain and fear, crying out under colonial persecution and the threat of death. They remained in a state of hypervigilance, believing that “white men smiling just meant

more evil was coming with the next wave” (Gyasi 2016, 49). This indicates the fear engendered by the trade in enslaved people was not an occasional fright, but a sustained alertness permeating bodily perception. On the other hand, Africans like Effia, who witnessed, condoned, and even directly or indirectly participated in harming their compatriots, were plagued by complex emotions of guilt, anger, and horror. For instance, Quey, the mixed-race son of Effia and a white trader in enslaved people, tormented by a “mix of fear and shame and loathing” (Gyasi 2016, 62), could not help recalling the bloody scenes and the smell of excrement in the slave castle dungeon. This demonstrates that the psychological trauma caused by the trade in enslaved people is not a single or instantaneous reaction, but rather a persistent and intrusive form of traumatic memories, mixed with olfactory (faecal odour), visual (bloody scene), and sensory (emotional perception) dimensions, that lingers among the population. As for Quey’s son James, he even breaks ties with his family to avoid complicity in the trade in enslaved people and its attendant guilt. These examples indicate the slave trade has caused varying degrees and types of psychological trauma to African people. They exemplify symptoms Judith Herman identifies as “hyperarousal” (the persistent expectation of danger), “intrusion” (the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment), and “constriction” (the numbing response of surrender) (Herman 2015, 35).

More profoundly, the trade in enslaved people also tore apart the original social structure of Africa, producing what Kai T. Erikson terms “collective trauma.” It is “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality” (Erikson 1976, 154). In the novel, driven by the profits of the trade in enslaved people, tribes such as the Fante and Asante descended into prolonged hostility and warfare, in which people’s trust and sense of identity were also destroyed. For example, the Asante girl Akosua’s refusal to shake hands with James at their first meeting symbolises fractured communal bonds. Likewise, Maame’s two daughters, Effia and Esi, were also divided by the divisive force of the trade in enslaved people. Under these circumstances, individual trauma converged into a collective crisis of trust and historical burden inscribed upon the African collective psyche.

Even after the trade in enslaved people ended, the collective trauma did not dissipate but persists in the postcolonial era. In *Homegoing*, although James cuts off contact with his family and lives a simple farming life with Akosua, the historical guilt of harming fellow Africans still troubles him and his descendants. These descendants are what Marianne Hirsch calls the “postgeneration,” namely the “descendants of victim survivors as well as of perpetrators and of bystanders who witnessed massive traumatic events” (Hirsch 2012, 3). They do not experience the trauma directly but bear “the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (Hirsch 2012, 5). The postcolonial trauma is most prominently reflected in the fear of fire among African descendants. Each night, Akua has horrible nightmares “where fire consumed everything, where it ran from the coast of Fanteland all the way into Asante. In her dreams the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart.

The firewoman would carry these two little girls with her all the way to the woods of the Inland and then the babies would vanish” (Gyasi 2016, 177). In the nightmares, the firewoman is ancestor Maame. She set a fire to break free from the shackles of enslavement and regained her freedom, but on the other hand, she was separated from her first child, Effia. And in the flames of enemy attacks, she died and was forever isolated from her second child, Esi. This traumatic association with fire does not end with Maame’s death but instead recurs in her descendant Akua and leads to her schizophrenia. She burns her two daughters with fire and severely burns her son in her sleep. Fire, a colonial instrument of destruction and separation, becomes a symbol of intergenerational trauma, persisting not as history’s distant shadow but as a lived, fearful experience reproduced in descendants’ nightmares. This underscores how the trauma inaugurated by the trade in enslaved people is neither erased nor diminished but is continually rearticulated through fear, loss, and psychological distress across generations.

Nevertheless, the novel also points out that African people are not passive recipients of traumatic history but demonstrate subjective agency in the conscious construction and negotiation of trauma. According to Jeffrey Alexander, the reason trauma affects individuals and groups lies primarily in cognition, that is, “events do not, in and of themselves, create collective trauma. Events are not inherently traumatic” (Alexander 2004, 8). Rather, if imaged individually and collectively, events can become traumatic. Given this cognitive and constructive nature of trauma, collective actors can “‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander 2004, 10), thereby engendering cultural trauma as “indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 2004, 1).

In the novel, Effia’s confession regarding her family’s complicity in the trade in enslaved people and Akosua’s accusation that the trade persecutes her family both exemplify this deliberate social construction of trauma. They reveal and intensify a profound identity crisis through the narrative of confession and accusation, conveying that African collectives are unable to fully identify with colonisers or return to precolonial identities. Quey, for instance, “could not fully claim either half of himself, neither his father’s whiteness nor his mother’s blackness. Neither England nor the Gold Coast” (Gyasi 2016, 56); James is also confused about the reason for being rejected by Akosua. These identity dilemmas indicate that the trauma rooted in memories of enslavement, complicity, and fractured roots has become deeply embedded in the African collective consciousness, constructing cultural trauma. However, from another perspective, such trauma narratives also anchor unnamed pain as concrete and recognisable historical events—the colonial trade in enslaved people. This deconstructs the claim in classic Western trauma theory that “trauma is fundamentally unrepresentable, unsayable and unspeakable” (Meretoja 2020, 24). More importantly, it opens possibilities for African collectives to confront colonial history and achieve

mourning. As Hanna Meretoja puts it, “narratives function as a vehicle of genuine (non-subsumptive) understanding precisely when, instead of a comfortable subsumption of new experiences into what we already know, they facilitate change (of pre-given categories, values, identities)” (Meretoja 2020, 30). Trauma narratives, through public discourse on long-suppressed shame and loss, enable that “all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object” (Freud 1991, 253) and support “the gradual acceptance of loss” (Durrant 2004, 9).

Homegoing thus profoundly reveals the multidimensional and enduring impact of Western colonialism, particularly its attendant trade in enslaved people, on African people. It destroys individuals’ bodies and spirits, dissolves communal bonds, and strips Africans of their sense of identity through cultural suppression, burdening them with persistent and profound historical trauma.

The Transatlantic Ghost: The Projection and Evolution of Colonial Trauma in America

In addition to tracing the historical trauma of colonialism in Africa, the novel also portrays the continuation and transformation of this colonial trauma within the American context through the lives of enslaved Africans and new African immigrants in the United States. Under the brutal oppression of the trade in enslaved people, African people represented by Esi are sold to America, severed irrevocably from their continent of origin. However, this historical trauma does not fade with geographic isolation; rather, it is inherited, reconfigured, and projected across time and space within the new socio-political realities of America.

Centring on the lives of Esi and other enslaved Africans in America, the novel vividly depicts the persistent resonance of African colonial traumatic memory on American soil. During the era of slavery, enslaved African Americans were confined to plantations, enduring oppressive living conditions characterised by restricted freedom of movement, insufficient nourishment, relentless labour, and persistent physical violence. For example, characters such as Esi and Ness toil in the fields by day and inhabit rudimentary wooden quarters by night, and are often subjected to brutal whippings by their owners. This portrayal underscores the structural continuity between American slavery and the transatlantic slave trade as components of a unified system of colonial violence. The American plantation emerges as a spatial analogue to the slave ship’s “middle passage” and the dungeons of African slave castles. They operate as “wombs” or “factories,” utilising African American bodies as raw material in the production of commodities and the accumulation of capital (Hartman 2007, 111). They are integral to the so-called “plantation complex” (Rediker 2007, 44), a transnational system that perpetuates the commodification and dehumanisation initiated by the colonial slave trade.

This oppressive structure, isomorphic with colonialism in Africa, produces trauma symptoms in African Americans that closely parallel those experienced by enslaved people in Africa. In *Homegoing*, Ness, born on the plantation, bears shocking scars across her body, much like the enslaved in Africa. These scars serve as somatic archives of physical trauma inflicted upon enslaved African Americans, echoing the brutalities of colonialism in Africa. Moreover, after being sold into enslavement in America, Esi remains enslaved and gradually sinks into emotional numbness. She never smiles and repeatedly recounts scenes aboard the transatlantic slave ship where enslaved Africans “were stacked ten high” and “thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing” (Gyasi 2016, 70). This suggests the traumatic memories of colonialism in Africa have not faded along with geographical separation but continue to haunt enslaved black people like Esi, who suffered psychological traumas akin to those experienced by enslaved people in Africa.

Beyond individual physical and psychological suffering, slavery also ruptured the collective consciousness of enslaved African Americans. In America, enslaved black people were forbidden from speaking their native African languages or using their original names, thus forcibly cutting off the cultural ties with their homeland. This forced alienation obliterated their African identity and tragically rendered them akin to homeless orphans. These traumatic symptoms also occur in Ness and other members of the “postmemory generation.” Ness is marked by her mother Esi’s sorrow, unable to smile naturally and always longing for the black stone her mother lost in the African slave castle. Her descendant, Marcus, behaves like enslaved people in Africa, wetting his pants out of fear when struck by a white elderly man at the museum. Additionally, he has a fear of water; as his father explained, “black people didn’t like water because they were brought over on slave ships. What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men” (Gyasi 2016, 284). These examples indicate that although native African Americans did not directly experience the slave trade in Africa, the traumatic memories about it have been transmitted through familial oral histories, inherited relics, and communal practices within African American communities.

While inheriting traumatic memories related to the transatlantic slave trade, native African Americans also experienced new forms of oppression after the abolition of slavery. These persecutions have exerted a more direct and profound impact on the transmission of their traumatic memories. Crucially, the trajectory of trauma is closely related to evolving racial and political policies targeting African Americans and other marginalised groups. After the end of the Civil War, although slavery was legally abolished, structural oppression against African Americans endured. The ruling class produced its byproduct—racism (Harman 2008, 273), and packaged it to secure a basis for the constant persecution of native African Americans. As Saidiya Hartman states, America after slavery is in fact the “afterlife of slavery” (2008, 45). That is to say, though slavery came to an end legally, its violent logic and traumatic structures persisted within society. For instance, the ruling class instituted a series of systematic modes of

oppression following its logic and organisational form, like Jim Crow laws—“deeply rooted customs [formal and violent separation of the races] were now being written into law” (Oshinsky 1997, 13), and the criminal leasing system, another form of slavery in which “armies of free men, guilty of no crimes and entitled by law to freedom, were compelled to labor without compensation, were repeatedly bought and sold, and were forced to do the bidding of white masters through the regular application of extraordinary physical coercion” (Blackmon 2008, 4). These systems “legally” excluded newly freed African Americans from mainstream society and imposed mass incarceration and forced, hazardous, and unpaid labour, which severely undermined their physical health. In *Homegoing*, characters like H are imprisoned in coal mines for ostensibly trivial infractions, such as not keeping a distance from white people, loitering, stealing, and others during the segregation era. They faced daily threats of whipping, contracted fatal lung diseases, and lived under the constant danger of dust explosions and being buried alive.

Although the advancement of the Civil Rights Movement dismantled legal racial segregation, racism did not withdraw from the historical stage. It shifted from scientific racism rooted in so-called physiological differences to a subtler cultural racism in contemporary times. The latter, legally cloaked in the rhetoric of free choice, rationalises “minorities’ contemporary status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and blacks’ imputed cultural limitations” under the guise of “racism without racists” or “colorblind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 2014, 2). In the novel, Willy warns her son Sonny: “He [the white man] 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 2016, 263). At the institutional level, this new racism always deploys “colour-blind” policies to continue persecuting marginalised groups such as African Americans. Marcus observes that “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” and “friends from his hood were doing five-year bids for possession of marijuana when nearly all the white people he’d gone to college with smoked it openly every day” (Gyasi 2016, 289). Despite legal prohibitions against racial discrimination, in practice African Americans remain subject to racialised law enforcement and judicial harshness. They are surveilled as a “criminal race” and disproportionately incarcerated, enduring overcrowded prisons, inadequate medical care, and pervasive threats such as police brutality. Based on this, it can be said that the racist suppression of African Americans never retreated but mutated, perpetuating a racialised extractive labour regime that is “race marking labor as disposable, as realizing value through expending workers’ lives” (Scarritt 2024, 65). Accordingly, African American bodies remain sites of extraction for sustaining colonial structures of domination and wealth accumulation.

This persistence of systemic racism provides a solid material basis for the inheritance of traumatic memories at the biological level of the epigenome, forming a mediating mechanism for the ongoing trauma among native African Americans. In biology, the

epigenome comprises a set of chemical modifications to DNA and histone proteins that act as switches turning genes on or off, influencing “how the genome is made manifest across a diverse array of developmental stages, tissue types, and disease states” without altering the DNA genomic sequence (Bernstein, Meissner, and Lander 2007, 669). Epigenetic changes induced by trauma can be relatively stable within a consistent environment; that is, “trauma-induced changes and their transmission have often been considered permanent” (Lehrner and Yehuda 2018, 1771). But they will display plasticity when the environment changes. That is to say, when the traumatic environment changes, the DNA genomic sequences controlled by the epigenome may also change, leading to a possible attenuation or disappearance of trauma symptoms across generations. Within mammalian species, especially humans, there remains scholarly debate regarding the extent to which transgenerational epigenetic inheritance can be disentangled from cultural transmission and shared environmental factors (Bird 2024; Horsthemke 2018). Nonetheless, it is widely accepted in academia that “the environment can directly provoke epigenetic changes in somatic cells” (Bird 2024, 2). This challenges the traditional genetic assumption that the genome is fixed and immutable by highlighting the crucial role of the environment in the genetic process, and constitutes “an acceptable explanation for human variability” (Bird 2024, 4).

As for native African Americans, the persistent experience of racialised stressors activates biological stress responses, preserving traumatic memories in germ cells as molecular marks transmitted epigenetically across generations. In *Homegoing*, Esi’s descendants suffer from various forms of racial persecution over time. These persecutions push the epigenome carrying traumatic memories of slavery and its legacies to imprint itself onto DNA genomic sequences and to get passed down through generations. As a result, native African American descendants remain caught in a cyclical trauma. For instance, Kojo constantly worries about the extinction of his bloodline; Beulah occasionally suffers nightmares, fighting and whimpering in her sleep. Moreover, they often exhibit what Mary-Frances Winters describes as “Black fatigue”; that is, “repeated variations of stress that result in extreme exhaustion and cause mental, physical, and spiritual maladies that are passed down from generation to generation” (Winters 2020, 33). In the novel, Kojo bluntly declares he is tired of it, and his descendant Sonny also laments “in America the worst thing you could be was a black man” more than a hundred years later (Gyasi 2016, 260). Such instances fundamentally prove that traumatic memory is inheritable information, which aligns with Yaa Gyasi’s own assertion: “I think trauma is inheritable” (Kellaway and Gyasi 2017). In sum, the epigenetics of trauma are not independent of lived reality, but are mostly sustained by persistent structures of racialised injury. These structures continuously provoke physiological stress responses to preserve epigenetic markers. It has a profound impact on the African American collective, causing generations to endure the torment of suffering and loss.

The decisive role of the environment in the epigenetic transmission of trauma is not only evident within the novel’s thematic content but is also intricately woven into its

generational narrative framework. In the novel, each section centres on a descendant of Esi, delineating the specific racist environments they encounter and the corresponding oppression and trauma they endure across distinct historical periods. Additionally, throughout these narratives, recurring imagery (laden with traumatic residues of slavery) reappears, including motifs such as water/urine and physical scars. Take the image of water/urine as an example: First-generation enslaved African Americans like Esi often suffered incontinence induced by terror during forced transportation and were forced to live amidst their own urine and other excretions. Shockingly, this corporeal humiliation resurfaces symbolically in the sixth generation, as Marcus wets himself in the museum under the intimidation of an elderly white man. Such recurrence demonstrates that although the imagery carrying traumatic memories of enslavement may not be overt in every generation, it is metaphorically embedded in the generational framework, revealing the persistent imprint of slavery and its legacies on the collective memory. From this perspective, this repetition transcends mere narrative detail to assume profound structural significance, forming an essential constituent of the generational framework. It bridges temporal divides between characters, aligning the novel's formal architecture with its thematic preoccupation with the enduring presence of trauma.

In short, whether in content or form, the novel highlights the persistent structural racism that underpins the transmission of traumatic memory among native African Americans. This stance deconstructs classic Western trauma theory based on individual and event-oriented perspectives by foregrounding that the “collective, ongoing, everyday forms of traumatizing violence” are the primary causes of trauma in non-Western and minority communities (Craps 2013, 4). What is more, by firmly anchoring trauma transmission within historical and social realities, the novel effectively addresses the concern that overemphasising epigenetic transmission of trauma may result in “‘molecularizing’ the forms of social suffering,” thereby providing a biological basis for racism (Cerdeña 2023, 632). Instead, it provides a nuanced biological framework that illuminates how systemic racism operates across generations, bridging sociocultural and biological dimensions of trauma.

In regard to trauma transmission engendered by systemic racism, native African Americans are also committed to the construction of cultural trauma. In the novel, some characters like Willie and Amani sing blues, jazz, and other forms of black music, while others orally tell stories of their families being persecuted by racism. Through such singing, storytelling, and other narrative practices, they cultivate a collective cultural trauma that seeks to acknowledge the losses (such as life, freedom, dignity, and cultural continuity) inflicted by racism and integrate these experiences into a shared identity as a pathway towards healing. However, due to the ongoing operation of structural racism, it is fundamentally difficult to achieve this healing process. White mainstream society continues to deny African Americans the full dignity and rights accorded to “complete Americans,” obstructing the crucial stages of mourning, that is, the reinvestment of libido in a new socially recognised identity. Consequently, mourning remains in an

unfinished state, preventing trauma from being fully resolved or channelled into effective political redress. This impasse situates the identity crisis within W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness," that is, "a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 2015, 5). In this situation, the more vigorous the endeavour to articulate cultural trauma, the more apparent becomes the intractability of interrupting biological trauma's transmission without a fundamental transformation of the racist environment.

It is notable that the construction of cultural trauma rooted in racism relatively downplays the more ancient trauma of colonialism in Africa. That is to say, even though the latter persists among contemporary native African Americans, it does not constitute the central axis of their cultural trauma. Instead, African American collective actors tend to foreground slavery and its legacies, alongside systemic racism in its manifold forms, as the primary materials for cultural trauma construction, but push African colonial historical trauma to the background position, leading to the gradual decrease of the impact of its memory. As depicted in the novel, although Amani adopts an African name, she exhibits detachment and indifference towards the "Nation of Islam and Back to Africa business" (Gyasi 2016, 255), which is a subtle symbol of historical trauma yielding to present-day realities.

African American Community-Building through the Bond of Traumatic Memory

By emphasising the agency of collective actors in the construction of cultural trauma, *Homegoing* reveals that traumatic memory is not a static repository of objective historical facts but rather a dynamic narrative resource subject to continual processing and reinterpretation. Through imaginative reworking, traumatised individuals can gradually define a painful injury to the collective, establish the victim, attribute responsibility, and distribute the ideal and material consequences through repeating and re-enacting traumatic experiences. As Jeffrey Alexander points out, "insofar as traumas are so experienced, and thus imagined and represented, the collective identity will become significantly revised" (2004, 22).

In *Homegoing*, the cultural trauma forged by African Americans based on slavery and its enduring legacies powerfully facilitates African American community-building. Confronted with the compounded oppression of slavery and its subsequent systemic racism, African Americans have suffered profound hardship and forged indelible traumatic memories. These memories not only chronicle individual and collective pain but also delineate their shared historical trajectory: from African origins, through the brutal realities on Southern plantations, racial segregation, the Great Migration, the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, to contemporary movements such as

“Black Lives Matter.” This shared historical origin and experiences of oppression then function as an emotional bond connecting African Americans, evoking their profound mutual empathy and understanding as well as pointing out their common direction of racial struggle for freedom and equality. In this sense, race signifies “both a death sentence and the language of solidarity” (Hartman 2007, 6). Therefore, cultural trauma shaped by slavery and its legacies as well as systemic racism underpins the cultural identity of native African Americans, explaining where they come from, what they have experienced, and where they are headed. “It was within this identity that direct experience, the identification ‘former slave’ or ‘daughter of slaves’ became functionalized and made generally available as a collective and common memory to unite all blacks in the United States” (Eyerman 2004, 77), establishing the foundation for community cohesion.

Furthermore, this community built on the basis of cultural trauma is of great significance to the survival and development of African Americans. Materially, it provides essential support and community shelter for oppressed African Americans. For instance, after H is released from prison, the African American community in Pratt City that is largely made up of ex-cons provides him with shelter, and when H’s daughter Willie and her family migrate northward in search of a better life, Harlem opens new possibilities for them. Spiritually and psychologically, this community also furnishes vital comfort and healing for traumatised African Americans. On the Stockham plantation, after Pinky loses her mother and falls into a state of continuous hiccups and mutism, the enslaved community collaborates to ease her psychological trauma. Similarly, during the Civil Rights Movement, collective struggle also inspires people’s aspirations for democracy and equality, reinforcing communal resilience. These instances illustrate that although cultural trauma imposes a heavy historical burden, it also evokes a community spirit of mutual recognition and solidarity, thus forging resilient collective bonds that sustain African Americans through adversity.

On the other hand, through the parallel generational framework, the novel also examines the significance of African American community in the context of the new century from the perspective of new African immigrants. In the novel, each chapter alternately narrates the experiences of one of Effia’s and Esi’s descendants, and horizontally compares the evolving trajectories of trauma endured by African people and the native African Americans respectively. At the beginning in Africa, Effia and Esi once dramatically occupied the same slave castle, one upstairs and the other downstairs, before embarking on separate paths. Centuries later, Effia’s descendant Yaw immigrates to America in contemporary times and converges with Esi’s descendants. This mirrors the historical trajectory of African people, that is, separation followed by reunion in America through immigration. And what should be paid attention to is that the reunion dramatically alters the demographic structure of native African Americans. According to Violet Johnson’s statistics, “until the mid-1970s blacks from Africa constituted a very small proportion of the foreign black population. ... From 1980 to 1989, 134,000 black Africans were admitted into the United States. The number more than doubled in the

next decade, when 323,000 arrived between 1990 and 1999. The 2000 Census revealed that the African immigrant population had almost tripled in the preceding decade” (Johnson 2008, 81–82). The continuous influx of African immigrants into America has significantly changed the ethnic composition of African Americans and challenged the community historically defined by native African Americans grounded on the shared “‘Americanness,’ or the assumption of deep cultural knowledge, collective memory, and common heritage undergirding African American racial identity” (Landry 2018, 127).

As a result, new African immigrants are often racialised as part of the African American community, but their different historical experiences and cultural traumas complicate their integration and challenge established community identities. In the novel, Marjorie, a second-generation new African immigrant, faces exclusion from white classmates because of her dark skin. Her teacher Pinkston remarks: “Here, in this country [America], it doesn’t matter where you came from first to the white people running things. You’re here now, and here black is black is black” (Gyasi 2016, 273). In the eyes of white people, regardless of the cultural differences among African diasporic people, they are homogenised as racialised others on account of their same skin colour.

However, for native African Americans, new African immigrants are not actually members of their community due to their different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, native African American classmates cannot accept Marjorie’s British accent, calling her “white girl” at school. Likewise, with her African background, Marjorie also finds it difficult to understand her native African American classmates’ obsession with rigid racial boundaries. Regarding this estrangement, Yaw explains in Ghana, “where they were the majority, where theirs was the only skin color for miles around. To them, to call someone ‘obroni’ was an innocent act, an interpretation of race as skin color” (Gyasi 2016, 269). Unlike in America, African colonial history did not generate a strict ideology centred on racial lineage. Instead, collective actors actively explore paths to heal cultural trauma through selective interpretation. Akua’s reflection encapsulates this ethos:

When someone does wrong, whether it is you or me, whether it is mother or father, whether it is the Gold Coast man or the white man, it is like a fisherman casting a net into the water. He keeps only the one or two fish that he needs to feed himself and puts the rest in the water, thinking that their lives will go back to normal. No one forgets that they were once captive, even if they are now free. But, still, Yaw, you have to let yourself be free. (Gyasi 2016, 242)

For Akua, the process of initiating and facilitating the trade in enslaved people is akin to casting a net, with white colonialists, African conspirators, and bystanders as fishermen, and African people as the fish caught within it. Although the colonist activity of casting nets has ceased, no fish will forget they were once trapped, that is, African people’s traumatic memories about this history will not easily dissipate. However,

African people cannot remain confined by these traumatic memories indefinitely, but must strive to reconcile with them and achieve freedom for themselves.

As for the way in which this is to be achieved, the novel emphasises the importance of memories but also conscious narratives of traumatic history in order to uphold African unity and cultural autonomy. When Marjorie and Marcus return to their African homeland to visit the slave castle, they find the locals have already transformed it into a landscape for tourism, a place that encourages forgetting rather than remembrance. However, as anthropologist Bayo Holsey states, “silence” itself is also a strategy. It can reconstruct African history and “be productive of particular kinds of identities and positive possibilities” (Holsey 2008, 5), thereby tightly uniting African people and integrating Africa into the global network. This outlook is centrally embodied in the titles of Yaw’s books *Let the Africans Own Africa* and *The Ruin of a Nation Begins in the Homes of Its People*. This collective identity cultivated by African colonial trauma differs fundamentally from that of the native African American community that is centred on slavery and its legacies and emphasises racial binary opposition and continuous struggle. Consequently, when the two African diasporic groups, carrying different cultural traumatic memories, meet in America in the new century, there inevitably arises conflicts embodied as the exclusion of new African immigrant groups by the native African American community.

Confronting this reality, the novel demonstrates an ideal of looking back to Africa while remaining rooted in American realities to construct a heterogeneous African American community. While tracing African cultural trauma, the novel critically unveils the dangers of internalising colonial ideology and harming compatriots, a pattern it warns against repeating within native African American communities that exclude new African immigrants. Therefore, from the perspective of Marjorie and other recent African immigrants, the novel stresses the importance of preserving African cultural traumatic memory and persisting in solidarity and African cultural traditions. She writes the following poem for the black cultural event:

Split the Castle open,
find me, find you.
We, two, felt sand,
wind, air.
One felt whip. Whipped,
once shipped.

We, two, black.
Me, you.
One grew from
cocoa’s soil, birthed from nut,
skin uncut, still bleeding.
We, two, wade.
The waters seem different

but are same.
Our same. Sister skin.
Who knew? Not me. Not you. (Gyasi 2016, 282)

This poem asserts that new African immigrants and native African Americans share common African roots and bloodlines. Despite suffering different forms of harm under the colonial rule, they share a joint fate of being oppressed. And in contemporary times, they simultaneously suffer the oppression of systemic racism in the United States due to their shared non-white skin colour. More importantly, whether forcibly transported or voluntarily emigrating, both groups confront the insurmountable distance from their African homeland. This is powerfully suggested by the novel's title *Homegoing*, rather than *Homecoming*: while "homecoming" implies a realistic, traversable journey between one's current residence and ancestral home, "homegoing" evokes the notion that Africa is no longer a place the African diasporas can simply return to as "home." Grounded in this common origin and shared predicament, the African American community should embrace new African immigrants and other African diasporic groups with greater openness and value the historical significance of African cultural trauma so as to strengthen the collective resistance to racism.

At the end of the novel, Marcus's quest for his African roots offers a concrete embodiment of this ideal. While tracing the family history, he not only investigates the family's historical development in the United States but also perceives the remote connection with Africa through the prayers and singing of his grandmother Willie, eventually following Marjorie back to Africa to visit the slave castle from which his ancestor Esi was taken. During this process, his traumatic fear of water is finally healed. It proves that only by facing and integrating the fractured historical sources can traumatic memories be healed and a broader and deeper global African diaspora solidarity built on recognition and dialogue across difference be achieved. This offers an ideal path forward beyond community models based on a single trauma narrative.

Conclusion

The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed a large influx of African immigrants to the United States. They have greatly changed the social structure of native African Americans and challenged the community culture historically grounded in slavery and its legacies. This reality is profoundly reflected in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*. Through its nuanced portrayal of divergent traumatic histories experienced by African diaspora populations in Africa and America, the novel reveals African people and native African Americans have constructed distinct cultural traumas and communal consciousness: The former demonstrates the importance of tracing traumatic history but practising selective silence to foster solidarity and assert cultural autonomy as a form of resistance against colonial oppression, while the latter, grounded in slavery and ongoing systemic racism, stresses racial binary opposition as central to the fight for equality. Both narratives have historically been pillars of their survival and struggle. However, due to

its inheritance of Western colonial discourse, the latter also demonstrates the characteristics of closure and exclusivity.

Against this background, the novel's parallel narrative framework foregrounding the traumatic memories of new African immigrants carries significant import. It corrects the narrative tradition in African American (and black British) fiction that conceptualises Africa as a "landscape of the mind" (Kamali 2016, 2), and indicates the cultural roots of native African Americans lie in Africa by tracing African traumatic history. This serves as a cautionary reminder that the African American community should go beyond the closed identity constructed by a single trauma and keep an open attitude towards Africans and even the global African diasporas, so as to dissolve the influence of colonial discourse within American society on itself. Only in this way can native African Americans acknowledge their own existence and that of other African diasporas as a shared "being," "a being that we might learn to think of on the one hand as our embodiedness [to recognize that we 'cobelong' simply as sentient beings] and on the other as our indebtedness [to have a simple respect for human suffering that grounds our awareness of injustice and produces a non-exclusionary form of solidarity]" (Durrant 2004, 113). This represents a crucial step towards forging a more inclusive, dynamic solidarity capable of addressing the multifaceted realities of African diasporic existence.

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