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"Veil Walking": Assertions of Bodily Autonomy and Black Mothering as Forms of Agency in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

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Introduction

Ghanaian American Yaa Gyasi's 2016 debut novel, *Homegoing*, focuses on the trials and triumphs of two sides to Maame's matriline representing a total of eight generations affected by conditions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, American chattel slavery, and British colonial occupation in Ghana. The compact nature in which Gyasi details over three centuries of history provides readers with an expansive omniscience to draw clear connections between each generation's progress to the preceding generation's actions. Westernized narratives that victimize the global Black community and logical fallacies that conclude "that [slavery] has no bearing on our present" are effectively subverted through the novel's commitment to bolstering Ghanaian and African American resistance alongside the evolving economic, political, legal, social, and ideological systems that preserve colonialism and slavery's legacies (Goyal and Gyasi 476). In order to examine resistance in *Homegoing,* it's essential to recognize the ways these systems intersect in Ghanaian and American histories.

The entanglement of European colonization of Africa, the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and America's system of settler colonialism are "nevertheless all connected to the history of the capitalist world-system" (Loomba 24). Because of this, scholars of colonialism and postcolonialism have debated the use of these terms in a modern context due to the extensive nature of colonialism's history. During the convergence of these collaborative systems, competition for political and financial power between European leaders was fought through unrelenting expansionism, resulting in "military violence…to secure both occupation and trading 'rights' ... [and a] colonial genocide in North America" (Loomba 25). In conjunction with European colonizers' military tactics to implement ethnic cleansing against Native Americans, the violent usurpation of land in North America led to the development of plantations which

relied heavily on the labor provided by enslaved peoples captured and purchased by the highest bidder. This unethical trade exchange maintained European nations' prosperity and also manufactured economic dependency for nations that were colonized: "it restructured the economies…so that there was a flow of human and natural resources between colonised and colonial countries" (Loomba 21). Dismantling systems developed to support European colonialism, such as the Transatlantic Slave Trade, did not inherently exterminate the ideologies or economic structures established from this exploitative racial hierarchy.

Original trade agreements that were forcibly arranged under the threat of violence led to enmeshed economical systems so that even in a modern context, the impact of these invasive systems remains evident:

> It might seem that because the age of colonialism is over, and because the descendants of once-colonized peoples live everywhere, the whole world is postcolonial. And yet the term has been fiercely contested on many counts…if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and or culturally dependent) at the same time. We cannot dismiss the importance of either formal decolonisation, or the fact that unequal relations of colonial rule are re-inscribed in the contemporary imbalances between 'first' and 'third' world nations. (Loomba 28-29)

These conditions render the term postcolonialism problematic as it can mistakenly suggest that the adverse impacts on colonized nations have disintegrated, whereas in today's global economy, "The former slave-trading nations…are also currently the wealthiest in the world" (Howard 77). Many scholars therefore encourage reevaluating the use of the term postcolonial, leading to "the

coinage of words like neocolonialism, neopatrimonialism and paternalism, amongst others to describe the nature of the relationship between Africa and her former colonial masters and their allies" (Okon and Ojakorotu 228). Although a scholarly consensus has not been reached, this ongoing debate emphasizes the urgency to thoroughly dissect power imbalances that continue to wield influence over historically disempowered nations from centuries of wealth and power built on White supremacy.

Discussions on the language used to describe the sustained global inequality resulting from colonialism and slavery also necessitate conversations regarding the ways these enduring structures can be effectively deconstructed. Adjusting terminology has not subsequently discouraged "foreign powers [from continuing] to project their interests and impose their preferences on the [African] continent" (Okon and Ojakorotu 228). One approach to remedying the disproportionate global recognition of freedom began as a collective movement between "W.E.B. Du Bois, a leading African-American theorist of the Pan-Africanism movement…and Kwame Nkrumah," the former President of Ghana and "leader for independence and African unity" (Price). This leadership pairing advocated for the liberation of Black individuals across the African diaspora, highlighting the concurrent challenges Ghana and America faced at the time:

> President Nkrumah declared "Ghana will be free at last" in front of thousands of supporters…[and] Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King were among the guests. When the Union Jack came down and the Ghana flag was raised, King described later how tears welled up in his eyes…he might have been thinking about how just recently African Americans had struggled for freedom during the brutal 381-day bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. (Price)

The mutual exchange of support and idea development between Du Bois, King, and Nkrumah became essential for forward progress in their own national movements for justice and equality, embodying the tenets of Pan-Africanism. Nkrumah's advocacy for the specific needs of Ghana differed from the specific needs of African Americans such as Du Bois and King, making their commitment to one another's causes a public statement of solidarity to collectively improve the global conditions of Black lives.

However, Pan-Africanism is not universally accepted as an adequate philosophy. While its objective of "work[ing] toward collective liberation of people of African descent fighting domination" is ethical, many contest that "liberation requires dismantling local forms of oppression," requiring a more targeted approach tailored to each nation's systems of oppression (Jaji 132). To equate the political, social, and economic dynamics of modern-day African countries to the obstacles of Black Americans would ignore America's global influence and, as some caution, mislead Westerners to "imagine [Africa] as culturally fixed and unchanged since the Transatlantic Slave Trade" (Roberts 171). Although some contest the practicality of Pan-Africanism, its principles continue to be explored by scholars and novelists who celebrate "the survival strategies developed in the face of the depredations of the transatlantic slave trade" and the "resistance movements adapting African cosmologies to a new context" that aim to restore what was unrightfully taken (Jaji 130).

In addition to contributing to the development of Pan-Africanism, Du Bois's theory of "double-consciousness" continues to resonate as an effective affirmation of the adverse psychological effects of racial inequality stemming from colonialism and slavery, particularly within America's Black community. Born in the years following Emancipation and raised during the Jim Crow Era, Du Bois coined the term double-consciousness "to capture and convey

African Americans' feelings of dissonance and dividedness between their distant African ancestral homeland and their present American environment" (Rabaka 75). Legal segregation and racial discrimination constrained the personal freedoms of Black Americans while the ruthless division of families during slavery severed people from their ancestral heritage and cultural knowledge. Because of these forms of isolation and the emphasis on compliance for survival, he suggested that there was "a veil separating the socially constructed white world from the black world" (Roebuck Sakho 13). The history of violence and subjugation against Black individuals creates a barrier, a veil, that continually affects the way White society views people of color and even how Black individuals see themselves.

Over a century later, Jacqueline Roebuck Sakho built upon Du Bois's theory and developed the term "Veil Walking". This term acknowledges the enduring existence of the veil in Du Bois's metaphor but that "black folks learn to manage living within both worlds…passing back and forth between them" which "shifts the veil metaphor from a barrier to be lifted or shattered to one that can be passed through and thus serves to transform marginalization from a victimized position to one of power" (Roebuck Sakho 13). Du Bois's term highlights the injustice inflicted upon Black people that limits ability and access while Roebuck Sakho adjusts this concept by diminishing the strength of the veil to a permeable barrier. Through mutual recognition of shared experiences both behind and beyond the veil, the Black community can support one another's individual agency when navigating both White and Black spaces. Choosing to walk through or remain behind the veil suggests that Black individuals are empowered to select when and with whom they voice resistance, maintain reticence, avoid conflict, or refuse compliance. The choice of which strategy to employ is enfranchised by

communal support, allowing a collective regained control over environments that have historically enforced racial power imbalances after colonialism and slavery.

Gyasi's *Homegoing* spans multiple generations anchored to a matriline, offering a panoptic view of the persistent repercussions of colonialism and slavery and the dissenting responses in both Ghana and America. In an interview with Yogita Goyal, Gyasi explains that she "was absolutely thinking about diaspora" while writing her novel (Goyal and Gyasi 477). Although Pan-Africanism may be debated, the novel's empathetic and comprehensive perspective of the brutal conditions that coerced some into making morally dubious decisions and the remarkable resilience against evolving forms of race-based discrimination emulates the laudable objectives of Du Bois, King, and Nkrumah's allyship in the 1950s and 1960s. While the specific conditions of Ghanaian and African American characters' lives differ, the dual point of view structured in alternating chapters "insists that the two should be read together as part of the same story" (Goyal and Gyasi 474). Divided by slavery's forced removal and colonialism's intrusive control, the protagonists on both sides of the matriline exemplify Roebuck Sakho's theory of "Veil Walking" on a diasporic scale by refusing submission to cultural hierarchies and strategically securing the next generation's survival. The novel's structural design and historical authenticity are a beautiful tribute to the varied methods of resistance both Ghanaians and Black Americans employ to reclaim autonomy within multifaceted global systems of oppression.

Throughout the following chapters, characters are analyzed in various contexts to fully capture each character's multidimensional strength, ensure they are not confined to the limitations of one analytical category, and commemorate the multilayered approaches of reclaiming agency against centuries of systemic racism. Chapter 1 investigates instances in which Gyasi's characters exert their bodily autonomy not only for individual preservation but to

further the freedoms of the next generation and make cumulative advancements toward sexual freedom. Chapter 2 centers biological Black mothering as an essential method of protection and resistance that secures the next generation's connection to the matriline and ensures the survival of future generations to navigate the inevitable perils sustained by White supremacy. Finally, Chapter 3 expands on Chapter 2's analysis and explores diverse expressions of Black mothering in the novel including grandmothers and community members who provide opportunities to heal and restabilize in the face of systemic oppression. When examining these forms of agency, the analysis situates each character's story within historical context and celebrates the power of communal tenacity to deteriorate unjust systems of power.

Chapter 1: Advancement of Bodily Autonomy and Sexual Freedom in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

"Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves" (Gyasi 38)

Slavery's Legacy of Violence Against Black Bodies

In her novel, *Homegoing,* Yaa Gyasi's fictionalized account of two half-sisters divided by the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the journeys of their descendants effectively traces systemic violence against Black bodies in both Ghana and America. Her writing marginalizes voices of colonizers and centers the perspective on the experiences of the enslaved and colonized. Although honest in her portrayal of slavery's brutality, she does not reduce characters to incapacitated victims impaired by colonial powers and instead emphasizes their efforts to reclaim bodily and sexual autonomy to resist oppressors and the racist infrastructure that protects them. Over the course of nine generations, the novel depicts a pattern of progression and regression in the characters' rights to their own bodies to symbolize America's and Ghana's nonlinear and grueling evolution toward liberty. *Homegoing*'s multigenerational perspective provides a compressed overview of the ways in which the Transatlantic Slave Trade and British colonial occupation of Ghana denied autonomy alongside the collaborative efforts to restore it.

Colonialism and slavery deliberately worked to strip individuals of their identities to assert dominance and maintain control and the depth of this cultural excision is still being uncovered in modern research. For centuries, scholars resisted the conclusion that nations like Ghana primarily relied on matriarchal systems prior to European colonization. In response to matriarchy's widespread dismissal, anthropologist and scholar of African and African American studies, Tarikhu Farrar, challenged conclusions that claimed there was "no evidence of

[matriarchy’s] existence, outside of myth and legend” (Farrar). When researchers dismissed the existence of matriarchal political and social systems, including “even a few Afrocentric scholars [who] reached similar conclusions”, they nullified oral tradition as an adequate system of historical preservation and anthropological knowledge among African communities while also neglecting to consider the systematic erasure of African cultures during colonization which likely made evidence more challenging to find (Farrar).

The root cause of this unanimous denial, Farrar suggests, is that “matriarchy, as conceived by nineteenth century and early twentieth century social theorists, is best understood as patriarchy's nightmare. It is the world turned upside down; a world in which women become ruthless, petty dictators in a family form and a society under their domination” (Farrar). Colonization’s Eurocentric ideologies that prioritize Western customs, such as patriarchal authority, obscured academic speculations resulting in misinformed conclusions. Farrar’s findings firmly contradicted previous theories that disregarded the possibility that West Africa heavily relied on matriarchy:

> I have become more acquainted with the several female titles (or "stools," to use the Akan designation) collectively referred to, in English, by the term queenmother. The thing that I find most fascinating, and important to the study of African history and culture, is the very real political power embodied in these titles in former times…the Akan queenmother, more properly, the ohemmaa (literally, "female ruler"), wielded true political power and could, under certain conditions, assume full control of central authority; she could become the "king," the omanhene. (Farrar)

Farrar’s resistance to scholarly consensus introduced crucial elements of Akan culture and its history of matriarchal power to academia without being corrupted or erased by Occidental

perspective. His insights, and those of others who share in his work correcting disinformation, demonstrate the extensive clutch colonialism continues to have over historical narratives, especially those imposed on non-Western societies.

Research such as Farrar's clarifies that as a result of colonial rule, Ghana's matriarchal traditions shifted toward patriarchal systems, and women's bodies were eventually used to prioritize the aspirations of men:

> In the nineteenth century Asante and Akan provinces were hierarchical societies. Patriarchy and gerontocracy dominated…the state mediated sexuality and gender relations, recognizing male sexual needs but not those of women. As a sign of wealth, elite men sought to accumulate women through various forms of marriage, as well as to acquire subjects and land. (Miescher 8)

This practice of leveraging women's bodies to gain power and influence among the Akan people was symptomatic of and intertwined with slavery's aspirations of ownership and control. British colonialist structures in Ghana and North America during the Transatlantic Slave Trade thrived on exploiting Black communities to obtain and expand land ownership, global economic power, and cultural domination. This established a racial caste system used to rationalize unimaginable cruelty that prioritized Eurocentric ideals and vilified otherness. Colonizers inflicted a looming threat of capture and enslavement over Ghana and other African countries, resulting in Big Men arranging marriages between women in their village and slavers in order to protect their community from enslavement. Using women and raw materials such as palm oil as peace-keeping insurance created a dangerous exchange economy that fueled competition between villages and led to a widespread cycle of kidnappings and other forms of violence that fortified colonizers' control.

Slavery and colonialism's fixation on cultural imperialism normalized control over bodies for political and economic advancement. In order to sustain power imbalances, colonizers heavily relied on abuse and intimidation, epitomizing the patriarchal values and tyrannical ambitions embedded in slavery. The Transatlantic Slave Trade was designed to uphold the intrusive commoditization and ownership of land which was mirrored in the ownership, commoditization, and intrusion of human bodies. Historical records have been intensively studied to reveal that sexual violence, particularly against Black women, was commonplace:

> Serial rape of enslaved black women by slave owners/masters and forced sexual activity of all kinds, from breeding to coerced intimacy, was deeply embedded in the institutionalization of white supremacy and domination, and has become central to how we imagine the period of slavery (Lindsey and Johnson 172-173).

Black women in particular were subjected to rape and sexual violence in part due to their ability to birth children into slavery for profit. However, it is important to note that, while not as well-documented or frequently discussed, Black men were also victims of "outright physical penetrative assault, forced reproduction, sexual coercion and manipulation, and psychic abuse" (Foster 447). Slavers were emboldened to violate Black bodies because of the immense economic, political, and social web of complicity among nations that authorized and relied on their enslavement for power and capitalistic gain.

Abuse for enslaved individuals was routine and, as explained by Samuel Wood who compiled first-hand accounts of slavery in an 1805 broadside advocating for abolition, included barbaric human suffering such as "drop[ping] hot sealing-wax on…negroes after flogging", "[using a] whip…made of plaited cow-skin, with a thick strong lash…[that can] take skin off a horse's back", "pregnant women so severely whipped, as to have miscarried in consequence of

it", and "[throwing] a slave into… boiling cane juice" (Wood). Documentations such as Wood's preserve evidence of the ways in which slavers reduced Ghanaians and people of other African nations into cargo and corrupted the way Western society perceived their humanity which then unjustly ratified the systematic psychological, sexual, and physical abuse used to terrorize people into subservience among European societies. Slavers' brazen public display of disregard for human life cultivated lasting beliefs of a racial hierarchy yielding abuse against Black bodies beyond the institution of slavery which signifies the cultural remnants of colonialism's ideologies.

Reclaiming Bodily Autonomy: Nonlinear Progress Toward Liberation

Gyasi's novel is crafted to reveal how the structural foundations of slavery and colonialism exhibit intertwined pursuits to conquer land and domination over Black bodies, forever shaping the lives of generations across the African diaspora. Her work carefully ensures that the White oppressors in her narrative who eagerly assert their virility over others do not also assume ownership over the novel's purpose while also unabashedly acknowledging their violent transgressions engendered by White supremacy and patriarchal structures. Gyasi's motif of bodily autonomy is traceable across generations, and though often marked by moments of devastating restraint and maltreatment, she gives reverence to each character's suffering and evident resilience in the face of injustices they endure.

One of the ways *Homegoing* depicts a fight for bodily autonomy is through suicide, highlighting the dire circumstances under which enslaved people suffered but also fierce noncompliance with colonialism's manipulation. Maame, the first generation of the novel's genealogy, served as a house girl for a Big Man who raped her. In order to escape, she set a fire and was rescued by another village which then led to her marriage to another Big Man. Years

later, Maame is informed of a village fire that was intentionally set to capture members of her community, and she is overwhelmed with the threat of returning to enslavement. Rather than returning to similar conditions, Maame begins repeatedly whispering "I can't do it again" to herself while "rocking back and forth and cradling the fat flap of her stomach in her arms as though it were a child," and eventually decides to run into the fire (Gyasi 42). The interplay of these violent attacks and Maame's devastating decision illustrate the heightened tension between villages and psychological torment caused by uncertainty under the rise of colonialism and slavery. Her daughter Esi later reflects on her decision, recognizing that her mother "would die rather than run into the woods ever again, die before capture, die even if it meant that in her dying, Esi would inherit that unspeakable sense of loss, learn what to meant to be un-whole" (Gyasi 42). While the institution of slavery undoubtedly created the conditions under which Maame makes this decision, her response, while tragic, demonstrates her power to resist the coercive methods slavers used to control others. Maame subverts the assumption that she, like the rest of the villagers, will run helplessly from the fire for survival only to be embraced by slavery's abuses. Gyasi's choice to begin the novel with Maame's story establishes that one key aspect of resistance to colonialism and slavery throughout the novel comes in the form of exerting bodily autonomy, including an individual's choice between life and death.

A similar dissenting suicide occurs when Maame's descendent, H, nearly dies in his mother's womb shortly after her capture. H's mother, Anna, is arrested by Baltimore police following the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that required escaped slaves to be returned to their owners. Although Anna did not escape, the new legislation imposed state-determined parameters to distinguish freed slaves from escaped slaves which placed all Black lives at risk of capture. Because Anna mistakenly forgot to carry her freedom papers while out

for a walk, she was forcibly taken to work at a plantation in Georgia. While being questioned by plantation owners, Anna makes a H, like Esi, is orphaned and enslaved: "My old master…asked her to name me somethin' proper before she gave birth, but she refused. She killed herself. Master said they had to slice me out her belly 'fore she died" (Gyasi 165). Anna's preference for death over slavery underscores the harsh realities slaves endured. Maame and Anna's suicides are separated by nearly a century and occur in two different nations suffocating under White supremacy, acknowledging slavery's widespread torture and control. Their deaths are a response to systemic racial terrorism and an impactful form of protest against relinquishing bodily autonomy to slavers, abdicating their humanity, and accepting terms of persecution that can authorize their murder. Maame and Anna choose death on their own terms rather than living a life of involuntary servitude, ultimately denying colonizers and slavers the bodies and labor on which they rely to uphold their power. Gyasi demonstrates that while slavery's violence reverberates throughout the African diaspora, resistance to this oppression also rebounds through the choices her characters make regarding their own bodies.

In addition to suicide, Gyasi also explores the paradoxical value of strength under the conditions of slavery with characters such as Sam and H, who are exploited for their physicality but also rely on their strength for empowerment. Sam, a slave purchased to work on Tom Allan's plantation with Esi's daughter, Ness, has a notably muscular physique that makes him desired by plantation owners and powerful enough to undermine their attempts to control him:

> He is the large, muscular body of the African beast, and he refuses to be caged…Ness knows that the Devil must have paid a great deal of money for him, and therefore expects hard work, but nothing anyone does seems to tame him. On his first day he fights with

> another slave, spits on the overseer, and is stood on a platform and whipped in front of everyone until the blood on the ground is high enough to bathe a baby. (Gyasi 80)

Sam's body is a dichotomous space of oppression and power. His stature increases his value to slavers, motivating them to retain him, and allowing them to leverage his impressive size to warn slaves that regardless of their value in labor, all are subject to violent retribution. However, his body also empowers his self-preservation with his fear-inducing strength and tolerance for unimaginable pain which sabotages attempts to portray him as lesser.

This same conflict between the limitations and benefits of physical strength is exhibited decades later when Sam's grandson, H, also faces exploitative labor. H is born into slavery and grows up in America witnessing the progression into abolition following the Civil War. However, because "The Thirteenth Amendment offered legal cover and social acceptability for Jim Crow apartheid at its most abject and murderous degree within spaces such as the chain gain, the convict lease camp, and the peonage camp…[which were] public/private hybrids of neoslavery", he also witnesses Black Americans face mass incarceration due to the legalized free labor of convicts (Childs 66). At one point, H "wondered if there was a black man left in the South who hadn't been put in prison at one point or another" (Gyasi 173). The Thirteenth Amendment seemingly outlawed slavery but specifies that "involuntary servitude" can be used "as a punishment for crime" (US Const. amend. XIII, sec. 1). This clause compounded with Jim Crow Laws enabled law enforcement to increase arrests of freed Black citizens, developing forms of neoslavery represented in H's story.

Like Sam, H is particularly strong, making him particularly desirable to private business owners and state-operated projects that required manual labor. His strength is emphasized when, "It took three policemen to knock H down, four to put him in chains" (Gyasi 157). These men's

strength allows them to withstand maltreatment but also incentivizes their capture. When H is forced into a convict leasing program in an Alabama coal mine, he earns the nickname "Two-Shovel" for being the first man to ever use a shovel in each hand to independently meet the quota of two workers (Gyasi 170). Once again, as witnessed with Sam, H's strength is his power that commands respect and fear, but is also the feature that makes him a target for exploitation. The parallel nature of Sam and H's struggles, which are separated by two generations and emancipation, demonstrates that assumed control over Black bodies is traceable from one legal system to the next but also that the stamina of Black bodies continually resisted those structures.

While the conditions under which these two relatives' struggle overlap, the differing outcomes of Sam and H's exertion of bodily autonomy signifies America's gradual shift because of previous generations' sustained resistance. Sam initially resists cultural assimilation when he "fights with another slave" and "spits on the overseer" (Gyasi 80). When these attempts lead to physical abuse, he helps Ness plan an escape North through the Underground Railroad. Upon hearing of their escape, plantation owner, Tom Allan, assembles a search team that closes in on Ness, Sam, and their son Kojo. Fearing for the wellbeing of their child, Ness hands over their infant to another woman and Ness and Sam surrender themselves. When Sam and Ness are brought back to the plantation, Tom Allan "made [Ness] watch. He made them all watch: the rope come out, the tree branch bend, [Sam's] head snap free from body" (Gyasi 87). Sam's continual fight for self-governance is forced to an end because Tom publicly lynches Sam, using Sam's body to warn other slaves of his absolute power and the disposability of Black bodies under slavery. Sam's hanging body is a devastating reminder that resistance comes with consequences and also demonstrates the consequences of continuing to yield to corrupt authority.

Sam and H's physical strength forced them into physical labor leading them to become resilient survivors of slavery and neoslavery, but H's strength exists within a different time period, enabling him the freedom that Sam was denied. H's remarkable strength leads him to become a respected member of the coal mine, "and his hard work and skill had shaved a year off his sentence" (Gyasi 166). H's life is restrained under the parameters defined for him under Jim Crow, but his body's endurance enables his survival and even the expedited termination of his unjust conviction. Once he serves his sentence, he chooses a life with his partner, Ethe, earns money for his physical labor, and joins a union to implement protection against unsafe working conditions. While exercising his union right to engage in a strike, H witnesses Black children brought in shackles to replace the labor of striking union workers. When one child tries to flee, he is shot, and H retaliates against his unjust killing: "H grabbed a white man by the throat and held him over the vast pit…[the man's'] blue eyes, bulging now that H's grip had tightened" (Gyasi 174). While Sam is put to death for attempting to run away, H's body persists under dangerous conditions, is freed from servitude, and is even physically combative toward a White man to grieve his frustrations of injustice. These divergent outcomes signify America's gradual relinquishing control over Black bodies and the importance of Black bodies in that fight for freedom.

While Sam and H's endurance highlights one method of bodily autonomy that resists oppression, Gyasi offers a contrasting mode of defiance through the motif of abscondence, seen in the journeys of James, Abena, and Akua. These characters make up three generations of Effia's matriline Ghana and they all decide to remove themselves from inequitable circumstances, refusing patriarchal and racial hierarchies. When James learns of his father and grandfather's involvement in orchestrating the slave trade, he grows increasingly resentful of his

life built from corruption and uncomfortable with accepting his arranged marriage to Amma. For these reasons, he "traveled to Asanteland. He slept in caves and hid in trees…And when he finally got to Akosua, on the fortieth day of his travels, he found her waiting for him" (Gyasi 109). James's choice to leave his family leads others to conclude that he died in the Asante-British War, absolves him of familial, political, and business obligations that preserve human trafficking, and establishes a new life living in a small village with Akosua, someone he genuinely cares for. James is born into power and privilege and rather than accept his status of superiority, he determinedly untangles himself from corruption. His decision to flee signals his refusal to remain complicit in immoral negotiations that reduce Ghanaians to chattel and inflict pain on thousands of lives, challenging the notion that James and other slavers are forever indebted to the sovereignty of slavery.

James's daughter, Abena, also exhibits the same rebellious spirit when she leaves her community because, while it does offer James a new life, it eventually disparages her and her family. Her father's lack of agricultural success as an outsider in this new community has earned him the nickname Unlucky, which obstructs the possibility of her marriage to Ohene Nyarko, a friend from her childhood with whom she later engages in an extramarital affair. Though Abena is continually promised an eventual proposal, Ohene explains that "To get the cocoa plants" needed to mitigate the community's crop failure, he "had to promise a man in Osu that [he] would marry his daughter" and "cannot marry Abena this season" (Gyasi 152). Colonialism's economic exploitation directly interferes with her longest companionship. During British occupation in Ghana, arranged marriages were frequently used as "a business transaction, entered into principally with a view to mutually enhancing the (cocoa) productive capacities of the parties" (Duncan 304). The cocoa plants as well as the use of a woman's body to solidify the

village's dedication to agricultural advancements are evidence of colonial exploitation, economic imperialism, and patriarchal suppression that capitalizes on their village's ongoing struggle with insufficient harvests. Abena refuses to wait for Ohene and wields her right to remove herself from the community that insists on her inferiority. Her decision to leave her village to start a new life in Kumasi is painful, but signals her unwillingness to sacrifice her integrity, directly challenges patriarchal values that prevent her from a life with Ohene, and dismisses intrusive economic manipulation endorsed by colonial powers.

Abena and Ohene's daughter, Akua, follows her mother and grandfather's tradition of removing herself to escape injustice when she leaves Kumasi and marry Asamoah. Unfortunately, when Abena leaves her parents and village behind, she unexpectedly moves closer to structures of White supremacy and patriarchy when she finds sanctuary in the deceitful promises of Christian Missionaries. When Akua questions a man only referred to as the Missionary about her mother's suspicious death, he admits that he "took [Abena] to the water to be baptized" and "she thrashed as [he] lowered her down into the water. She thrashed and thrashed and thrashed, and then she was still" (Gyasi 189). The presence of Christian missionaries was widely unwelcomed in African countries because of their infamous reputation of violence:

> The objective of missionary activities in Africa was to strip persons or groups of their values in order for non-Africans to own and control Africans psychologically and physically (slavery). This meant using ruthless and any means necessary to achieve the Christian objectives. (Ephirim-Donkor 23-24)

The Missionary stripped Akua's mother of her bodily autonomy by drowning her under the guise of religious salvation, using "any means necessary" to exert his dominance over her and her

vilified religious and cultural differences. In response to this news, Akua recognizes the injustice wrongfully imposed on both her and her mother and refuses to accept a life under these conditions and leaves, like her ancestors Abena and James: "'You can't keep me here,' Akua said [to the Missionary]. She was gathering the last of her things out of her quarters. Asamoah would be back before nightfall to get her" (Gyasi 189). Akua declines the Missionary's access to her body and her beliefs, leaving for a life with Asamoah in Edweso. Akua is slowly accepted into Edweso's community and remains there through her old age, eventually becoming a well-respected Elder after an arduous journey of personal healing. While not always successful due to the pervasiveness of colonial influence and at the expense of having to shoulder the responsibility of rebuilding a new life, together, James, Abena, and Akua make incremental progress toward autonomy across three generations. Collectively, they create opportunities for themselves and their descendants to pursue lives that retreat further away from systems that are strengthened by their degradation. Gyasi demonstrates that cultural defiance is not solely through physical resistance or retaliation but can be through abstaining from an environment that depends on the victimization of one group to benefit another.

Gyasi also demonstrates that self-acceptance can be a form of bodily autonomy that subverts oppression through characters such as Ness and Yaw, who embrace the physical scars that are inflicted by slavery and colonization. Ness's body is disfigured from violent whippings of slavery that leave scars severe enough that when a plantation owner's wife saw them, "she fainted outright" (Gyasi 73). Despite these scars that are jarring enough to warrant a visceral reaction, Ness feels they are "more like the ghost of her past made seeable, physical" and Ness "didn't mind the reminder" (Gyasi 73). While oppressors struggle to stomach the proof of violence inflicted upon her, Ness is desensitized to the point that she finds comfort in baring her

personal history of endurance. Her radical acceptance of her deformed body demonstrates her refusal to accept slavery's attempts to invalidate her humanity.

Like Ness, Akua's son, Yaw, also finds a way to accept his scars that resulted from his near-death experience as an infant. Akua's recurrent trauma being raised by the Missionary manifests into a psychosis or possession by a firewoman spirit that results in her unknowingly killing her children in a fire. Yaw, her only surviving child, is forever marked with distinct scars that become his insecurity and a reminder of his unknown past, often wishing "he were a beautiful man, with skin as smooth as clay" (Gyasi 233). He suffers at the public attention they garner, such as when "a little boy no older than four, holding the long train of his mother's wrapper, pointed at Yaw with his tiny index finger. 'Look, Mama, his face! His face!'" (Gyasi 234). A visit with his mother offers an opportunity for them to acknowledge their matching scars, the physical reminders of the intergenerational trauma passed from mother to son, which transforms his shame into pride in his family's resilience against colonialism's threats:

> His mother had put her hand on his scar, running her fingers along the ruined skin that he alone had touched for nearly half a century. She continued, undeterred by the anger in his voice. She took her own burned fingers from the lost eyebrow to the raised cheek to the scarred chin. She touched all of it, and only once she had finished did Yaw begin to weep. (Gyasi 239)

After Akua traces the lines and acknowledges Yaw's pain, she explains the story from her own perspective. This knowledge transforms shame into understanding, forgiveness, strength, and pride. Like Ness, Yaw understands that his scars are remains of his personal history and signify resilience against efforts to jeopardize his family's lives, culture, and tranquility. Ness and Yaw's

choice to embrace their scars reveals Gyasi's primary argument to transform the Westernized historical narrative of Black individuals as victims of colonialism to dynamic, resilient survivors.

Throughout *Homegoing*, Gyasi illustrates the acquisition of bodily autonomy as a recurring endeavor passed through generations and across diasporic divides in Maame's matriline. This includes exerting the right to choose between life and death, to endure suffering, to escape harmful environments, and to accept the body's physical transformation as a result of White supremacy's abuses. While no single character can dismantle colonialism's vast infrastructure, each exercise of autonomy challenges the Eurocentric systems that seek to regulate and constrain Black bodies. This cumulative resistance forms a shared legacy of resilience that steadily pushes back against enduring oppression and shifts Black bodies in Ghana and America closer toward liberation.

Chasing Sexual Freedom: A Symbolic Journey of Resistance

Expressions of bodily autonomy take many forms in *Homegoing* and Gyasi invests utmost attention to sexuality as a crucial form. Historically, Black bodies were sexually violated to maintain colonialism and slavery's aspirations of domination. Over the course of eight generations, the novel follows an undulating pattern of gradual progression from sexual violence toward sexual freedom. Gyasi signals a relinquishing of control from racial and political hierarchies that weaponize sexuality and violate autonomy as characters regain control over their bodies and sexual lives. Through individual acts of defiance and healthy practices of physical intimacy, Gyasi celebrates the collective progress made across the African diaspora toward achieving sexual autonomy despite institutionalized racism's persistent efforts to police, control, and violate Black bodies.

Maame's daughter, Effia, is forced into an arranged marriage with James Collins that reveals the adversities for Black women to acquire autonomy in colonial Ghana. Effia's adoptive mother, Baaba, wants to expunge her from her life and the village because she is filled with resentment about being forced to raise Effia. Baaba successfully reduces Effia to a peace-keeping commodity when she appeals to the anxieties of village leaders who are concerned with threats of enslavement and suggests using Effia as an offering to a British leader. Baaba has shamed Effia, often labeling her as a burden, which molds her conciliatory nature. Shortly after meeting James and arriving at the Cape Coast Castle, she passively accepts that she should be "the one who laid her body down…the one who lifted her skirt" for James (Gyasi 18). Colonialism's explicit messaging teaches men that they are entitled to women's bodies and results in Effia's automated compliance. Although her actions suggest that she is a willing participant, Effia has no other alternative and is burdened by the depravity of sexual violence permitted through political and economic agreements under British colonialism.

However, after meeting Adwoa, a woman from her village married to another Englishman, Effia's sexual relationship with James transforms from despondent submission to an act of assertive determination. Adwoa coaches Effia to be "A lioness…[that] mates with her lion and he thinks the moment is about him, when it is really about her, *her* children, *her* posterity. Her trick is to make him think that he is king" (Gyasi 21). Adwoa reframes Effia's perception of her situation from victim to challenger. Her sexual relationship with James becomes a tool for her own survival by pursuing a pregnancy that will secure her own wellbeing:

> Before he could register his surprise, she grabbed his arms and pushed him to the bed. Not since their first night together had he been this timid, afraid of her unfamiliar body, the full-figured flesh, so different from how he had described his wife. Excited now, he

> pushed into her, and she squeezed her eyes as tightly as she could, her tongue circling her lips. He pushed harder, his breathing heavy and labored. She scratched his back, and he cried out. She bit his ear and pulled his hair. He pushed against her as though he were trying to move through her. (Gyasi 22)

While the power dynamic of their relationship–between slaver and chattel–is not equal, making the terms of their sexual relationship nonconsensual, Gyasi's language depicts this encounter as mutually violent. Adwoa's advice reconstructs Effia's understanding of her body from obedient object for James's pleasure to an essential asset that can guarantee her survival. Gyasi pointedly addresses the ways in which enslaved women were able to obtain self-preservation by exercising the limited autonomy afforded to them while also acknowledging the abhorrent role of sexual exploitation in trade deals between Ghanaian village leaders and slavers.

The parallel nature of the sexual violence both Esi and Effia endure in the Cape Coast Castle underscores the novel's use of sexual violence as a metaphor for slavery. As Annie Isabel Fukushima explains,

> one must contextualize the convergence of structural power in colonialism, militarism, nation-state-controlled capitalism, masculinist sexual cultures, and violence against women (Soh 2008) ... The symbolic parallel between the domination of one country by another and the violation of women's bodies by men is central for examining masculinity and militarism. (Fukushima)

Unbeknownst to Effia, she has a half-sister, Esi, who becomes one of the "people in the dungeons…people who had been stolen" that Effia only hears fragmented stories about (Gyasi 25). Once Esi reaches the castle, she is horrified of the conditions and is raped by a British soldier:

> She tried to fight him, but the lack of food and the wounds from the beatings had left her too weak to even collect her saliva and spit at him. He laughed at her attempts and grabbed her by the elbow out of the room…He put her on a folded tarp, spread her legs, and entered her. She screamed, but he placed his hand over her lips, then put his fingers to her mouth. Biting them only seemed to please him, and so she stopped. She closed her eyes, forcing herself to listen instead of see. (Gyasi 48)

Although initial observations may suggest that Esi and Effia's lives in the castle are vastly different, Gyasi's language signals reflectivity between Effia and Esi's experiences. Similar to Effia, Esi "closed her eyes" as a result of painful force and like Effia's eroticized aggression toward James, the pain Esi inflicts on the soldier "only seemed to please him". Esi and Effia's sexual trauma is emblematic of the aspirations of British imperialism to conquer, silence, plunder, and expropriate for self-interested gain. While the details of their situations are different, both are coerced into subjugation and endure a form of sexual violence for their survival, demonstrating the diverse but interrelated modalities of control over Black bodies under British colonial regime.

The response of the women who are held captive and witness Esi being dragged away extend the metaphor of sexual violence as slavery because it mirrors the complexities of Ghana's internalized conflicts under the threat of British colonialism. Esi's assault is profoundly disturbing and compounded with other enslaved women chastising her to be "quiet, stupid girl, or they will beat us all!" as she is dragged from the dungeon by her assailant (Gyasi 46). These women urge for Esi's silence because they are driven by their own safety and survival much like the way village leaders orchestrated violence against other villages and arranged marriages such as Effia's to keep their community safe. The women do not offer sentiments of solidarity,

demonstrating the suppressive dynamics of British control that exhausted people into making decisions for self-preservation. Despite isolating circumstances, Esi combats this oppressive system by physically resisting the British soldier while Effia strategically initiates sex with James, highlighting the varied collective efforts of enslaved women to refuse to relinquish autonomy and diminish colonialism's perversions.

Gyasi further explores Ghana's extensive history of enduring sexual violence under British colonialism and its complex intersection with the work of Christian missionaries through Akua's venerable quest for sexual autonomy. When Akua confronts the Missionary about the cause of her mother's death, she learns that he drowned her despite his alleged intentions to baptize her. Abena was a casualty of colonialism's systematic efforts to propagate Eurocentric superiority and exterminate traditional Akan customs. The Missionary successfully weaponizes his religious teachings to instill shame and cultivates Akua's dependency only to falsely portray himself as her savior who could remedy the deep-rooted feelings of inferiority that he manufactures. Outraged at her mother's murder and the Missionary's theological manipulation, Akua begins to question the trajectory of her life, knowing she couldn't "stay with the Missionary forever, playing his strange game of student/teacher, heathen/savior" (Gyasi 185). In these games, "he told her to stand up and bend over," "lashed her…and commanded her to repent her sins and repeat 'God bless the queen'" (Gyasi 183), and "looked hungry, like if he could, he would devour her" (Gyasi 184). While Gyasi does not state that the Missionary ever rapes Akua, his incessant punishments and invasive stares have sexual undertones that suggest his fetishization of cultural, racial, and religious dominance.

Many scholars note that this fetishization has become normalized in history and remains prevalent today when Western tourists look to people of color "to fulfill their escapist and

hedonistic fantasies about sexual pleasure", treating them "as exotic, wild and barbarous", which ultimately "sustain[s] Western privilege, hegemonic masculinity, heteropatriarchy and class exploitation (Kempadoo 2003)" (Marshall 69-70). The Missionary's rapacious abuses and violative fascination with Akua are aligned with these concepts. Akua's disgust in the Missionary's eroticized control motivates her to move to Edweso with Asamoah, with whom she establishes a secure emotional and sexual relationship. As the fourth generation of Effia's matriline, Akua's resistance is a crucial turning point in reclaiming sexual autonomy within their lineage, but also symbolizes the cultural importance of Ghanaian women's sustained resistance to purge the nation of colonial exploitation.

In addition to addressing colonialism's sexual abuse, *Homegoing* also explores slavery's reliance on weaponizing sexuality for control through misperceptions of Ness's dangerous sexual prowess. When Ness is separated from her mother, Esi, and brought to Tom Allan's plantation, Ness's mere presence is perceived as a threat to Tom's wife despite the descriptions of Ness's body that provides contradicting physical evidence that White supremacy is the true hazard. The narrator explains, "If Susan was like any of the other masters' wives, she must have known that her husband's bringing a new n**** into the house meant she had better pay attention. In this and every other southern county, men's eyes, and other body parts, had been known to wander" (Gyasi 73). Ness's body is perceived as dangerous because of slavery's history of sexual coercion that fueled territorial aggression from slavers' wives. Ness is not the source of violence and yet Ness's presence incites Susan's hypervigilance.

Gyasi's personification of Ness's gruesome scars as a male sexual predator highlights that Susan has misdirected her skepticism and distrust toward Ness when in reality her husband

and other plantation owners are the source of peril. Ness's brutally battered body is deliberately described with sexually predacious language:

> her scarred skin was like another body in and of itself, shaped like a man hugging her from behind with his arms hanging around her neck. They went up from her breasts, rounded the hills of her shoulders, and traveled the full, proud length of her back. They licked the top of her buttocks before trailing away into nothing. (Gyasi 74)

The placement of Ness's scarring suggests her attempts to turn away from slavery's unwanted grasps but that its pervasive cruelty ensnares Ness's body. The whipping scars hang around her neck, representing the weight of slavery's life-threatening dominance, and are described as "lick[ing] the top of her buttocks", a sexually suggestive violation of her lower body. Susan's response to Ness in her home and the description of Ness's scars are emblematic of slavery's sexual debasement of Black bodies. However, while textual evidence overwhelmingly addresses Ness's victimization, it's essential to note that Gyasi also uses the term "proud" to describe Ness's back, suggesting that her self-esteem remains intact despite efforts to objectify and dehumanize her body.

Ness's scars symbolize her resilience against weaponized sexuality, but her sexual relationship with Sam is a monumental milestone of their mutual advancement toward reclaiming sexual autonomy and resisting degradation. Although forced into marriage, Ness and Sam develop an attraction to one another partially nurtured by their shared trauma:

> She has never been with a man before, but she imagines that Sam is not a man. For her, he has become something much larger than a man, the Tower of Babel itself, so close to God that it must be toppled. He runs his hands along her scabby back, and she does the

> same along his, and as they work together, clutching each other, some scars reopen. They are both bleeding now, both bride and bridegroom, in this unholy holy union. (Gyasi 81)

Like the arranged marriage between Effia and James, Ness and Sam are forced together, but their sexual relationship exceeds the original purpose to control Sam and produce a child for future enslavement. After jointly enduring a violent whipping, Ness's attraction toward Sam transcends physical desire and becomes a spiritual endeavor. Gyasi describes their movements as "work[ing] together", illustrating their mutual respect and admiration for each other's bodies, a stark contrast to slavery's legacy of sexual domination and the scars meant to disparage them. The vivid imagery of their scabbed wounds reopening during sex symbolizes their relationship's emotional vulnerability that celebrates their fortitude and gives them temporary solace in reciprocal compassion regarding the continual assaults against their humanity. Their union is both "unholy", as a forced coupling, but also "holy" for their ability to consummate their marriage in a loving, pleasurable manner. Sam and Ness have persevered against abuse and reclaimed sexual intimacy, effectively resisting slavery's methodic structures designed to minimize their existence to manipulable chattel.

Gyasi illustrates ongoing cultural advancements of sexual autonomy for Black Americans when Sam and Ness's son, Jo, makes a successful venture North and establishes a consensual, sustained, and mutually fulfilling sexual relationship with his wife, Anna. While his parents were paired together and eventually developed affection, Jo and Anna fall in love, choose to marry one another, and raise seven children who are born into freedom in Baltimore just before the American Civil War. The immediate threat of sexual violence embedded in slavery's infrastructure has faded, allowing them to experience joy not only from sex but also in the consenting reproduction of their children:

> the way she stifled her moans so the kids wouldn't wake up, an expert at this after many nights and seven children. They worked quickly and quietly together, hoping the dark would mask their motions if one of the children happened to be peering through the curtain, unable to sleep…As long as he lived, it would always be a pleasure and a gift to fill his hands with the weight of her flesh. (Gyasi 116)

Once again, Gyasi uses the terms "worked" and "together" to describe their physical movement to emphasize their reciprocal respect and affection for one another. Their modest home makes intimacy challenging, but they are the first generation in Esi's matriline to not only control their sexual experiences but also claim ownership over the space in which they share that intimacy. The lack of privacy also closely resembles the layouts of the huts of Jo's ancestors in Ghana: "[Esi] couldn't see much, but it was the sounds that had interested her. The sounds her parents made together, sounds that walked a thin line between pleasure and pain" (Gyasi 41). For children, like Esi, it was common to occupy the same space as parents while they engaged in sex in the mother's hut. Jo and Anna's home simulates their ancestor's unenslaved lives in Ghana, signifying restored sexual autonomy after three generations of racially motivated sexual violence.

The narrative builds steadily toward repairing sexual autonomy, leading to Jo's granddaughter Willie, the sixth generation of Maame's matriline, to become a dominant leader in her sexual relationship with her husband, Robert. Their sexual relationship is not only consensual but a practice of Willie's empowered femininity: "Robert was cautious, but she was wild…She'd put each of his fingers into her mouth one by one and had bitten the tips, watching him all the while. She'd eased him into her and moved on top of him…She liked to be the star of the show" (Gyasi 210). Gyasi no longer signifies that these partners are working together as in previous

descriptions of consensual sex. By positioning herself on top of Robert and guiding Robert's movements, Willie enacts a form of consenting sexual dominance and subverts patriarchal gender roles.

However, this sexual dynamic shifts when Willie and Robert are humiliated in an act of forced sexual voyeurism, reflecting the fragility of Black autonomy during the Jim Crow Era. Robert's light skin tone and Willie's darker complexion place them in two different racial castes under Jim Crow Laws. Because Robert can pass as a White man, "just one white face among the many," he begins to avoid Willie and their son Carson in public to seek higher paying jobs reserved for White people (Gyasi 209). This creates a significant crack in their marriage and escalates into a traumatic episode of sexual violence when Robert and his White co-workers go out together at the Jazzing where Willie works as a part of the custodial staff. When one of Robert's co-workers notices an intimate familiarity in Willie and Robert's gaze, he forces them to have sex in the bathroom:

> the [White man in the] gray suit…had already unzipped his pants with his left hand. With his right hand, he stroked his penis. "Don't worry, I won't touch her," he said. And he kept his word. Robert did all the work that night while the blue suit guarded the door. It wasn't more than a few tear-stained kisses and carefully placed hands. Before the gray suit could ask for Robert to enter her, he came, a shuddering, breathy thing. Then, immediately after, he grew bored with his game. "Don't bother coming to work tomorrow, Rob,." (Gyasi 215)

Robert's fearful compliance, Willie's tearful resignation, and the White men's assertions of racial superiority collide to reinstate slavery's sexual trauma, creating a regression in the generational progression toward sexual autonomy. Although this scene is a devastating

obstruction to previously established generational resistance, Gyasi's novel maintains a historically informed approach by refusing to inaccurately romanticize Black sexual autonomy as unfaltered in its advancements. The nonlinear development reminds readers of slavery's legacy of tenacious possession over Black bodies which is persistent and deeply ingrained into all facets of American culture.

Along with heteronormative relationships, Gyasi also spotlights Effia's son, Quey, and his unique journey of sexual autonomy. Quey is the sole character that demonstrates homosexual suppression as an extension of heteropatriarchy's influence on colonialism's violence. When Effia expresses fears of the potential adverse effects of Quey's isolated life in the castle living as "the half-caste child…both white and black" she was warned about in the folklore of village Elders, James introduces Quey to Cudjo, a young child from Fanteland (Gyasi 20). The two quickly become friends and as they grow older, one of their wrestling matches is notably different from the countless matches before and signals that their years-long companionship has matured into a mutual sexual and emotional attraction: "The boys drank in each other's gazes; their breathing slowed; the feeling on Quey's lips grew stronger, a tingling that threatened to draw his face up toward Cudjo's" (Gyasi 60). Quey's White British father, James, interrupts their near kiss, sends Cudjo home, and a month later, arranges for Quey to be sent to board a ship to England to sever communication between the two young men.

James, an embodiment of colonialism, teaches Quey that his pathway to survival is to deny his queer identity alongside his half-Black background, both of which threaten to devalue the validity of his manliness and power. Annecka Marshall raises concerns about "internalization of regressive cultural expectations" (Marshall 63) and explains Gregory M. Herek's theory that,

> anti-gay prejudice and hate crimes are connected to authoritarianism. Herek states that homophobic stigma and practices are most intense among men who believe strongly in heteropatriarchy, religious fundamentalism and have limited education. Men's overt attacks on gays are attempts to repress attraction to other men and to prove their manhood to their peers. (Marshall 67)

James equates sexuality outside of heterosexual relationships to weakness because of patriarchy's dependence on binary divisions of gender roles and equates Blackness to inferiority based on his endorsement of slavery's binary division of races. Prior to James's insertion, Quey and Cudjo embrace the curiosities of their intimate connection without disgust. Quey's exile to England shifts his perspective, strengthening his belief in the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchy his father strives to uphold. When Quey sees Cudjo again six years after their abrupt separation, he decides to dismiss their relationship entirely: "Quey would never go to Cudjo's village. He would not be weak. He was in the business of slavery, and sacrifices had to be made" (Gyasi 68). James's intolerance of his son's sexuality manifests into Quey's sexual suppression, symbolizing colonialism's disruptive ideologies that prioritize patriarchal systems, stigmatize the unfamiliar as perceived threats, and restrain bodily autonomy. Ultimately, Quey declines Cudjo's invitation, commits to his involvement in slavery, and relinquishes his sexual autonomy to remain in his father's good graces. Gyasi effectively displays colonialism's tragically effective outcomes in Quey's journey from curiosity to internalized homophobia and racism.

While both sides of Maame's matriline exhibit progression and regression in obtaining sexual autonomy in the wake of slavery's aftermath, Gyasi indicates an overall outcome of healing. Yaw, the sixth generation in Maame's matriline, builds a life in Ghana as an educator and hires Esther as a house girl. Yaw's ancestor, Maame, was once a house girl and was "raped

by her master because he…was a Big Man and big men can do what they please, lest they appear weak" (Gyasi 38). Although Yaw and Esther's relationship becomes sexual, "He was in love with her. Five years passed before he realized it" (Gyasi 232). Despite his attraction to Esther, "He could see the differences between them as long as ravines, impossible to cross. He was old; she was young. He was educated; she was not. He was scarred; she was whole. Each difference split the ravine wider and wider still" and concludes "There was no way [for them to be together]" (Gyasi 232). Yaw's unassuming nature toward Esther is in direct contrast to how Big Men like Cobbe Otcher inflicted sexual violence against house girls, like Maame, to project strength and dominance. Yaw recognizes the power imbalance, maintains a professional atmosphere, and refuses to cross emotional or physical boundaries out of respect for Esther. Yaw and Cobbe's contrasting mentalities represent a crucial shift toward healing from previous cultural and political attitudes during Ghana's colonial period that once minimized the harm of sexual violence.

Similarly, Yaw's daughter, Marjorie, the eighth generation of Maame's matriline signals further healing of generational wounds. Not only does Maame experience sexual violence, but her daughter, Esi, is brutally raped by a White British solider and her other daughter, Effia, is forced into an arranged marriage with James. These experiences demonstrate the extensive sexual trauma normalized within European colonization and slavery. However, Marjorie goes on dates with Graham, a young White German, who "appeared and swallowed up a bit of [Marjorie's] loneliness with his blue whale eyes" (Gyasi 274). Marjorie is unable to focus on the movie during their date and finds herself preoccupied "about the location of Graham's hands in relationship to the popcorn or the armrest they shared" (Gyasi 274). While Black women like Esi and Effia had to exercise hypervigilance regarding the location of European men's hands for fear

of their abuse, Marjorie's hypervigilance is rooted in nervous excitement about her blossoming romance with Graham which marks a significant shift in the acquisition of sexual autonomy.

Despite this progression, Gyasi leaves readers with a caution that reclaimed sexual freedom, specifically for Black women, has not been fully achieved due to exclusionary definitions of beauty that are rooted in White supremacy. Graham and Marjorie's relationship eventually dissipates when he chooses to go to prom "with the brunette" girl who had previously expressed disapproval over Graham and Marjorie's close relationship during an encounter in the high school cafeteria (Gyasi 280). Graham's rejection touches upon "how differences in body image, skin color, and hair haunt the existence and psychology of Black women, especially since one common U.S. societal stereotype is the belief that Black women fail to measure up to the normative standard" (Patton 24). Graham's explanation further clarifies the embedded racism in his decision and deepens Marjorie's hurt when he tells her "his father didn't think it would be proper. The school didn't think it was appropriate" (Gyasi 280). The criticism that Graham faces for his interest in Marjorie eventually deters him from pursuing their connection, showing that while Graham's initial interest is an improvement from the experiences of Marjorie's ancestors, White supremacy's violence still lurks in America's biased cultural perceptions of beauty and prejudice against interracial relationships. Gyasi draws a clear thread of incremental improvement in each generation's journey toward achieving sexual autonomy, slowly peeling away from colonialism's violence, but the deteriorating relationship between Marjorie and Graham serves as a warning against excusing progress as full emancipatory agency.

Gyasi's repetitive emphasis on the resilience required to endure and eradicate violence against and control over Black bodies is carefully woven into the novel's eight generations.

Gyasi’s thesis regarding autonomy is made clear through the wise perspective Willie shares with her son, Sonny:

> White men get a choice. They get to choose they job, choose they house. They get to make black babies, then disappear into thin air, like they wasn’t never there to begin with, like these black women they slept with or raped done laid on top of themselves and got pregnant. White men get to choose for black men too. Used to sell ‘em; now they just send ‘em to prison like they did my daddy, so that they can’t be with they kids…It makes me sad to see my son a junkie after all the marchin’ I done, but makes me sadder to see you thinkin’ you can leave like your daddy did. You keep don’ 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 just own you just as is, and he’ll say you the one who did it. He’ll say it’s your fault. (Gyasi 263)

The nonlinear progression toward protecting and respecting Black bodies displayed in Gyasi’s multigenerational narrative helps readers connect methods of systematic oppression over time. While colonialism and slavery have protected the violent actions of White oppressors, Black bodies remained unprotected from these systems, requiring Black individuals to forge their own forms of resistance and preservation. Her novel recenters perspective on people of the African diaspora whose remarkable endurance spanning several centuries warrants not only recognition but critical skepticism toward global economic, political, social, and legal systems that relied on violent injustice and still exhibit residual racist ideologies.

Chapter 2: Black Mothering as a Form of Agency in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing

Motherhood vs. Mothering

Homegoing by Ghanaian American novelist Yaa Gyasi is told in a multigenerational perspective that spans over three centuries and spotlights relationships between children and the adults that guide them amid the turmoil inflicted by colonialism and slavery. In Gyasi's words, "it made sense to begin with mothers or the questions of motherhood. My people are matrilineal so I was playing off of that as well, being able to start these two lines of the family with the true mother, but also these other mother figures who pop in" (Goyal and Gyasi 483). The focus on mothering is promptly established with Maame's traumatic separations from her daughters, Esi and Effia, who are born of different fathers, forced into enslavement, and are never able to meet one another because of the destructive ambitions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Throughout the novel, Gyasi traces the indispensability of maternal resistance in combating injustice and maintaining community from one generation to the next.

In order to examine Gyasi's *Homegoing* and her portrayal of mothering as a form of agency, an important distinction must be recognized between the terms motherhood and mothering. Adrienne Rich heavily influenced theoretical discourse surrounding the cultural heritage of motherhood in her seminal work *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* by critiquing societal notions of motherhood and their consequences on a woman's identity: "The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. That earliest entrapment of one female body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo" (Rich 218). Rich acknowledges the cultural expectation of women who become mothers to mold themselves into the primary if not sole source of emotional nurturing for their

developing children. As a result, young girls and women for whom this type of motherhood has been modeled can develop the same expectation of themselves, thereby perpetuating a singular narrative of motherhood, and womanhood by association, as a form of inevitable self-erasure.

Praises of this form of motherhood acts as a cultural instrument to prioritize patriarchal structures by confining the presence and contributions of women within society so that men can occupy other spaces beyond these predetermined boundaries for women. Rich notes that "In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, [institutionalized motherhood] has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them" (Rich 12-13). By defining motherhood based on reproductive functionality alone, women are immobilized in the collective consciousness of society.

Rich's theoretical concept of mothering, however, has an entirely different purpose and does not solely focus on the biological relationship between mother and child. Min Jiao explains this distinction:

> The term "motherhood" refers to the oppressive patriarchal institution, which is male-defined and controlled, while the word "mothering" refers to female experiences of mothering, which are female-defined and centered, and potentially empowering women…it paves the way for feminist narratives to identify the oppressiveness as well as empowerment of maternity in both literature and theory. (Jiao 542)

By centering the experiences of childbearing and childrearing around women sharing their perspectives, society and literature can reenvision the roles mothers and mother figures play as a source of power and community rather than logistical, economic, social, or political scaffolding for patriarchal structures. Sharing experiences of mothering, especially the obstacles

encountered, allows closer examination of inequitable systems and insights on actions that can be taken to support those mothering and being mothered.

Black Activist Mothering

To examine the mothering within Gyasi's narrative, readers must also recognize the historical context for the Black mothers she creates which in many cases impacts the nature in which these characters become mothers and their motivations behind their mothering choices. Because Gyasi's narrative addresses mothering in both Ghana and America spanning from the 18th to the 21st century, Black mothers must continually devise their own protective strategies to mitigate the violence endorsed by racism that threaten them and their children. In an interview, Andrea O'Reilly claims that works like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* show that mothering can be "something radical, political, revolutionary, paradigm shifting…mothering can be a site of empowerment, social activism, a place of power for women…not simply the natural intuitive calling of women as assumed in normative motherhood" (Mendes and Mendonca 14). When a person is a source of mothering within societal infrastructures designed to uphold racism, sexism, and classism, they can pursue activism through their mothering choices. The transfer of knowledge about the realities, dangers, and pathways of resistance assists new generations to respond to the injustices produced from these systems.

Whether Black mothers encourage their children to actively resist or exist safely within repressive structures, they exhibit what Jacqueline Roebuck Sakho refers to as "Black Activist Mothering" which "expands the capacity to learn, listen and create knowledge that is translatable across unequal dimensions of power" (Roebuck Sakho 11). While compliance could be interpreted as subservience, Black mothers are aware of the systems built against them and their

children, survive them, and raise another generation with the same awareness which cultivates empowerment and resistance.

Turning mothering experiences into opportunities of communal storytelling acts as a form of activism and exemplifies a written form of what Roebuck Sakho and other scholars categorize as *Gumbo ya ya*:

> Simply put, *Gumbo ya ya* is a practice of agency to push back against oppressive narratives. Historian, Dr. Elsa Barkley Brown (1992) explains the storytelling practice of *Gumbo ya ya* as creating a communal dialogue by synthesizing each person's journey…she argues for this practice as a wholistic practice of telling and making sense of history, a form of resiliency, a tie that binds individual histories into communal histories and those into political, economic, and social histories. (Roebuck Sakho 13)

Although historical fiction, the character arcs she designs are rooted in historical tenability and the polyvocal structure highlights the multidimensional issues and the efforts to dismantle injustice across the African diaspora. Each example of mothering in Gyasi's novel acts as a key component to the narrative, building a flavorful *Gumbo ya ya*, compounded in a multifaceted narrative that illuminates how slavery's legacy has shaped individual, communal, and national identities, simultaneously acknowledging the unique and the shared experiences for African Americans and Ghanaians.

Gyasi's *Homegoing* recognizes that one way oppressive colonial structures pursue and successfully maintain power is through dismemberment of familial heritage. However, matrilineage, connections to ancestral knowledge, and supportive mothering choices remain a central concern within the lives of her characters to counter White supremacy's destructive ambitions. While several women in the novel make sacrifices, some of which temporarily sever

intergenerational ties, these choices are not made with the intent to appease those with influence and control, as Rich warns about in her theories of motherhood as an institution. Rather, they are choices for themselves, their family, and their community to thrive against systems that threaten them, embodying engagement in Black Activist Mothering.

Agency in Black Mothering: Ghanaian Characters

The experiences of mothering in America and Ghana in Gyasi's novel feature common threads of protection, advocacy, and resilience, but cultural viewpoints about the roles and impacts of mothers are essential to distinguish. In Ghana, for instance,

> The mother is considered the central figure in the family around whom life revolves; once she dies, there is no longer family…[Akan proverbs emphasize] the importance of women on the grounds that since women are the givers (of course, together with men) of life and the nurturers of the lives they give birth to, educating them amounts to educating the whole human race. (Diabah and Amfo 9)

Matrilineage is an important aspect of traditional Akan culture and mothers are regarded as the literal carriers of life but also the life source of community, acting as a vessel through which history, culture, and knowledge is passed down. Although widely dismissed as "proponents of feminist propaganda" or "a figment of the feminist imagination", women even had substantial political and social power in Ghanaian societies prior to British colonial occupation:

> when a chief had to be chosen it was Queen Mother who had the most say in the choice to be made…Having chosen the chief, the Queen Mother sends a message to the sub-chiefs and elders who now discuss discuss the nominee…no one can be put on the [sacred Akan gold] stool against whom the Queen mother gives her veto. (Farrar)

Gyasi's emphasis on maternal figures throughout her novel restores pre-colonial Ghanaian traditions of women, and mothers in particular, being essential in supporting, guiding, and strengthening community.

Gyasi's narrative structure and character design establish the importance of matrilineal history by beginning the narrative focusing on Maame, a mother who serves as the connection between two half-sisters, Effia and Esi. Abronoma, a house girl for Maame and Cobbe's hut, reveals to their daughter Esi that, "you are not your mother's first daughter. There was one before you. And in my village we have a saying about separated sisters. They are like a woman and her reflection, doomed to stay on opposite sides of the pond" (Gyasi 39). Abronoma outlines the novel's intentions to examine the parallels and dissonance between slavery's impact on Ghanaian and American culture. This is further symbolized by splintering the duality within Maame's personal history into the stories of two half-sisters and the generations that follow. Maame's past as a former servant contrasts her later life as a wife of a Big Man. Her history is echoed in the divided lives of her two daughters when one, Esi, is sold to slavery and the other, Effia, is married to a powerful slaver. She is the origin of the narrative as their biological mother and is designed with intergenerational reflectivity between Maame's life and the lives of her daughters. Regardless of how far the reader is in their journey of the novel's contents, each generation they encounter stems from the same maternal root and a collective past.

Maame's personal history as a house girl informs her approach to mothering with Esi and demonstrates that mothering can be a form of agency that nurtures an individual's growth and communal restoration. When Esi is just a child, she witnesses her family's servant, referred to as Little Dove or Abronoma, become a public source of entertainment when she is given the task to carry a bucket of water on her head without spilling a single drop and is whipped when she is

unable to do so. Esi's support of her father's choice to whip Abronoma prompts Maame to let her daughter know, "Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves" (Gyasi 38). Though Esi is unaware of this at the time, her mother was once a servant to a Big Man in another village, just as Abronoma is a servant to Esi and her family. Even as her social status rises to the wife of a Big Man, Maame does not allow the power that comes with her new role to eclipse the shared experiences she has with Abronoma. Maame's stern disapproval shifts Esi's understanding of her community from one based on sensible hierarchy to an unjustly ranked society. Through her mothering, she instills an essential lesson in humility and compassion for Esi. On a larger scale, her wisdom subverts her husband's authority, both within their household but also as a man of political power as a Big Man.

Maame's inability to be present for her other daughter, Effia, during her upbringing provides an obstacle to her mothering, but her choice to leave behind her stone necklace once again exhibits Black Activist Mothering that defies the attempts of oppressive forces. When Maame is raped by a Big Man, Cobbe Otcher, for whom she was a servant, she becomes pregnant. The resentment Cobbe's wives feel about Maame's pregnancy prompts her removal from the village after she gives birth to Effia. The patriarchal structure of their society protects Cobbe from retribution and misdirects his wives' anger about Cobbe's sexual violence from Cobbe to Maame. Maame is shamed while Cobbe is permitted to uphold his roles as husband and Big Man; Cobbe can watch Effia grow while Maame's relationship with Effia is forcibly cut. However, she leaves behind a gift for Effia that Baaba, one of Cobbe's wives, eventually gives her. As Baaba hands over the necklace, she calls it "A piece of your mother" (Gyasi 16). The stone necklace is successfully passed from mother to adoptive mother to daughter, just barely

salvaging a glimpse of their severed connection. Although the two were never meant to have any contact, Maame's slight but successful act of resistance ensures a connection to her daughter and as it is passed down to future generations. Maame's choice and even Baaba's reluctant facilitation of passing the stone to Effia symbolize that even simple mothering choices and the collective cooperation among mothers can successfully undermine unjust systems that are designed to destroy and repress.

Maame's stone eventually becomes a source of connection between Effia and her own son, making it clear that the choices one makes as a mother have intergenerational impacts and can act as a form of agency. As a young woman born outside of a traditional Fante marriage and eventually forced into marrying a slaver as part of a political deal, Effia's existence is shrouded in marginality. This pain is resurfaced and soothed with the arrival of her son, Quey. Similar to his mother, Quey is tasked with navigating his otherness as a biracial child descending from a Ghanaian woman forced into marriage with a British slaver. To connect with Quey, Effia often shares her memories of home. When she is unable to share with Quey who her biological mother was, they acknowledge that "the shimmering black stone Effia always wore around her neck had belonged to this woman, his true grandmother. Telling this story, Effia's face darkened, but the storm passed when Quey reached up and touched her cheek" (Gyasi 54). Maame's necklace simultaneously represents Maame's absence and her effort to be present, providing an opportunity for Effia and Quey to mourn their shared loss. The acknowledgement of disconnection in their matriline fortifies the connection between Effia and Quey and alleviates the pain caused by Effia's traumatic separation from her biological mother. Effia's decision to address their unknown familial history allows Effia to regain the companionship stolen from her through the vulnerability in her relationship with Quey. Despite the societal structures that try to

marginalize them, Maame's resistance empowers Effia's commitment to sharing her past with her son, regardless of how painful, and effectively creates a sense of belonging.

Effia's efforts to nurture her son's self-esteem through his connection to her culture also highlight the importance of mothering decisions on identity and empowerment. James, Effia's husband, demeans her patient approach to mothering claiming that she "coddled him" (Gyasi 55). James confuses Effia's compassion as a potential weakness that may infect Quey. In reality, Effia advocates for Quey's need to find belonging by requesting opportunities for "playing with other Fante children, village children, so that he can get away from [the Castle] from time to time" (Gyasi 55). When James eventually complies with Effia's suggestion, Quey meets Cudjo and confirms Effia's theory: "He felt only that he belonged, fully and completely" (Gyasi 57). Effia's advocacy ultimately provides Quey with a sense of community and connection that he was lacking while living in the Cape Coast Castle, an emblem of slavery and its violence against Fante people like Effia and Quey. Her successful advocacy for her son demonstrates the power of mothering to connect and affirm a person's identity against larger systems of oppression.

Quey's arranged wife Nana Yaa echoes Effia's commitment to transparency with her son James, further emphasizing the importance of mothering to preserve communal knowledge and incite agency. In matriarchal societies like Akan culture, villages selectively arrange marriages: "Marriage between two clans is not marriage between individuals, but rather a communal marriage. It is an ancient custom of bonding between two clans, and it makes good sense as a system of mutual aid" (Goettner-Abendroth). Marriage is viewed as a unification of communities so when a person decides to marry outside of their village, both communities exhibit caution. However, during marital disputes, James hears his mother make comments like "James Richard Collins! What kind of Akan are you that you give your son three white names?" (Gyasi 90). His

mother's criticisms of Quey's decisions, heritage, and their son's "three white names" lead James to the correct conclusion that his parents' marriage was not merely based on mutual aid between communities but derives from slavery's coercion. Upon observing his father's work, he realizes that "[The British and his father] would just trade one type of shackles for another, trade physical ones that wrapped around wrists for the invisible ones that wrapped around the mind" (Gyasi 93). His mother's criticisms guide him toward invaluable insight: even after slavery's legal collapse, its concepts transcend physical oppression and would simply transfer to psychological, spiritual, economical, and ideological control over Ghana to sustain financial gain. Nana Yaa's disapproval forms James's critical perspective of his father's business and develops his preference for his Ghanaian heritage. Nana Yaa gives James essential knowledge of his complex ancestry, demonstrating that Akan mothers are essential in preserving communal history to protect children against threats such as communal divisions or cultural assimilation as a result of systematic oppression.

Because James's mother assists him in recognizing the ways in which he has benefitted from a system reliant on the degradation of his own people, he gradually retreats from his family's business while holding sympathy for his arranged wife, Amma, and her own missed journey of motherhood. James does not take immediate action to remove himself from his family, but he finds himself unable to have sex with Amma, leaving them childless. James's rejection of Amma is fueled by disgust in his family's compliance in slavery. However, in Ghana, "The person of the mother is regarded as sacred" (Dipio 18), so his rejection carries culturally significant consequences: "'If I do not get pregnant soon, people will start to believe there is something wrong with me', Amma said. He felt bad for her. It was true. Failure to conceive was always believed to be the woman's fault, a punishment for infidelity or loose

morals" (Gyasi 101). Although James's refusal to have a child with Amma unfairly punishes her with public ridicule and shame, James is forced to confront his life built on a pedestal of global infrastructure that profits from enslavement. His father's managerial role in solidifying trade deals gives him the influential power that he used to arrange James's marriage with Amma. Having children with Amma would be a form of his complicity in slavery. The knowledge he gains from his mother informs his decision to leave Amma to marry Akosua, a girl from a small village and an avid vocal critic of James's family. Nana Yaa demonstrates the importance of knowledge gained from mothers for children to make informed decisions and resist expectations to ignore institutionalized discrimination.

James and Akosua's daughter, Abena, shares her father's curiosity but when James stifles her questions, her mother encourages her and gives Abena a sense of ownership over her identity. Abena's endless questioning about her ancestors results in James slapping her for the first time to prevent her from discovering the truth. Akosua, although a knowledgeable and passionate opponent to James's family history, chooses to step in and support her daughter's curiosity:

> Your father and I are not welcome in Kumasi…He was the son of a Big Man, the grandson of two very Big Men, and he wanted to live a life for himself instead of a life that was chosen for him. He wanted his children to be able to do the same. That is all I can say. Go and visit Kumasi. Your father will not stop you. (Gyasi 135)

Although Akosua does not offer a detailed truth about James's family ties to slavery, she does not silence her daughter in the way James does. Instead, she provides Abena with the opportunity to learn and question the past, just as James did, because she understands that ancestral identity is vital to an individual's identity. Akosua's compassion inspires James to have a change of heart,

and he decides to give Abena Effia's stone necklace as reconciliation for his rigidity but also as a symbol of his permission to uncover their family's past.

Akosua's mothering grants Abena permission to go to Kumasi and the opportunity to connect to some of the most sacred aspects of their ancestral culture. When she arrives in Kumasi, she is moved by her experience: "Despite herself, Abena felt tears sting her eyes. She had heard about this stool her entire life from the elders of her village, but she had never seen it with her own eyes" (Gyasi 138). Abena is overwhelmed when she sees the ancestors' stool as it represents both an introduction and reconnection to her ancestry. The golden stool "is the ultimate religious symbol. More than the most numinous symbol par excellence, the ancestors' stool is, indeed, the ultimate symbol housing the souls of ancestors that the Akan refer to as Nananom Nsamanfo" (Ephirim-Donkor 47). The stool is not valuable due to its material composition but rather the spiritual connection to the people who have occupied the stool, much like Maame's stone necklace that James passes down to Abena. Akosua's mothering choices inspires James to pass down Maame's necklace, enables Abena to see the ancestors' stool, and gives Abena a sense of empowerment through belonging rather than living in fear of the repressive systems that have continually threatened her and her ancestors.

Later in the novel, Akua, Abena's daughter, can take accountability and apologize to her son Yaw, showing how mothering is essential in building a person's personal history and healing wounds inflicted by oppression. Abena's reconnection with her ancestral history in Kumasi is not free of pain and suffering; her journey leads her and her daughter, Akua, to the Missionary who is physically, sexually, and mentally abusive. The trauma Abena and Akua suffer from their experiences with the Missionary festers within Akua's mind, triggering a psychological illness or the possession of a firewoman spirit that affects her ability to make rational mothering choices.

One night, Akua unknowingly kills her two daughters in a fire and nearly kills her son, Yaw. After a considerable amount of time, she begins to heal and after decades of silence, she tells Yaw about her understanding of evil and its presence within families:

> What I know now, my son: Evil begets evil. It grows. It transmutes, so that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home. I'm sorry you have suffered. I'm sorry for the way your suffering casts a shadow over your life, over the woman you have yet to marry, the children you have yet to have. (Gyasi 242)

Because Akua recognizes and apologizes for the pain embedded within their family, even though the pain in their lineage did not stem from her decisions or actions alone, she alleviates the pain of their family's generational trauma. This selfless act of love results in Yaw hugging his mother and sharing a meal together after years of estrangement, highlighting the ability of mothering choices to mend intergenerational relationships and create joyful spaces in spite of systems that were designed to strip Ghanaians of their individual and communal identities.

The comfort Yaw receives from his mother encourages his romantic pursuit of Esther, resulting in the birth of Marjorie, the eighth generation of Maame's matriline. As Esther and Marjorie have a heart-to-heart about romantic relationships, Akua's influence still permeates in the conversation: "if a boy likes you, you have to make it known that you like him too. Otherwise, he will never do anything…Were it not for Old Lady's intervention, who knows if [your father] would have ever done anything. That woman has strong powers of will" (Gyasi 272). The transparency Akua provides in her relationship with Yaw reinstates her power of influence in his life, encouraging his relationship with Esther, which then enables Esther's opportunity to support her daughter. Rather than repeating harmful cycles of abuse and mental illness, Akua confronts her pain, takes ownership of the collateral damage it caused, and prevents

Yaw from subjecting Marjorie to "the evil in [their] lineage" and the "people who have done wrong because they could not see the result of the wrong" (Gyasi 241). Akua's resilience and self-reflection not only repairs considerable damage that threatened the survival of their matriline, but is proactive in limiting Marjorie's exposure to colonialism's cycle of violence.

Homegoing honors the Ghanaian matrilineal traditions that Pittman explains commemorate the importance of mothering choices to nurture, give and sustain life, and educate future generations for communal gain. The mothering choices of Maame, Effia, Nana Yaa, Akosua, and Akua prioritize community over the individual and strengthen bonds within the matriline. Gyasi's work joins Farrar's in challenging Occidental rhetoric that diminishes the role of matrilineage and matriarchy in West African countries by underscoring the power of mothering choices to repair the vulnerabilities created by patriarchal leadership and colonial power.

Agency in Black Mothering: African American Characters

Cultural notions of Black mothering in the United States mirror strategies of Ghanaian mothers which are also informed by racially motivated discrimination. Activists such as Shadd Cary supported the idea that mothering's influence could "guide [the] social and political transition from slavery to citizenship" (Conaway). LaShawnDa Pittman explains the perspective Black mothers in America have regarding their role within their family and community:

> While many mothers may feel compelled to protect their children, not all mothers must protect them from anti-Black racism and harm. Black mothers have had to devise strategies to protect their children from systemic racism in all its manifestations, including racialized violence…Every generation of Black mothers must devise protective

> strategies of resistance to confront how anti-Black racism is codified into laws and policies and becomes naturalized and normalized in the era in which they must parent their children. (Pittman et al. 2)

Because of the ways in which slavery's legacy remains embedded within America's structural blueprint long after slavery as a formal system was dismantled, each new generation of Black mothers must equip their children with the skills to understand the inequities they face and tools to respond. Examining mothering choices amid Jim Crow, Pittman goes on to explain how these strategies were formulated:

> Black mothers must teach their children the "right" actions and behaviors to keep them alive amidst the anti-Black racism that follows their children's Black bodies everywhere in America said bodies may take them. What does it mean to raise one's children right if they are Black children coming of age during legalized segregation? For the mothers in this study and their families, it meant the following: (1) teaching children restraint, resistance, and when to employ each; and (2) negotiating space, including understanding under what conditions it is safe or unsafe to take up more or less space. (Pittman et al. 6)

These protective strategies range from suggesting compliance when challenged by authority, to encouraging methods of self-defense when necessary, to preparing children with the skills to recognize when to employ these different strategies appropriately and remain safe. While these strategies stem from the Jim Crow Era, they remain necessary for contemporary Black mothers due to enduring oppressive constructs.

The mothering represented in the American folklore of Gyasi's narrative vary in their unique circumstances and decision making but collectively demonstrate how mothering choices are a vital source of resistance and preservation. For example, Esi's approach to raising her

daughter, Ness, opposes notions of mothering as self-effacement; her blunt transparency about her past adversities and fortitude prepares her daughter for America's inequitable system of chattel slavery so that she may survive. Knowing that her daughter is the product of being raped by a British soldier, Esi has experiential insight into the dangers and violence her daughter's life will entail and she does not conceal these harsh realities. Esi gains the nickname "Frownie" amid other slaves for her restrained facial expressions and willingness to recall the brutality she experienced during the Middle Passage (Gyasi 70):

> 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 through into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth. In the Big Boat, Esi said, they were stacked ten high, and when a man died on top of you, his weight would press the pile down like cooks pressing garlic. (Gyasi 70)

Ness's nightmares of Esi's experiences signal a merger between Esi's painful memories and Ness's identity. Esi's detailed depictions of her experiences packed, shackled, and transported like inanimate cargo are intentional to link Ness into the collective consciousness of those captured and trafficked in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Rather than protecting her daughter from the truth, she protects her daughter by arming her with the bitter truth. Esi knows that prioritizing Ness's comfort with imagined fairy tales would not effectively prepare her with the essential knowledge she needs to anticipate future struggles.

Instead of terrifying Ness, Esi's choices become a source of comfort for Ness after they are separated, demonstrating the power of mothering choices to counter oppressive structures. Ness eventually encounters significant childhood trauma, which Esi clearly anticipated:

> When they sold Ness in 1796…Esi's lip had not moved, her hands had not reached out. She stood there, solid and strong, the same as Ness had always known her to be…she would always miss the gray rock of her mother's heart. She would always associate real love with a hardness of spirit. (Gyasi 70)

Ness is not resentful or harmed by her mother's guarded reaction or her candor regarding the evils inflicted upon her prior to their forced separation because she recognizes that her mother's choices were to prepare her for the injustice she would inevitably face. Rather than finding comfort in the "black people who smiled and hugged and told nice stories", she understands, respects, and demonstrates gratitude for her mother's stories as a keystone for her sense of self and the larger systems in place that will continually aim to keep her subjugated (Gyasi 70). Openly weeping would only satisfy slavers' aspirations to inflict emotional pain for dominance.

Ness's strength when separating from her own child, Jo, stems from the stoicism Esi modeled for her, ultimately undermining the systems and resources fueled by White supremacy to keep them powerless. When Ness "is given to calm the new slave Sam," it's clear that their arranged marriage was intended to be a form of oppression (Gyasi 80). In an unfortunately customary practice in America's Antebellum period, "Slaveowners 'coupled' men and women, named them husband and wife, and foresaw their own future in the bellies of enslaved workers" (Morgan 105). These forced relationships were "legally sanctioned rape and forced breeding [which] not only rendered the Black female body into a grotesque machine for reproduction but denigrated her offspring, relegating children to the status of products, not humans" (Wright 86). However, Ness and Sam impede these efforts to be dehumanized and compliant in producing children for free labor. In a plan to escape North through the Underground Railroad, Ness feigns a back injury, handing the baby over to Aku, a woman who has experience successfully helping

slaves escape: '"My back can't take much more of him.' Aku nodded, giving her a strange look, but Ness knew what she wanted and she wouldn't change her mind" (Gyasi 84-85). The results of Ness's mothering choices, though unable to avoid tragedy and violence for her and Sam, successfully defy slavery's oppressive objectives because Jo will not grow up not as a slaver's possession.

Jo's marriage to Anna results in the birth of numerous children, signifying the exponential success of Ness's mothering choice. Together, Jo and Anna have "Agnes, Beulah, Cato, Daly, Eurias, Felicity, and Gracie" and "They would teach their children to read those letters, grow them up to be the kind of people who could teach those letters to other people" (Gyasi 114). Not only do they successfully have and raise seven children, but Anna's last pregnancy marks the arrival of their eighth child, and their shared goal to educate their children so that they could educate others is emblematic of the ways in which the approaches to mothering can create a ripple effect of knowledge. After Anna is captured by the police at the beginning of the Civil War and Ma Aku passes away, Gyasi juxtaposes the profound sense of defeat and loss in their family with the prospect of continuance and hope: "Agnes had three children, Beulah was pregnant" (Gyasi 131). This acknowledges that while not all characters survive the institutionalized oppression against Black lives, the young women in the Freeman family do not allow their mother's capture to instill fear of discrimination to the point that they are deterred from having children of their own. Jo's ability to become a grandfather is because of Ness's sacrifice, Anna's birthing their children, and the courage his daughters maintain in their decisions to become mothers, demonstrating resilience against the manufactured confines for the Black community.

As Ness's descendants continue to multiply, America's cultural landscape shifts through abolition and the rise and fall of Jim Crow but does not completely eradicate all oppressive systems that threaten Black lives. Other systemic issues such as Harlem's heroin crisis disproportionately affected communities of color:

> Considered the "Dope Capital" of the nation, Harlem emerged as the epicenter of the heroin trade with an estimated $150 to $350 million worth of smuggled heroin stored in the community each year and some narcotics rings taking in $2,000 to $3,000 a day. [2] As Eric Schneider argues in *Smack: Heroin and the American City*, marginalized communities in major cities, like Harlem, became central nodes for heroin distribution because the withdrawal of capital and public disinvestment in these neighborhoods sparked demand for narcotics. (Kautz)

Government policy failures and poorly distributed funding increased poverty and weakened community supports, eroding Harlem's once-booming, predominantly Black economy. Heroin's accessibility combined with experiences of financial struggles and racial inequality forced many to turn to drug dealing as secure income and made heroin an appealing form of escapism.

Gyasi indicates that Black mothering is a potential tool for survival and activism against such systemic failures through Jo's granddaughter, Willie, who provides her son with grace and strength through his substance abuse. Sonny and his mother Willie are long-term Harlem residents who witness the rise of heroin addiction in Harlem firsthand. When Sonny turns to heroin, Willie does not abandon her son but rather relies on her faith in order to help him survive his battle with addiction: "Lord, release my son from this torment. Father God, I know he done gone down to Hell to take a look, but please send him back" (Gyasi 256). During one of Sonny's frequent visits to request money, she distracts him with a story about how she "marched with

[his] father and with [her] li'l baby all the way up from Alabama. All the way up to Harlem" because she wanted her son to "see a better world than what [she] saw, what [her] parents saw" (Gyasi 262). Detailing her struggles and sacrifices for him is effective in getting his mind off of his initial intent to ask for money and "Instead, he stayed" (Gyasi 263). Willie's choice to be both compassionate with her faith and honest with her son regarding her own personal history confronting racism gives him the perspective he needs to seek sobriety. He is able to eventually establish a routine and secure employment: "He would get his methadone and then he would head over to work as a custodian at the hospital" (Gyasi 285). Willie's support for Sonny, despite Harlem's growing drug epidemic, demonstrates the empowerment mothering can have to repair the devastating failures of government that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Furthermore, Willie works together with Sonny's half-sister, Josephine, to protect Sonny's children from the realities of his personal addiction and Harlem's greater struggle with heroin. While Sonny is absorbed in his struggles, he admits that, "He hadn't wanted any children, but somehow he had ended up with three…His mother gave [their mothers] some money each month even though he had told her to stop" (Gyasi 252). Not only does Sonny not want the responsibilities of raising children but he even opposes his mother's efforts to financially support them and compensate for Sonny's absence. Yet, he feels justified in asking his mother for money when he cannot find other ways to fund his heroin addiction. During one of Sonny's visits for money, Willie asks Josephine to take the children out and later returns to Willie's house. Sonny notices that his children "had ice cream smeared on their shirts and contented little smiles on their faces. Josephine didn't wait to hear more. She just took the kids straight into the bedroom to lay them down to sleep" (Gyasi 262). Willie works in tandem with Josephine to mend the fractured family structure caused by Sonny's addiction. As Willie spends

time with Sonny to coach him through his struggles, Josephine steps in to protect her nieces and nephews from their father's instability. Her attentiveness provides access to joyful childhood memories and a secure environment in which to rest. Willie and Josephine's combined efforts of mothering limit the children's exposure to Sonny's turmoil. Sonny's disillusionment and addiction concocted by Harlem's systemic crisis cannot fully infiltrate the experiences and minds of his children, displaying the importance of maternal resistance against calculated disenfranchisement against marginalized communities.

Gyasi's exploration of Black mothering in America echoes Pittman's observations that "Black mothers have had to devise strategies to protect their children from systemic racism in all its manifestations" (Pittman et al. 2). The way children are raised directly informs key aspects of their individuality such as their worldview, emotional intelligence, and coping mechanisms. Therefore, when raising children in societies that are designed to marginalize them, mothers must establish and retain their child's self-possession by affirming their identity through communal connections, folklore, traditions, modeled perseverance, and knowledge. Through each example of Black mothering, Gyasi emphasizes the essential role mothers play in defending Black children against systems that aim to legitimize their oppression.

Homegoing's intergenerational stories of Ghanaian and American mothering gather into a diasporic *Gumbo ya ya* to demonstrate the dynamic approaches women have historically protected their children from colonialism and slavery's legacies. Together, these fictional mothers preserve voices lost in Eurocentric narratives that do not celebrate the work of mothers who nurtured their child's individual pursuits, preserved cultural traditions, and enabled the survival of future generations to continue the matriline despite efforts to diminish community. Ghanaian mother characters are tasked with upholding ancestral connections and Akan cultural

practices against assimilation and coercion while American mother characters focus on their children's survival despite the legalized violence inflicted upon them. The various stages of British occupation in Ghana and America's continuously evolving legal and political structures that stem from slavery give each mother a unique struggle based on their historical context and yet they share the collective motivation to form authentic relationships with their children that empowers them to withstand and defy repressive systems.

Chapter 3: Activist Othermothering in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing

Defining Othermothering

Aside from biological mother-child relationships, other forms of mothering are essential to consider within Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* as these systems are "rooted in the principles of African collectivism" (Canossi and Lopez-Diago 24). The term othermothering is often "defined as the practice by which female neighbors, sisters, aunts, grandmothers, or other women step in to care for children they have not biologically birthed" (Canossi and Lopez-Diago 24). These adults who nurture Black children are especially important because they embrace the collective goal to mend familial structures, which were "deeply affected by slavery's abuses", as well as "the resultant fracturing of the nuclear family structure [that] continued to reverberate in the black community" after the Transatlantic Slave Trade was dismantled (Jenkins 82). When birth mothers are supported by or replaced with othermothers, "we often find extended communities concerned with mutual care, public health and social activism" (Canossi and Lopez-Diago 24). Othermothers invest in themselves, one another, and the community's future to diminish the political, social, legal, environmental, and ideological factors that put their community, especially younger generations, at risk. Throughout the novel, othermothers are an essential link between an individual and their family, local community, and the African diaspora, "a method in pursuit of collectives whose histories and cultures were/are otherwise hidden or forcibly taken as part of the development of Western epistemes (formal and informal) and the violences of chattel slavery and colonialism" (Redmond 63).

Because the purposes of othermothering are to restore knowledge, reconnect individuals to their ancestry, and sustain life, this term is not limited to women characters. As Roebuck

Sakho explains, within the Black community, all ancestry, whether by blood, close community, and even folklore, can serve as Black Activist Mothering:

> [Titles of Elder, Ancestor/Ancestoress, Sister, and Brother] are ways of intersecting my motherline as a justified knowledge system with the more traditional ways of exposing epistemology (the theory of how one knows what they know). What follows then, can be considered an 'oppositional stance' or a revolt against traditional knowledge structures that only deliver one dimensional oppression narratives. (Roebuck Sakho 7)

From this perspective, othermothering is an intricate web of an individual's personal and communal history that enables collective resistance. Any person who supports others within that community by sharing knowledge or interfering with oppressive structures upholds the intentions of othermothering. Several men in *Homegoing* become vital connections to another character's ancestry, share cultural knowledge, ensure children's survival, and therefore are also recognized as a source of mothering in the following chapter.

This chapter examines an expansive definition of mothering beyond the work of birth mothers and instead focuses on the "'mothering of the mind,' a means to share knowledge and build confidence" (Canossi and Lopez-Diago 24). The several different forms of othermothering analyzed in the following sections share the ambition to keep characters connected to Maame's matriline through community, knowledge, and protection. However, because of the dynamics of how these othermothers assume this role and function within a character's life, I use the following terms throughout the chapter to differentiate between types of othermothering: 1."Grandmothering" will refer to a woman who is separated from the person they raise and nurture by two generations. 2. "Community mothering" is used to describe a woman who exists within the same community as the child they support and steps in to assist the biological mother

or replace the role of a mother in the child's life. 3."Othermothering" will refer to forms of mothering outside of the parameters set by the previous two models, including adults who seek the support of another adult caregiver and men who engage in mothering to protect and preserve another's wellbeing against oppressive structures.

I. (Grand)mothering

Due to the novel's multigenerational perspective and the formal structures that strive to divide Black families, such as slavery and segregation, grandmothering becomes an important tool for both American and Ghanaian characters to engage in resistance against the loss of community. The role of grandmothers for many Black families is an essential support: "Involved grandmothering is a well-worn family strategy with roots in Black cultural traditions and the economic and social realities of Black life" (Hunter). Grandmothering is prevalent across the diaspora to enable Black families in modern society to raise children while parents uphold financial responsibilities for work, or when nuclear family structures are disrupted by other factors such as "incarcerations, mental illness, and the deaths of parents", which often disproportionately affect the Black community (White Jackson 277).

Maintaining multigenerational mothering as a cultural custom in both Ghana and America despite colonization's efforts to force assimilation is an act of resistance that refuses patriarchal and White supremacist structures. In traditional Akan culture, grandmothering is valued as a vital and routine source of childrearing: "In matriarchies, mothering, which originates as a biological fact, is accorded such great importance that it is transformed into a cultural model….a matri-clan consists at least of three generations of women" (Goettner-Abendroth). In such cultures, mothering transcends the individual experience of a mother raising her child(ren) and becomes not only a multigenerational effort in childrearing, but an integral

part of that community's social mores. Similarly, in a recent study of African American grandmothers who raise their grandchildren, it was found that these grandmothers "believe that they do not have a voice in policies and procedures that affect them and their grandchildren. To assist themselves, they agreed to adopt the methods of slave women where many had to raise their children without the benefit of spouse or other assistance" (Jackson 277). When Black grandmothers accept their role as a primary caretaker, they sustain community mothering traditions stemming from African cultures, such as those of the Akan people, and American chattel slavery. Their persistent involvement in their grandchild's life not only acknowledges slavery's harmful legacy of separating nuclear families, but the enduring legacy of grandmothering to counter the adverse effects of inequitable systems that jeopardize stability and connection within Black families and communities.

— Grandmothering in Effia's Matriline—

Gyasi's novel highlights the invaluable service grandmothering has on younger generations as they mature beginning with James's connection to his grandmother, Effia, who shapes his decision to liberate himself from the pressures slavery placed upon his family. As the son of a slaver and the son of a woman regarded as Akan royalty, James understands that his uncle Fiifi manufactured his matrilineage to heal the wounds of British colonization in Ghana. He also understands that Amma, "his own wife-to-be back home in his village, selected for him because of her status" is also expected to continue healing his family's bloodline (Gyasi 99). However, his heart is more invested in Akosua, a woman who does not hold as much societal influence as Amma because she grew up in a smaller village: "She had nothing, and she came from nowhere" (Gyasi 99). Afflicted with the opposing pressures of familial obligations and his own personal convictions, he recalls memories of his grandmother:

> Nothing from nowhere. It was something his grandmother Effia used to say on nights when she seemed most sad…he'd spent a weekend with her at her house near the Castle. In the middle of the night, he had woken up and heard her crying in her room. He'd gone to her, and wrapped her into a hug as tight as his little arms could muster. (Gyasi 99)

James recognizes the stigma forced on Effia is similar to what his family would impose on Akosua. His memory of his grandmother struggling in her old age with wounds that derive from her unexpected removal from her community provides James with a sobering realization that remaining complacent in his family's choices will not remedy deep-rooted suffering. Now that James is an adult, he understands that slavery disenfranchised Effia, various members of his family, and other Ghanaians to feel ostracized and unfulfilled. He now carries the burden of healing generational wounds he did not inflict but unjustly inherited. By selecting his own partner and surrendering his highly regarded social status, James hopes to break a damaging generational cycle. James's memories of his grandmother, the stories she tells him about her experiences, and the empathy these invoke grant him the courage to pursue a life with Akosua and resist the political pressures slavery thrusted upon him and his ancestry.

Although James hopes to alleviate future generations from suffering, his granddaughter, Akua, suffers the abuse of Christian Missionaries and her children must rely on their paternal grandmother, Nana Serwah, for protection. The title of "Nana" among Akan peoples recognizes her venerated status as an Elder: "To be an ancestor, a person must have lived an altruistic life in community, recognition of which by a society leads to the conferral and honorific title as Nana (Elder) on a person" (Ephirim-Donkor 74). Her people have come to a consensus on her righteousness which is formally recognized in her title. Because she has been recognized in this way, she is tasked with upholding this standard of nobility within her matriline and community,

justifying her cautious approach to Akua, an outsider, who becomes her daughter-in-law and the mother of her grandchildren. When she witnesses Akua's delight in her 4-year-old daughter's strength carrying a stick larger than her body, Nana Serwah lets Akua know she detests her approach to mothering:

> "She'll fall and hurt herself," her mother-in-law would say, snatching the *fufu* stick from Abee's hands and shaking her head. Nana Serwah did not approve of [Akua], often saying that a woman whose mother had left her to be taught by white men would never know how to raise children herself. It was usually around this time that Nana Serwah would send Akua out to the market. (Gyasi 179)

To Nana Serwah, Akua's ancestral history and moral compass has been damaged because she was raised by White Christian missionaries and lacks a firm connection to her matriline and Ghanaian heritage. This leads Nana Serwah to become especially observant and critical of Akua's actions as a mother. When she notices the potential for harm, she enacts her political leadership role and delegates a community task to Akua to separate her from the children, effectively disrupting the risk of injury. Nana Serwah's devotion to her family's wellbeing models community expectations to protect its youngest members from all danger because when children in their community are vulnerable, the village's internal stability weakens along with its ability to defend itself against the threats of colonization.

Nana Serwah's role becomes especially important to her grandchild's survival when Akua's behavior signals mental illness from the sexual and mental abuse she endured from the Missionary or the potential possession of a firewoman spirit, earning her the nickname Crazy Woman. Akua's instability and her husband's absence due to war leads Nana Serwah to step in to care for her grandchildren: "Nana Serwah decided that Akua was sick and that she must stay

in her hut until the sickness had left her body. Her daughters would stay with Nana Serwah until Akua had fully healed" (Gyasi 186). As an Elder and grandmother, her disapproval of Akua is overshadowed by her need to protect the children. Nana Serwah's son's relationship with Akua produces these children, making her an inseparable and integral support for Maame's matriline and she accepts the responsibility for its continuance. She arranges for Akua to rest in the hopes that she will be nursed back to health and for herself to fulfill the role of a mother for her grandchildren. However, even following Akua's husband's return from war and time to rest, Akua's condition worsens, eventually leading to the deaths of all but one child in a tragic fire of which Akua has no conscious recollection. While the village expresses outrage and accuses Akua of murdering her children, "Nana Serwah and the doctor were tending to Yaw's wounds" (Gyasi 198). Despite the traumatic circumstances, Nana Serwah does not succumb to shock and is not deterred from administering life-preserving care to her surviving grandson. She embraces her role as Elder and grandmother to assist in stabilizing the turbulent and unpredictable nature of Akua's illness that incapacitates her ability to mother. Without Nana Serwah's presence, Akua's illness could have escalated sooner and potentially resulted in the deaths of all the children and Maame's matriline would discontinue. Although two of the three children die in the fire, Nana Serwah demonstrates the essential role of Elders to guide a community through crises but also how grandmothering can mitigate psychological or spiritual wounds inflicted by colonization's generational trauma that perpetually threaten a new generation's chance of survival.

Nana Serwah's interventions with her daughter-in-law, Akua, and her grandson, Yaw, are successful in preserving the matriline and enable Akua to eventually exhibit the same nurturing approach to grandmothering Yaw's daughter, Marjorie. Akua, having struggled with identity herself, understands the fundamental need every person has to find a sense of belonging and

accurately anticipates that Marjorie's connection to Ghana can be that source of empowerment for her. After Yaw and Esther move to Huntsville, Alabama, Akua gives them a specific request for when her first grandchild arrives: "[Marjorie's] parents had mailed her umbilical cord to Old Lady so that the woman could put it into the ocean" (Gyasi 267). Marjorie's umbilical cord is a literal artifact of maternity that carries essential life-nurturing nutrients to pass from mother to child. Akua's choice to release Marjorie's umbilical in the ocean, knowing that their "family began here, in Cape Coast" signifies Akua's devotion to protecting their family's matrilineage and maintaining connection regardless of geographical distance (Gyasi 267). Visiting her grandmother in Ghana each year and going to the beach, in the same waters in which her umbilical cord was placed, becomes a sanctuary: "her grandmother took her hand and walked her farther and farther out into the water. It was their summer ritual, her grandmother reminding her how to come home" (Gyasi 268). Akua's ability to anticipate Marjorie's need for belonging outside of the United States displays how grandmothering can uphold intergenerational bonds and be a vital source of cultural preservation.

Together, Marjorie and her parents navigate unfamiliar implications of racial identity and what it means to be Black in America, giving Akua the unique opportunity to provide Marjorie with an emotional safety her parents can't. Adapting to life in America's Deep South presents uncharted struggles for Marjorie and her family. After receiving a suggestion from Marjorie's Kindergarten teacher to seek out special education and language development services, her parents "quizzed Marjorie on her English every night…[until] it was the first language that popped into her head" (Gyasi 266). Like Marjorie, her parents are concerned with her ability to blend in at school. However, as she excels in school and takes an interest in English Language Art classes, she is teased by her peer Tisha: "You sound like a white girl. White girl. White girl.

White girl" (Gyasi 269). The conflicting expectations Marjorie encounters from her parents, teachers, and peers create a crucible of cultural alienation. Although Marjorie has a close relationship with her parents, they are also immersed in the complexities of racial and ethnic identity. Marjorie concludes that "[her] grandmother's the only person who really sees [her]" (Gyasi 278). Akua's authenticity and fierce commitment to her bond with her granddaughter offers a unique opportunity for Marjorie to become more deeply connected to their culture, history, and matrilineage. Akua demonstrataes that grandmothering can offer refuge amid intrapersonal oppression found in modern social constructs, as exhibited by Marjorie's Kindergarten teacher, and the internalized oppression, found in Akua's parents' efforts to militantly practice English and Tisha's criticisms, that impose limiting expectations based on ethnicity and racial identity.

Colonialism's divisive powers over Ghana continually threaten the principles of African collectivism. But grandmothers, women Elders who retain familial history and understanding of Akan culture, become a vital source of preserving identity against Eurocentrism's erasure. When British occupation infiltrated Ghana's cultural ecosystems and established the Transatlantic Slave Trade that forced economic dependency, the grandmothers of Maame's matriline remained committed to traditional Akan practices that sustain cultural independence and invest in the safeguarding of future generations.

— Grandmothering in Esi's Matriline—

Because "during American antebellum slavery…mothers and their children were often separated temporarily or permanently," relationships between Black grandmothers and their biological grandchildren were rarely maintained (Conaway). Maame's daughter, Esi, is kidnapped in Ghana and brought to the Cape Coast Castle where she conceives a child through

rape and is trafficked through the Middle Passage. When Esi's daughter, Ness, is purchased at a young age by another plantation owner and torn from her mother. After becoming a mother herself, Ness's trauma from the forced separation is soothed with the presence of Aku, a woman with notable similarities with her own mother: "she was from Asanteland and had been kept in the Castle just like Ness's mother had…who sounded like her mother had, who praised the god her mother had praised" (Gyasi 85). Aku becomes a community mother to Ness and adoptive grandmother to Jo through their intersecting histories and Aku's investment in their wellbeing. When Aku offers to help Ness and her family escape North, she inadvertently contributes to their family's fragmentation. When a search party closes in on them, Ness hands over Jo to Aku just before she is recaptured. Gyasi demonstrates that Black families in America's Antebellum period were often created through community rather than biological ties because of the substantial likelihood of separation.

Ma Aku upholds her promise to Ness and delivers Jo safely to a life of freedom in Baltimore where she provides her adoptive grandson with a rich understanding of his cultural ancestry that would have otherwise been erased. She teaches him trivial information about Akan culture, such as how, "in the Gold Coast brooms had no handles. The body was the handle, and it moved and bent much easier than a stick ever could" (Gyasi 113). Ma Aku also provides Jo with more expansive knowledge such as her lesson about White supremacy's inseparable entanglement in America's Christian nationalism after Jo, an innocent child, gives someone a frog and is scolded publicly for practicing witchcraft:

> The white man's god is just like the white man. He thinks he is the only god, just like the white man thinks he is the only man. But the only reason he is god instead of Nyame or Chukwu or whoever is because we let him be. We do not fight him. We do not even

> question him. The white man told us he was the way, and we said yes, but when has the white man ever told us something was good for us and that thing was really good? They say you are an African witch, and so what? So what? Who told them what a witch was? (Gyasi 123)

Ma Aku forbids him to cry because in doing so, he is empowering the abuse of authority that thrives on sustaining his inferiority. She emphatically informs him of the theological methods slavers used to strip African people of their heritages and vilify them in order to force cultural homogenization. Because of his adoptive grandmother, Jo's understanding of the global impact of slavery deepens, enabling deeper connections to Jo's own identity in relation to America's curated narrative that demonizes otherness.

Furthermore, because Ma Aku ensures Jo's survival, she highlights the essential role of grandmothers for future generations of Black families to thrive despite the racist systems built against them. When Aku agrees to take Jo North to Baltimore, she physically separates him from his mother which unexpectedly deepens his connection to his matrilineage:

> Back then, he used to cry for Sam and Ness. The only thing that would pacify him was stories about them, even if the stories were unpleasant. So Ma Aku would tell him that Sam hardly spoke, but when he did it was loving and wise, and that Ness had some of the most gruesome whip scars she had ever seen. Jo used to worry that his family line had been cut off, lost forever. He would never truly know who his people were, and who their people were before them, and if there were stories to be heard about where he had come from, he would never hear them. When he felt this way, Ma Aku would hold him against her, and instead of stories about family she would tell him stories about nations. The

Fantes of the Coast, the Asantes of the Inland, the Akans. When he lay against this woman now, he knew that he belonged to someone. (Gyasi 130)

As a child plucked from his parents and the only home he has ever known, he is consumed with the fear that losing his biological family meant losing his identity. However, Aku conjures details about Sam and Ness that nurture his belonging and offers new stories Sam and Ness could not relay about his ancestors of Ghana. Had Jo remained with his biological mother on the plantation, he would have been trapped in the indefinite servitude controlled by slavers and, like Ness, forcibly separated from his mother when he was old enough to work and be sold. Instead, Aku aids in Ness's consenting separation from Jo and becomes a secure link to Jo's ancestry that ensures that he becomes a free man, eventually reflected in his chosen surname, Freeman. Aku's bravery allows Jo to grow old and experience roles as a paid employee, chosen husband, father of eight children, and grandfather to three grandchildren. Jo's survival is a direct result of his mother's sacrifice but also his adoptive grandmother's ability to carry out the successful journey North all while meeting his physiological, emotional, and developmental needs. Aku demonstrates that grandmothering is a powerful tool to decolonize America's intersecting legal, religious, and cultural frameworks that endorse harmful discriminatory practices and threaten to mutilate Black family structures.

Jo's granddaughter, Willie, also becomes a grandmother who supplants the primary mothering role for Marcus in his parents' absence. While Marcus's father Sonny and his mother Amani struggle to free themselves from the grips of addiction, his grandmother Willie ensures his protection and wellbeing. After Amani unexpectedly abducts Marcus after years of estrangement under the false pretenses of an ice cream treat, Willie helps Sonny track them down, strikes Amani across her face, warns against her future involvement, and takes Marcus

back home. Although through violent means, Marcus reflects on Willie's protection as a positive pivotal moment:

> Marcus thought about that day often. He was still amazed by it. Not by the fear he'd felt throughout the day, when the woman who was no more than a stranger to him had dragged him farther and farther from home, but by the fullness of love and protection he'd felt later, when his family had finally found him. Not the being lost, but the being found. (Gyasi 293)

Though Willie is compassionate toward Amani's struggle with heroin addiction and initially allows her visitation, she does not allow her compassion about the conditions that cultivated a drug epidemic for the Black community in Harlem to obscure her duties of protecting her grandchild from potential harm. Willie recognizes that if politicians and government agencies cannot or will not fund programs to assist in Harlem's crises, she needs to be the one that affects change with what she can control. She refuses to stand by and see her grandson fall victim to the same debilitating grip of addiction she witnesses for her son and his partner. Without Willie, Marcus's survival, self-worth, and future would be thwarted. Willie's fierce adoration for her grandson translates as fearless advocacy against the political factors that cultivated conditions for Harlem's drug epidemic infecting the welfare of various Black families.

Both sides of Maame's lineage rely on the role of grandmothers, demonstrating that this form of othermothering is an effective form of agency that maintains generational bonds against slavery's destructive legacy. Although nuclear families, religion, language, and other elements of culture and identity were stripped away from the victims of slavery, grandmothers and women Elders became an essential bridge between generations to preserve knowledge, resilience, and lives against such discriminatory structures. The parallels between these two sides of one

matriline bring the principles of Pan-Africanism, or “a belief in the cultural unity of Black people around the world,” to the forefront (Roberts 140). While Gyasi acknowledges the unique ways in which the Transatlantic Slave Trade induced and continues to pose political, social, psychological, and economical threats to Ghanaians and Black Americans, she emphasizes that these two strands of the matriline share the practice of grandmothering as restitution to heal individual and community wounds, refusing the disconnection colonizers strive for in order to maintain dominance.

II. Community Mothering: Women Raising Children Outside of Biological Relationships

Gyasi explores community mothering through relationships in which women have no biological ties to the children they nurture but serve as caretakers who enable those children’s growth and survival. In matriarchal societies such as Akan culture, “it is not necessary to be a biological mother in order to be acknowledged as a mother…Each individual sister does not necessarily have children, but together they are all ‘mothers’ of any children that any of them have” (Goettner-Abendroth). Community mothering, also referred to as community activist othermothering, stems from this concept, but reaches outside of biological sisterhood:

> Peteet argues that othermothering as a practice and discourse of motherhood “can simultaneously incorporate and uphold, critique, and challenge dominant cultural images and political policies" (103). Some studies of black activist othermothering have demonstrated that it is usual for othermothers to become community activists because of their commitment to black blood mothers and their children (Gilkes 219; James 44). The actions of community activist othermothers, as well as many black educators, contribute to communal physical, emotional, and intellectual welfare. (Conaway 4)

When women intentionally organize to share the responsibility of raising children within their community rather than solely within their family, they can better meet the needs of children made vulnerable by oppressive systems. Community mothers prevent separation and ostracism that enables inequality and subvert prejudiced power structures designed to inhibit progress.

Maame's protective demeanor toward Abronoma, their family's house girl, establishes the novel's investment in community mothering as a source of resistance. Following Abronoma's whipping for spilling water out of a bucket, Maame "[makes] a salve for her wounds", chastises Esi for vocalizing her support of her father Kojo's violence, and goes "to finish the chores that Abronoma could not perform that night" (Gyasi 38). Maame heals Abronoma's physical and emotional wounds through medicinal remedies, rebuking her biological daughter's stance, and alleviating the housework for which Abronoma is made responsible. Maame's unhesitating compassion signals her recognition of Abronoma's humanity and undeserved pain. Esi is shocked but clearly inspired by her mother's altruism: "Esi fetched [Abronoma] water, and helped tilt her head back so that she could drink it…Esi wiped the corners of Abronoma's lips with her fingers" (Gyasi 38). Esi is just a child and yet she mimics Maame's attentiveness to Abronoma's needs, demonstrating her desire to reconcile her previously held prejudice of Abronoma's inferiority. Maame's resistance inspires Esi's resistance toward Kojo's decision to exert his power to demean Abronoma for public entertainment. Maame's influential decisions highlight the power of community mothering to shift the hierarchical beliefs ingrained in a society from which violence, dehumanization, and systemic oppression flourishes.

Esi's daughter, Ness, also exemplifies community mothering and its power to make reparations in spite of injustice through her relationship with Pinky. Pinky, a young girl enslaved

on an American plantation, exhibits mutism likely caused by psychological trauma from the tragic loss of her mother. Her withdrawal from other slaves on the plantation makes her vulnerable and symbolizes slavery's suppression of a person's developmental and personal potential. Ness's connection to Pinky becomes vital as Gyasi writes, "Pinky could not be separated from Ness…She slept with Ness, ate with Ness, took walks with Ness, and cooked with Ness. Still, she didn't speak, and Ness never asked her to, knowing full well that Pinky would speak when she had something to say" (Gyasi 77). Though many are concerned Pinky doesn't speak, Ness doesn't pressure her to, modeling that Pinky can still receive the benefits and solidarity of communal membership she needs despite her inability to communicate verbally. Ness's willingness to care for a child that is not biologically hers invites the child into a collective space, repairs the child's sense of self, and moves her to speak when she becomes concerned about her caregiver: "'Ness, Ness!' she spoke. Ness turned to face the girl trying to hide her surprise. 'Was you having a bad dream?'" (Gyasi 81). Ness's unconditional love becomes the foundation of a relationship in which Pinky returns the responsibility to protect. Pinky's verbal participation in the community is reengaged, demonstrating that community mothering can heal the emotional wounds caused by institutionalized enslavement and suppression and incite a culture of reciprocal safeguarding in which children can continue to learn, develop, and thrive.

Gyasi's novel also explores the community mothering role of educators through Mrs. Pinkston who becomes a transformative source of mothering within Marjorie's academic life and restores her confidence despite experiences that diminish her self-worth. As Marjorie struggles to find her place in high school, her English teacher quickly becomes "Marjorie's favorite teacher, one of two black teachers in a school that served almost two thousand students" (Gyasi 270).

Marjorie naturally gravitates toward Mrs. Pinkston because of shared aspects of their identity. As Laurie A. Putnam points out,

> One of the most pressing challenges facing education systems today is addressing the systemic gaps in student achievement and wellbeing, particularly for students of color and those living in poverty…Increasing the diversity of our teaching and administrative staff leads to better outcomes for students. A growing body of research underscores the significant academic and social benefits that students experience when they have teachers and leaders who reflect their backgrounds [and] experiences. (Putnam)

Mrs. Pinkston is an emblem of a potential solution within the American education system, unveiling each teacher's and each district's potential to reconceptualize their role in dismantling discrimination. Not only does Mrs. Pinkston's identity attract Marjorie's attention, but she demonstrates a strong investment in Marjorie's cultural heritage and family: "She was the only person Marjorie knew who had a copy of her father's book, *The Ruin of a Nation Begins in the Homes of Its People*" (Gyasi 270). Mrs. Pinkston gives Marjorie a sense of security against an exclusionary environment, provides her with validation outside of her family, and stresses the importance of community mothering to support a child's holistic success by reinforcing young minds against marginalization.

Mrs. Pinkston further embodies her community mother role when she organizes a Black cultural night and successfully convinces Marjorie to share her voice through poetry, confirming her status as a student advocate who prioritizes the unique needs of Black students within a predominantly White society. The Black cultural night is held "at the beginning of May, well after Black History Month had passed," signifying Mrs. Pinkston's refusal to adhere to predetermined conventions of when Black history should be emphasized (Gyasi 273). When she

assigns Marjorie a prompt, to “talk about what being African American means to [her],” Marjorie is resistant to this label, identifying more with her Ghanaian heritage (Gyasi 273). However, Mrs. Pinkston is candid with her and defends her use of the term: “Listen, Marjorie, I’m going to tell you something that maybe nobody’s told you yet. Here, in this country, 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 273). Although Mrs. Pinkston’s comment could be misinterpreted as dismissive, she is assisting Marjorie with understanding America’s cultural landscape that often categorizes people based on perceived identity rather than accuracy or self-determined identifiers. Her frank explanation allows Marjorie to understand her inclusion under the umbrella term African American, and she shares an original poem that leaves her father, Yaw, with “tears running down his face” (Gyasi 282). With Mrs. Pinkston’s position as a formal and informal educator, she participates in community mothering that nurtures Marjorie to use spoken word, sharing in her father’s authorial background, and to find community in Black diasporic arts, culture, and history poetically juxtaposed against the backdrop of America’s Deep South.

Maame, Ness, and Mrs. Pinkston exert their powerful and protective influence over children who are made vulnerable by inescapable oppression. Although each child exhibits their own needs based on the sociopolitical context in which they are raised, these community mothers model the importance of matriarchal protection against problematic ideologies that fuel their society’s discriminatory behavior.

III. Othermothering: Mothered Adults

A significant lasting effect of colonialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade is intergenerational trauma. Joy DeGruy explains, “Post-traumatic slave syndrome basically

suggests that there has been multigenerational trauma as a result of slavery and the residual traumas that followed slavery that were effective in having some sorts of impact on behaviors of African Americans, and that trauma, which has continued, has never healed" (Smiley). While DeGruy's observations are specific to African Americans, this theory is also applicable to several Ghanaian communities who were "victims as well as perpetrators of slavery; they themselves were sold by neighboring groups, and they sold their war captives to Europeans" (Roberts 216). The external pressure from British colonization heightened rivalries between community leaders to arrange deals that ensured their own protection. For example,

> the Oyo Empire…competed with the Dahomey and Ashanti Kingdoms around trafficking humans into the Transatlantic Slave Trade with the Europeans…experts estimate that the Dahomey would send some $14 million (in today's U.S. terms) in revenue to the Oyo annually—income mainly derived from selling captives to Europeans. (Roberts 235)

Colonizers who reduced humans from the African continent to possessions in chattel slavery created a complex system of degradation, not only supporting a global racial caste system to expand land ownership and financial profit but leading to disloyalty between Ghanaian communities as a result of hypervigilance and the imminent threat of capture. These conditions, paired with abhorrent violence, continually exposed Ghanaians and African Americans to trauma for centuries. For this reason, adults also need nurturing in *Homegoing* to provide a pathway of agency by rebuilding connection, trust, and dignity and reduce the pain of colonialism's psychological wounds that fracture individuals and communities. Gyasi indicates that when othermothering expands beyond childrearing and includes a diverse range of relationships in which adult characters become a caretaker of other adults, community wounds resulting from the Transatlantic Slave Trade can be healed and increase chances of survival.

Many children suffer in the novel because of White supremacist ideology and the structures that maintain racial hierarchy, and some of these children grow into adults who carry wounds of disconnection and seek reconditioning from community. Individuals who are isolated as a result of racism can resist the false narrative of their inferiority by reconnecting to a network of shared cultural values, folklore, perspectives, and ancestry. As Roebuck Sakho explains, in her work, "the motherline is exalted and is demonstrative of the innate capacity and resiliency of Black women as a chain of knowledge producers whether it's [her] Grandmother or [her] other cultural heroines" (Roebuck Sakho 9). Othermothering exists through interpersonal interactions among Black women of all ages, but also through indirect methods such as oral histories and written works from previous generations, all of which place matrilineage at the center. When a character is nurtured by a woman who restores resilience and makes access to community readily available, they experience othermothering that allows them to be reintegrated into a broader knowledge system which they were previously denied. Consequently, the character who has regained connection is now empowered to survive, resist, and counteract oppressive systems and the misrepresentations they manufacture.

Despite Maame's inability to directly influence Effia's upbringing and the physical and verbal abuse Effia endures from Baaba, Adwoa connects Effia to her culture, becoming a powerful source of mothering by fostering belonging and connection. After Baaba arranges for Effia to be married to James Collins, a slaver, she moves into the Cape Coast Castle with little to no connection to her matrilineage, culture, or history. However, she finds solidarity with Adwoa, another Ghanaian wife of a slaver. Adwoa and Effia were not close when they lived in their village, but within the walls of the Castle, "they saw each other as often as possible, each happy to be near someone who understood her, to hear the comforting sounds of her regional tongue"

(Gyasi 21). Their shared understanding of Fante history, language, and culture is a form of mothering outside of maternity that brings them together within the Castle's literal and symbolic boundaries; the repressive context in which they live does not stifle their identities but rather increases their vibrancy. Adwoa and Effia's unity opposes the actions of their husbands whose business relies on the dehumanization and trafficking of Ghanaians.

Adwoa is able to educate and support Effia by teaching her about practices in Akan culture, nurturing her Fante identity in a Castle that represents methodic cultural erasure against Ghanaians. Adwoa advises Effia to pursue pregnancy as a means to remain safe; to help with Effia's fertility, she tells her, "I will give you some roots from the woods. You put them under the bed when you lie with him" (Gyasi 21). Effia complies with Adwoa's advice, which actively threatens James's power that rests on White supremacy and its weaponized use of Christianity for colonial power: "Now, Effia, I don't want any voodoo or black magic in this place. My men can't hear that I let my wench place strange roots under the bed. It's not Christian" (Gyasi 23). Effia's efforts to become pregnant oppose Christian customs, prioritize Akan beliefs, and is ultimately successful. Adwoa's othermothering links Effia to her cultural heritage and successfully enables Effia's own journey of mothering Quey despite the ways in which slavery and colonization aimed to divide, manipulate, and assert control over marginalized communities.

Unbeknownst to her half-sister Effia, Esi is captured and forced to survive in the dungeons of the same Cape Coast Castle awaiting the further perils of the Middle Passage. Gyasi paints a painfully vivid image of the unsanitary conditions Esi and other women are subjected to in the cages of the dungeon: "The smell was unbearable. In the corner, a woman was crying so hard that it seemed her bones would break from her convulsions" (Gyasi 28); "their stomachs were more empty more days than full" (Gyasi 29); "sometimes there were so many bodies

stacked into the women's dungeon that they all had to lie, stomach down, so that women could be stacked on top of them" (Gyasi 30); "Now the waste on the dungeon floor was up to Esi's ankles…Esi could hardly breathe" (Gyasi 46). Exposed to the unspeakable horrors of human trafficking, Esi seeks out an othermothering source in Tansi, which enables these two women to endure immense suffering. In an environment designed to strip these women of their cultural identity and humanity, Esi and Tansi engage in resistance when they turn to Akan folklore and consensual physical touch to restore communal knowledge and human connection. As Esi pleads for Tansi to tell her a story, Tansi "pulled Esi's head into her lap and began playing with her hair… 'Do you know the story of the kente cloth?'" (Gyasi 30). Tansi and Esi, sixteen and fifteen respectively, manage to share an intimate exchange amid harrowing circumstances. Even though Esi admits to having heard the kente cloth story multiple times from Tansi, Tansi's soothing touch and the familiarity of the story become a ritual of love that defies the dungeon's design and purpose. This intragenerational connection serves as a source of othermothering that resists colonization's degradation by restoring Esi's connection to her cultural folklore and fostering authentic intimacy despite the brutality they endure.

Esi's daughter, Ness, demonstrates othermothering through her compassionate, self-sacrificial, protective approach with her husband Sam. Sam's refusal to assimilate into slavery's White supremacist structure, while courageous in spirit, proves to be an unproductive form of resistance. Each time Sam ignores orders and expectations set by slavers such as speaking English, he refuses the caste system imposed upon him but is severely beaten. In fear that they may kill him after he vandalizes their living space in a fit of rage, Ness lies and claims that she is responsible for the destruction. For the first time, Sam witnesses Ness being severely beaten and is overcome with guilt and admiration. In repayment for her protection, he seeks medical help.

He stands by and watches "the roots and leaves and salves that are smeared into Ness's back as she slips in and out of consciousness…she finds him sitting at her feet, peering at her face with his big, tired eyes" (Gyasi 81). Ness's act of selflessness teaches Sam an important lesson; the pain directed toward one slave on a plantation does not singularly affect the individual but rather inflicts pain on their entire community. Although the slavers may be given the illusion that Ness successfully tames Sam into a productive and complaisant slave, she teaches him that survival through community and maintaining humanity in a system designed to break the human spirit can also be a form of defiance. Sam has been reduced to a monster in the eyes of slavers, and his fits of rage only justify that narrative. His connection with Ness and other slaves on the plantation restores his compassion and creates unity despite slavery's attempt to dismantle the individual and collective identities of Africans and African Americans.

In a variation of othermothering similar to Sam and Ness's marriage, Akosua and James's romance is rooted in Akosua's knowledge that diverts James from causing further harm. Akosua's wealth of knowledge about slavery's effects on Ghana and eagerness to challenge colonialism promotes personal growth for her future husband, James, with a transparency he lacked from his own mother. Following the death of a prominent political figure in Ghana, James meets Akosua at a funeral and is enamored by her confident criticisms: "'Respectfully, I will not shake the hand of a slaver,' she said. She looked him in the eye as she spoke" (Gyasi 95). Prior to this exchange, James had not been challenged about his family's involvement in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. She continues to condemn his actions when she explains that her village is caught in a senseless cycle of mourning and then "aveng[ing] lost lives by taking more" (Gyasi 99). Her commentary on British colonization's ability to manufacture and pressurize tense dynamics between Ghanaian communities for profitable gain is aligned with

Ness's protective guidance for Sam. This conversation leaves James feeling "something well up inside him as it had never done before. If he could, he would listen to her speak forever" (Gyasi 99). Akosua's educational lessons nurture James and his moral growth to question how he and his family continue to benefit from British colonization. He begins to realize that his passive acceptance of his arranged marriage to Amma, a wife selected for him due to his father's status as a slaver, would only drive him further into denial. Akosua's astute observations of Ghanaian's intricate history is a form of othermothering that changes James's perception. He becomes more cognizant of the ways in which slavery and his ignorance inflicts personal and communal harm. Both Ness and Akosua model how othermothering can be practiced in marriages, encouraging resistance against manufactured identities enforced by slavery's political and economic influence and recentering emotional investment toward community.

The knowledge James gains from Akosua leads him to rely on Mampanyin's revered powers as a witch doctor, deepening his connection to his Ghanaian heritage and highlighting how cultural traditions and elderhood function as othermothering. Her knowledge stems from traditional Akan medicinal practices rather than Western theories of healing, allowing Ghanaians who seek her advice to engage in solutions independently developed within their country and traditions. James seeks Mampanyin's guidance when he is unsure of how to leave Amma to pursue a life with Akosua without upsetting his parents, Quey and Nana Yaa, his uncle Fiifi, and his ancestors. When he confesses this desire, he refers to her as "Aunty Mampanyin" (Gyasi 103), a title that signifies respect and connection through shared communal history and realizes that, "[p]erhaps Mampanyin could make it so that neither his mother's voice nor his father's would ever be in his head again" (Gyasi 105). His mother's ancestry was forcibly merged with Quey's through marriage with the sole purpose of cleansing Ghana of British occupation and

profitization in slavery. James is the product of the dangerous lengths Fiifi went to in order to heal their family's matrilineage, creating immense pressure for James to remain with Amma and "A disease [of] spiritual (sunsum mu) ... origin, in which case treatment is sought through traditional healers" (Ephirim-Donkor 3). Mampanyin is honest with James, claiming that no one who seeks her help really needs her skillset, but rather "they come to [her] for permission" (Gyasi 105). This conversation propels James to fake his own death to avoid disappointing his elders and ancestors. Although dishonest, his disappearance is thoughtfully planned to allow him the opportunity for a life with Akosua without blatant disrespect for his matriline. Mampanyin's mothering provides a space for James to feel relieved of his political obligations, defy imposed expectations as the son of a slaver, and further diverge from his heritage engrossed in atrocious crimes against humanity.

The psychological burdens forced on Ghanaians and African Americans threaten to fragment families but are continuously countered with othermothers who foster connections and provide security. Each example of othermothering restores and repairs an individual's spirit through connection despite colonization's aspirations to sever relationships and isolate the individual to maintain power.

IV. Othermothering: Men Who Mother

While Gyasi prioritizes principles of matriarchy throughout her novel, she does not include a direct matriline from one generation to the next because not every character born into the ancestral line is a woman. In such cases, Gyasi includes men characters who epitomize mothering and its theoretical framework. Conaway defines "rhetorically constructed Africana othermothering as oral and written discourse that is intended to nurture, educate, protect, socialize, and promote individual and group wellbeing, all of which promotes the welfare and

survival of the race" (Conaway 7). Viewing the mode of mothering as rooted in communication rather than based on the source's gender allows the term othermothering to expand from the confinements of womanhood. Throughout the novel, several men characters exemplify othermothering by prioritizing the needs of others, particularly children, encouraging resilience against adversity, advocating for critical examination of how historical narratives are formed, and ensuring another's survival.

Fiifi and Quey's discussion of matrilineage highlights how men who maintain Akan culture participate in a form of mothering to oppose colonialism and patriarchal structures. After Effia is forced into a marriage with a British slaver, they have a son, Quey, who grows up outside of his mother's Fante culture. His Uncle Fiifi educates him about customs in Fanteland and explains that "here, mothers, sisters, and their sons are most important. If you are chief, your sister's son is your successor because your sister was born of your mother but your wife was not. Your sister's son is more important to you than ever your own son" (Gyasi 68). Although Fiifi's understanding of Effia is negatively influenced by his own mother's descriptions, he regrets his disregard for Effia and concludes that he "loved Effia as a sister once, so even though [Quey] is not of [his] mother, [Quey] is the closest thing to a firstborn nephew" (Gyasi 68). Fiifi's commitment to the concept of matrilineage serves as a form of mothering. He attempts to instill Akan culture in Quey that challenges his inherited the role as a slaver and the formal education he received at a boarding school in England. In doing so, Fiifi diminishes both patriarchal and White supremacist systems and tries to refocus his family's trajectory to remain rooted in Ghana.

Quey's arranged marriage to Nana Yaa also exemplifies the traditional Akan values with which Fiifi aims to heal their ancestral wounds, centering the hope of future generations on repairing the matriline. Nana Yaa, Quey's arranged wife and the future mother of his children, is

used as a salve to heal complex political wounds made in the wake of slavery. Nana Yaa's title demonstrates her cultural significance, as the term "Nana" is not used lightly among Akan communities. It signals her devotion to community, her status as an Elder, and person who will be revered as a treasured ancestor once she dies. This title, combined with her status as "the eldest daughter of Osei Bonsu, the highest power in the Asante kingdom, a man who commanded respect from the queen of England herself for his sway over the Gold Coast's role in the slave trade," allows Quey to understand why "Wars had been started over her: to get her, to free her, to marry her" (Gyasi 66). Fiifi explains that once Quey marries Nana Yaa,

> even if the Asante king and all of his men come knocking on my door, they cannot deny you. They cannot kill you or anyone in this village, because it is now your village as it was once your mother's. I will make sure you become a very powerful man, so that even after the white men have all gone from this Gold Coast—and believe me, they will go—you will still matter long after the Castle walls have crumbled. (Gyasi 68)

As a man, Fiifi is not in control of his matrilineage, leaving him feeling powerless in nurturing his bloodline and strengthening his community. As a result, he resorts to Nana Yaa's power and influence as a solution. Fiifi's desperate approach to joining Quey and Nana Yaa in marriage by kidnapping her reveals that the intent behind his actions equally ignores Nana Yaa's humanity and divulges the unequivocal power of matrilineage. Sustaining the values of Akan culture effectively defies the goals of British colonizers who strive to dominate, manipulate, and dictate the lives of other communities.

While Fiifi and Quey look to an arranged marriage to heal the matriline, Quey's son James learns to liberate himself from political obligation when Mampanyin validates his interest Akosua, which shapes his approach to raising his daughter, Abena. Initially fearing his

daughter's reaction to the truth about his family's involvement in the slave trade, James is opposed to Abena's curiosity about Kumasi and her family's history, creating a blockage in their matriline. However, James recalls Mampanyin's lesson about the universal need for permission and together with Abena, they unbury a family heirloom together, symbolizing his permission for her to decide the direction of her journey and the inability suppress the past:

> he picked up his shovel, went out to a spot on the edge of their land, and started digging…Abena took pity on him. She took the shovel and began digging for him…[James] started raking away the dirt with both of his hands…When he stopped, all that was left in his palms was a black stone necklace… "This belonged to my grandmother, your great-grandmother Effia. It was given to her by her own mother." (Gyasi 152)

James facilitates Effia's connection to Abena through the stone necklace which survives the tumultuous emotional and physical journey from one generation to the next. Mampanyin's guidance transforms his role into that of an othermother who nurtures Abena's intuitive curiosity about the past. His approval deepens their bond and Abena gains access to a stone and her matriline by extension.

James's othermothering transcends his relationship with Abena and influences future generations he will never meet. The stone's representation of their family's endurance is solidified when it successfully makes it to Marjorie, the ninth generation of their bloodline:

> Her father had given it to her only a year before, saying that she was finally old enough to care for it. It had belonged to Old Lady and to Abena before her, and to James, and Quey, and Effia the Beauty before that. It had begun with Maame, the woman who had set a

> great fire. Her father had told her that the necklace was a part of their family history and she was to never take it off, never give it away. (Gyasi 267)

This passing down of the stone from one generation to the next includes Quey and James, fortifying their place within the matriline regardless of their gender. While James does not physically give birth to a new generation, James's ability to put his personal contempt of Kumasi in the past births new opportunities and forever alters the trajectory of his family's future while also linking Abena to their shared past. Passing down a precious heirloom allows the stone to travel to his descendants, sustaining connection to Maame's matriline, and representing resilience against each generation's trials against the evolving but ever-present restraints of White supremacy.

Ness's son, Jo, is another father who engages in othermothering by preparing his children for potential harm and coaching them on how to survive situations in which they may be at risk. His approach to guiding his children aligns with LaShawnDa Pittman's assertion that, "Black mothers must teach their children the 'right' actions and behaviors to keep them alive…understanding under what conditions it is safe or unsafe to take up more or less space" (Pittman et al. 6). Jo is raising his family with his wife Anna during America's Antebellum era amidst rising tensions that eventually lead to the Civil War. As discussions about a new Fugitive Slave Law become a predominant focus in both public and private spaces, Jo grows increasingly more aware of the needs of his family. H. Robert Baker explains that,

> the settlement worked out in Congress between 1791 and 1800 had three components. First, it made fugitive slave reclamation a local affair, determinable by either a state or federal magistrate at a summary judicial hearing. Second, the details of reclamation—what procedure would guide the magistrate or what evidence would be considered

> sufficient—were left to judges' discretion or further legislative instruction. Third, the transit of slaves, free blacks, and the protection of free blacks from kidnapping were left to the states to decide as internal police matters. (Baker 1136-1137)

In the South's effort to reclaim slaves who had escaped North and restore slavery's legitimacy against abolitionists' momentum, Congress approved the right for slave owners to use legal proceedings and police force to capture free people and enslave them. Jo's children had never known any other life other than being free, but the new legal procedures determined by the state of Maryland require proof of freedom to avoid capture, even if they had never been enslaved. Jo must attune his approach to raising his children to the rising tensions of the national climate by teaching them the proper actions that will ensure their survival.

Jo's response to the altering legal status of his family's freedom by preparing them for encounters with the police and encouraging their compliance exemplifies Pittman's explanation of Black mothering:

> In the mornings, before Jo and Anna went off to work, Jo made the children practice showing their papers. He would play the federal marshall, hands on his hips, walking up to each of them, even little Gracie, and saying, in a voice as stern as he could muster, "Where you goin?" And they would reach into the pockets Anna had sewn into their dresses and pants, and without any backtalk, always silently, thrust those papers into Jo's hands. (Gyasi 124-125)

While this defies conventional gender constructs of how mothering is most commonly portrayed, Jo's response to these circumstances models a key aspect of othermothering: teaching children obedience, even in unjust circumstances, is sometimes necessary for their survival. Although it may appear that Jo is acquiescing to White supremacy's beliefs of his and his family's

inferiority, his mothering resists oppression by enabling survival against the political, legal, economic, and ideological structures intentionally designed to devastate the Black community.

In spite of Jo's efforts to protect his family, his pregnant wife Anna is captured and enslaved in a Georgia plantation and his son, H, is born into slavery. Anna refuses enslavement and takes her own life, prompting her slavers to "slice [H] out her belly 'fore she died" (Gyasi 165). Without his mother, father, grandmother, and seven siblings, H's formative years are spent without a consistent form of family. Following Emancipation, H leaves Georgia to live in Alabama, where he is accused of "studyin' a white woman" (Gyasi 158). Although Emancipation had been declared, freedom for Black citizens was still legally gatekept through Jim Crow Laws and the wording of the Thirteenth Amendment:

> The statutory criminalization of black freedom that occurred in the antebellum period lawfully propelled into the future, [produced] various formations of neoslavery from privatized public dominative regimes of convict leasing, peonage, and criminal-surety to the no less dominative and economically interested public systems of the country chain gang, the County Farm, and penitentiary plantation. (Childs 63)

H becomes one of the many Black men unjustly arrested and used for free labor, a practice that remains within modern day legal parameters. Despite coming of age in America's Post-Emancipation Era, legal loopholes and his lack of family connections make H particularly vulnerable.

During his incarceration, H builds a strong relationship with another convict, Joecy, who becomes another source of the novel's exploration of gender nonconforming mothering. One day while serving his sentence in a coal mine, H's "white third-class" mining partner shares his racist ideologies, so H picks up both of their shovels and meets their combined quotas to spite him

(Gyasi 163). However, this leaves H in an uncomfortable and unfamiliar position of feeling weak when he realizes later that night that he cannot move his arms. When H cries and confesses his fear of dying, Joecy steps in to comfort him: "'Hush now,' Joecy said, hugging H to his body as best he could with the chains clanking and clacking as he moved. 'Ain't nobody dying tonight'" (Gyasi 163). These two male convicts, both mislabeled in society as violent and dangerous, share an intimate moment of vulnerability. Rather than allowing H to feel belittled by the pitt boss, his prison sentence, or his racist mining partner that led to his dwindling physical strength, Joecy cradles H in the same manner a mother would calm an anxious child in the night. The juxtaposition between the physical discomfort and noise of the shackles and Joecy's consoling touch and soothing affirmations highlights the novel's depiction of mothering, in all forms, as an act of rebellion against structures that aim to control and marginalize Black lives. Joecy's othermothering allows H to endure physical, psychological, and emotional suffering without capitulating to the criminal justice system's barbarity.

H also follows in his father and Joecy's footsteps of othermothering when he challenges the supervisors who leverage the work of young, alleged convicts during a labor strike. Without work experience outside of plantation work and mining, H eventually pursues work as a free miner as a source of income after fulfilling his mandated sentence. Dangerous and life-threatening working conditions paired with unlivable wages incite H to join a group of unionized workers who vote to strike. Unhappy with union action, mine supervisors increase their reliance on convict leasing to replace workers, including young Black children. H is horrified and comes to their defense: "'Let them kids go!' H shouted loudly. A boy had peed himself waiting for the shaft … 'They ain't but kids. Let 'em go!'" (Gyasi 172-173). When the pitt boss argues with H, the young boy who soiled himself begins to run and is fatally shot. In response to the tragic and

unnecessary loss of a young Black child's life, "H grabbed a white man by the throat and held him over the vast pit…fear was written plainly across his blue eyes, bulging now that H's grip had tightened" (Gyasi 174). H does not kill the pitt boss, knowing that he couldn't give in to raw emotion and become "the con they had told him he was" (Gyasi 174). However, H was convicted for allegedly looking at a White woman too long, so physically threatening a powerful White man is particularly courageous and dangerous in a White supremacist patriarchal society. Although H could not protect all of the children from harm, his criticisms of child labor and disgust at the loss of a young Black child prevents further devastation. Because "the running boy was the only one to die in the struggle," this suggests that H's vocal stance against the boy's wrongful death and refusal to retaliate with violence potentially saved lives in a tense situation within an unequal power dynamic (Gyasi 174). H's othermothering shines through his union membership and fearless protection of his fellow workers, particularly the young children, which ensures survival, safety, and unity against oppressive forces.

Yaw is yet another man character that embodies rhetorically constructed othermothering by disseminating uncensored knowledge and equipping a new generation with critical thinking skills necessary to resist biased narratives. Yaw, Akua's son who survives the fire, is similar to his daughter's teacher, Mrs. Pinkston; he does not necessarily replace the role of a mother, but he becomes a supportive member in the community who teaches his students a pivotal lesson about the intersections of perspective, power, and history:

> This is the problem of history. We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others. Those who were there in the olden days, they told stories to the children so that the children would know, so that the children could tell stories to their children. And so on, and so on. But

> now we come upon the problem of conflicting stories. Kojo Nyarko says that when the warriors came to his village their coats were red, but Kwame Adu says that they were blue. Whose story do we believe, then? (Gyasi 226)

Yaw exposes that the root of all history, whether written or oral, is a story told through the lens of a person's perspective. If objective details, such as the color of coats, can be misremembered or inaccurately repeated, then subjective details are certainly vulnerable to modifications. Yaw views his role as an educator as "a performer in the tradition of village dancers and storytellers," a vessel through which culture is translated from one generation to the next (Gyasi 229). Yaw's desire to nurture young minds, prepare them to apply this knowledge to recognize power imbalances of systemic racism, and cultivate strategies to respond to such issues are aligned with the values and intentions of othermothering.

Gyasi's characters demonstrate that mothering is not limited by gender constructs and is a dynamic, crucial aspect of developing communal support amid recurring injustices. Throughout the novel, grandmothers, educators, women community leaders, and men alike respond to devastating adversity by preserving communal knowledge, maintaining intergenerational communication, and shifting concern from the self to the wellbeing of younger generations when faced with a threat. The parallel narratives of othermothers in both sides of the matriline highlight that African Americans and Ghanaians remain connected despite the cultural, familial, and communal fracturing inflicted by the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Unity is preserved and strengthened through othermothering, a practice traceable to traditional Akan social and political structures that prioritize community over individualism, to sabotage colonialism and slavery's efforts to validate racial hierarchy and fragment communities.

Conclusions on Forms of Agency in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

Homegoing's multigenerational narrative is layered with vehement strides toward healing that culminates in a friendship between Marjorie and Marcus, the eighth generation who unknowingly mend Maame's divided matriline. After a serendipitous meeting, both characters recognize an inexplicable magnetism in their newfound connection and readers are provided with a sense of relief as their union re-establishes connection in their matrilineage. When the two decide to take a trip to Ghana together, their subconsciously inherited fears rise to the surface, and they confront them together in a poignant resolution:

> Marcus ran until he found two men with dark, gleaming, shoe-polish skin who were building a dazzling fire with flames that licked out and up, crawling toward the water…"What's wrong?" Marjorie shouted. And he just kept staring out into the water. It went every direction that his eye could see. It splashed toward his feet, threatening to put out the fire. "Come here," he said, finally turning to look at her. She glanced at the fire, and it was only then he remembered her fear. "Come," he said again. "Come see." She stepped a little bit closer, but stopped again when the fire roared into the sky…She walked to where he stood, where the fire met the water. He took her hand and they both looked out into the abyss of it. The fear that Marcus had felt inside the Castle was still there, but he knew it was like the fire, a wild thing that could still be controlled, contained. (Gyasi 299-300)

The fires set to capture members of rival tribes and the firewoman spirit to whom Akua surrenders her children manifest as Marjorie's fear of fire while Esi's stories of Black bodies callously thrown overboard in the Middle Passage manifests as Marcus's fear of water. Rather than being forcibly taken and trafficked like their ancestors, Marcus and Marjorie travel to

Ghana together, tour the Cape Coast Castle, and hold hands as they bravely stand before the fears that once compromised them and their family. They support one another emotionally as they willfully return to the origins of their cultural heritage and ancestral trauma, demonstrating reclaimed bodily autonomy.

Their compassion toward one another's distress and Marjorie's decision to give Marcus Maame's black stone necklace are also significant gestures of mothering that underscore the healing of generational wounds through restorative community. Marcus's ancestor, Esi, was forced to leave her mother's stone in the dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle, representing the sudden involuntary break in the connection to her life, family, and community in Ghana. Though Esi's stone is never recovered, an ending that Gyasi feared would be "too neat" (Goyal and Gyasi 484), Marjorie is compelled to give Marcus hers: "'Here,' Marjorie said. 'Have it.' She lifted the stone from her neck, and placed it around Marcus's. 'Welcome home.' He felt the stone hit his chest, hard and hot, before finding its way up to the surface again. He touched it, surprised by its weight" (Gyasi 300). Marjorie's ancestors' careful preservation of Effia's stone represents intentional safeguarding of Ghanaian cultural values and their family's history through diverse expressions of mothering. When Marjorie passes the stone to Marcus, she steps into the role of an othermother and melds Esi's matriline with Effia's. The transfer of the stone symbolizes the healing of the fractures in their matrilineage. Marcus is humbled by the weight of the stone, representing the cumulative weight of their genealogical pain and accomplishments placed on his shoulders. Marjorie follows in the footsteps of her family's othermothers by embracing Marcus and his ancestors in their shared history and restoring their collective identity.

Each generation's effort to physically resist and rebuild community in spaces designed to seclude results in the powerful union between Marcus and Marjorie. Gyasi shares that Marcus and Marjorie's relationship,

> was one of the few things [she] knew from the very beginning that [she] wanted to happen and for [her] the entire book was working toward that moment—it never had another possible ending…there's something really satisfying about the idea of restoration and the idea to give back to these characters who have seen their lineages go through so very much. (Goyal and Gyasi 484)

Their decision to willfully explore Ghana and support one another in the process provides restoration for their family but also represents the power in recognizing the universality in the struggles and perseverance within people of the African diaspora. The novel's conclusion critiques the extraordinary depths of influence colonialism and slavery had and continues to have globally while concurrently celebrating each generation's unrelenting and varied approaches to resistance.

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi demonstrates how the veil of double-consciousness racial hierarchy forced over the eyes of the Black community through colonialism and slavery is meant to immobilize each generation. However, assertions of bodily autonomy and varied forms of Black mothering prove to be reliable forms of agency that prioritize communal needs, cultural preservation, and advance collective liberation. Through these collaborative efforts, preceding generations empower new generations to permeate this barrier with increasing ease, steadily reclaiming freedom unrightfully stolen.

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