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Speculative ancestry

The Human Genome Project did not inaugurate ideologies of engineering human biology. While genomics offered new technologies for identifying DNA sequences, practices of breeding humans have been sewn into colonial-capitalist expansion. As a new universal subject stepped out from the shadows of all that was premodern and primitive, humans were being stolen and shipped across the world as enslaved labour. And while European liberalism offered a developmental trajectory for this new vision of humanity as enlightened and in charge of its own destiny, these other humans were disaggregated into useful traits – phenotypic and psychological, body-shape and temperament – and bred by enslavers in ways similar to the breeding of domestic animals. Francis Galton's science of eugenics was as much a product of human breeding projects on plantations and in colonies as it was the application of natural selection – the natural propagation of the best hereditary stock – to social development.

When the Human Genome Project came to an end, it quickly became clear that it would not be able to deliver on the promises upon which much of its rhetoric had been founded, or at least not immediately. Nonetheless, the near-cult like status of the genome in popular imaginaries meant that it was going nowhere in a hurry: narratives of the 1990s had propelled it into global superstardom. There was no turning back. This was a new century, and it was to be the century of postgenomics. In lieu of healthcare applications for genomic science, which were still in their infancy at the turn of the millennium, more immediate uses of personalised genomics came into view. At the same time, the biologists Thomas Wilson and Clarence Grim's genetic account of the inherited effects of trauma and poor diets on rates of hypertension among African Americans situated the descendants of enslaved peoples in a genealogy of horror written into embodied code (1991). While their study was criticized for its (supposed) historical inaccuracies, it articulated an alternative set of concerns that was interested in the relationship between biology and history, rather than the reduction of self to

code, and in collective approaches to health based on shared experiences, rather than an individualized model of innate and immutable traits.

Here, I consider how the rise of genetic accounts of historical belonging are registered in fictive and speculative family histories, and how these histories end up challenging an encroaching reliance on genetic origins as a description of kinship. In Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2006) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016), DNA testing is not correlated with racial belonging, but is instead part of an apparatus for recomposing the past. The metaphorical power of ancestry testing reorients genomics from improving human futures to reckoning with the histories of brutalization and displacement upon which liberal humanism is founded (Lowe 2015). This reorientation puts pressure on molecular accounts of life and belonging, threatening to undo the premise (and promise) of genomic descriptions of being.

While genetic ancestry testing has promised a vision of genealogical continuity across the Atlantic for Black American roots seekers, it is also a site of inconsistency, imprecision, absence and silences. Inconclusive results point as much to flaws in the technological apparatus as they do to the tendentious incompletions of bio-historical record. This underscores yet another way in which this history – considered from the perspective of lineage – has been deliberately obscured in narratives of capitalist development (Baptist 2014). In the promise to share the burden of healing from history by repairing tears in the fabric of Black time, ancestry testing locates the trauma of enslavement at the level of the molecular, pressing on code as proof of the past.

Ancestry testing and racialization are not reducible to each other; the desire to seek ancestral roots in the genes is not the same as seeking biological evidence of racial identity. But the proximity of these desires begs attention. Finding answers about identity in the genes points to what Paul Gilroy has described as the modern convergence of nature and culture, in which racial difference and racial hierarchy become interchangeable. A protection against 'various postmodern assaults on the coherence and integrity of the self', this convergence enables both minorities and majorities to 'supply vivid natural means to lock an increasingly inhospitable and lonely social world in place and to secure one's own position in turbulent environments' (2004, 6). The popularity of genetic ancestry testing rehearses anxious recourses to deterministic accounts of being as a way of coping with uncertainties and injustices of the present.

Moving within the violence of this convergence, Hartman and Gyasi attend to a different lineage, not one inscribed in the genes in any straightforward sense, but through which 'the strengths passed down . . . the things that helped our

ancestors survive in a hostile world' might be found as marks on the body, and in shared practices across diaspora and Continent (Greenidge 2018). While the historical precision of genetic ancestry testing is limited, its cultural power has been made possible in part by the way it draws on the utopianism of Pan-Africanism, dwindling under the pressures of competitive nationalism after global financialization. This gives the politics of reparation a new technological imaginary, even as its value as an empirical form of evidence falls short. While ancestry testing continues to elude empirical and legal constitutions of evidence, its cartographic metaphors bank on reiterations of Black internationalism and African futurism, and the visions these plural movements offered to Black lifeworlds.

Movement is vital. Ancestry testing as Black praxis is not an ontological project, but a cartographic one: remaking annihilated routes. In *Demonic Grounds*, Katherine McKittrick writes that 'concealment, marginalisation, boundaries are important social processes' in the production of space, processes that destabilize the very kinds of predetermined stabilities of 'fixed and settled infrastructures and streets, oceanic containers' (2006, xi): 'We make concealment happen; it is not natural but rather names and organises where racial-sexual differentiation occurs' (xi–xii). There is a rough analogy here between mapping bodies – emancipated subjects able (in theory) to participate place in a liberal commons – and mapping space. The concealment of histories where Black flesh supplements white bodies corresponds to the concealment that shapes Black geographies as absence, for the sake of arbitrating the fault-lines of a monolithic white world. As for McKittrick, the practices of mapping with which Hartman and Gyasi are engaged do not seek to "find" or "discover" lost geographies' or – in the context of this chapter – lost lineages; rather, their narratives consider how 'space and place give black lives meaning in a world that has, for the most part, incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as "ungeographic" and/or philosophically undeveloped' (2006, xii–xiii). Geography and genealogy are intertwined in these texts as sites of uncertainty, attending to the enormity of the project to 'make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic' (McKittrick 2006, x).

These texts imagine kinship as a plural and often speculative making across the inconsistencies and transformations of biological and non-biological ties, not the product of singular lineages reliant on transparent and legible records. This is as much a philosophical intervention as it is a historical one. Writing on human genome diversity research, Kim TallBear notes, 'the faith in origins as molecular origins' is 'at odds with the idea of change over time, of becoming'

(2013, 5; see also Leroux 2019). The bearing of kinship on ontology is carried through tumultuous currents of emplacement and displacement in time and space: what does kinship mean and who can claim it, when rhythms of capture and loss have shaped the contours of endurance? When ancestry testing does not offer the restoration of lost lineages tied to territory, but continues to shroud the past in indeterminacy, some forms of kinship are annulled, some made necessary, and some emerge in new and transformative conditions of possibility. In Hartman and Gyasi's texts, the opposition between origins and relations shifts – to follow Christina Sharpe – 'in the wake' of the ruptures in time and history caused by the transatlantic slave trade (2016).

Ancestry-making

In *Lose Your Mother* and *Homegoing*, an ongoing crisis of genealogy reverberates across rhythms of leaving and staying, genealogical continuity as lure and feint as much as a promise. If genetic ancestry testing relies on the idea that hereditary material might fix a person to a place in time and history, these texts attach this promise to the ambivalence around biological origins in the wake of the destruction of family ties through enslavement. AbdouMalik Simone offers a powerful description of what he calls the 'curse and potentials of the abruption of genealogy', rendered through the Koranic figure of triple darkness:

Slavery was the brutal cut in the connection of a people from their land, culture, and capacity to institutionalise their version of humanity (or a version without it), a people whose 'darkness' threw them into a state of darkness, of separation and condemnation. It compelled their need to reinvent themselves without the certainty of cultural coherence, of the dark remaking a version of humanity in the dark. In doing so, through long periods of suffering, struggle, solidarity, and improvisation, all of the historical narratives that explained how things came about and how the world was made were upended. Those that were slaves consigned these narratives to darkness. (2018, 91)

The effort of enduring the cuts of history makes necessary modes of reinvention and improvisation. Here, genealogy is placed off-centre in an assemblage of practices for contending with a world turned upside-down. It is not that the genetic as such has no purchase. Its architecture is always something to be negotiated and reckoned with, rather than functioning as a central description of being. It is not the repetition of biological heredity that matters, but the

resurrection of practices through long periods of time, when no alternative future can be guaranteed or relied upon.

It is in this key that Hartman and Gyasi deliver their reckonings with lineage, with a past that can be traced, and with an aporia between genomic legibility and historical reparation: the genome might be legible, but what can it prove? The texts are connected by the question of what it is to dwell in a collective body that does not know if it is staying or leaving. What does this mean for the idea of the genome corresponding to a particular place and time and history or, conversely, the idea of universal genomic subject? Hartman and Gyasi's narratives dwell in the time of the body – the first-person narrator of *Lose Your Mother* and the third-person collective narrative of *Homegoing* – to consider what it is to 'go home' in the age of ancestry testing, when the possibility of alternative histories have legal and reparative dimensions, but when the technology consistently fails to provide definitive evidence.

Genomics has a strange, even combative, relationship with the past. For the most part, the main players in genomics were not interested in the past, except as proof of natural selection – genetically derived traits whose survival indicates fitness. Heritage is invoked in ethnonational imaginaries, as in Mike Fortun's account of the deCODE project in Iceland (2008). Venter's memoir is interrupted every so often by information boxes about his own genetic inheritance which prove certain autobiographical observations about his tendencies, gifts and – sometimes – his altercations with others. But my claim here – following Alondra Nelson and Dorothy Roberts – is that genetic ancestry testing does a different kind of cultural work in the context of Black American genealogies. Ancestry testing is not being used as proof of the inevitability of human progress along a long-term developmental trajectory – that is, of a racialized human supremacy – but rather as proof of endurance, claiming the need for repair, and invoking the dream of return. It functions as a technology of what might be compared to Hartman's idea of devotional dances to ancestral spirits on the plantations as 'insurgent nostalgia', which 'expressed a longing for home that most could only vaguely recall or that lived only in imagination' (1997, 72), inciting a reckoning, across the waves, between history and memory.

At its most radical, genetic ancestry testing becomes a tool in a broader project of ancestry-making – a way of inserting speculative histories into the blank spaces of the past. Hartman and Gyasi's interweaving of fact and speculation imagine the past as a site of multiple crossings – characters that find themselves 'simultaneously in many space-times' (Simone, 55), where people miss each other and fall out of history. They draw on an infrastructure of twentieth-century

Black and African futurist intertextuality – the political demands and aesthetic forms of Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, and *Négritude* – to restate the stakes of Blackness into the twenty-first, and to reiterate its contradictions and demands. Genetic technologies of identification are not to do with establishing racial boundaries, but with casting lines across historical waters. While genetic technologies do not – for the most part – offer legal evidence for reparation and return, their promise of calling up the dead produces new kinds of alliances among the living.

Narratives of ancestry-making are constrained by the restrictions of a data-fuelled present, in which (statistically) the data of Black people either disappear and become part of databases for surveillance and criminalization. Ruha Benjamin has called these practices ‘the new Jim Code’, which use new technologies to sustain and bolster existing modes of racial discrimination (2019, 13). The burden of individuality – the fiction of the self – is a political problem that speculative interventions cannot immediately solve, especially when it comes to racist fictionalizations of Black life into repurposed, racialized narratives of ‘natural’ inequality.

In this sense, genetic ancestry testing traverses horrors of Black histories and the romance of family origins. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, it has become part of a way of reading Blackness, and its uses indicate the enormity and difficulty of this endeavour. While it offers an ‘ethnological and conformist account’ of family history, its failure to offer direct lines of descent attests to the silences of history – and memory as rupture, broach and discontinuity (Hartman 2006, 75). And sometimes, the effects of these gaps take their time to catch up in the present. While genomics offers a powerful metaphor for reading the past – ‘an autobiography of our species’ – it cannot do the cultural work of caring for history. Its emphasis on individual lineage means that it is indelibly linked to an economic mode of existence that has privileged private property. The place of Black folks in this history cannot be rehabilitated through metaphors of liberal humanism.

As a way of negotiating this caesura, and in lieu of a germ-line running in a straight line through time, Hartman and Gyasi deploy recursive modes of storytelling, going back over the same ground, looking for a different opening to the past, and a strategy of enduring the present: to follow Simone, these are improvisations on a theme. These improvisations become a way of reckoning with the difficulty of staying and the pain of leaving, of not being able to exist fully in a body inscribed as the total sum of an illegible and erased ancestral past.

Genre, genetics and genealogy

Representations of genealogy in these texts fall across genres. These shifts in genre indicate the various and contesting forms of kinship that genealogy needs to encompass in contexts where enslavement is the governing historical narrative. Here, I pay particular attention to the intersection of Black horror and family romance. For Robin Means Coleman, Black horror is a genre born out of exclusion. The fever-pitch of excitement around the genome during the 1990s was reflected in a range of popular cultural references, and particularly in representations of the uses of DNA in forensics (detective stories), and bio-engineering (as in *Gattaca*). These representations emphasized the almost-immediate and unquestioned take-up of genomic technologies into the realm of empirical enquiry, with an emphasis on commodification and social control. Black horror is doing something different. For Coleman, Black folks' participation in horror at a more general level registers 'resistance against dominant ideologies' as much as re-inscription into it, and negotiations of representation of Black culture and bodies (2011, 199). A genre that has used Black bodies to represent either a fearsome other or – more recently – gullible fall-people, Black recuperations of horror are doing a different kind of cultural work. In Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) and *US* (2019), this means rearranging cinematic architecture to place whiteness in the position of fearsome other, and to connect this to broader critiques of consumer capitalism, as well as of the erasure of enslavement and genocide as a condition of American settler colonialism.

This is not only a US-centric Black history. The 1980s and 1990s were difficult decades for Black internationalism. Pan-Africanism diminished under the pressures of neoliberal finance capital, and forms of competitive nationalism made compulsory for access to foreign loans from international finance bodies – the World Bank and the International Monetary Foundation. African nations looked inward for cohesion, rather than outwards and across to the diaspora, and political and aesthetic iterations of Pan-Africanist internationalism were replaced by national developmentalism. In the United States, the radical force of Black Studies during the early 1970s was diffused by its co-option into liberal arts agendas (Wynter 2006). In 1999, the Ghanaian government ruled to deny Black American claims to Ghanaian citizenship. This was an extraordinary moment, partly due to Ghana's status as the first decolonized African nation – and long a site for Black imaginaries of Pan-African futures – and partly because it was from Ghana that many enslaved Africans headed to the Americas departed.

In this context, genetic ancestry testing offered to rejuvenate a waning commitment to identification across national borders and the passage of time, hinting at another genre: the family saga, or family romance, the genre of Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). Matthew Stallard and Jerome de Groot note that assumptions around the 'objective factuality' of DNA in comparison to other historical sources have meant that DNA data 'can be incorporated into genealogical practice as a confirmatory source for "traditional" research' (2020, 278). DNA suggests ways to thread obscured pasts into the present, opening lines of kinship that would trace time back across the Middle Passage. This quickly became commercialized, taking on spectacular forms: through the genre of 'roots revelations' in the nascent era of reality TV in the early 2000s, genealogists 'become performers whose job it is to react to genealogical information that is revealed to them' (Nelson 2016, 96). TV shows on big US networks showed celebrities finding out about their family history via DNA tests, with the promise of finding 'a notable predecessor, a significant historical event, or unexpected affiliations' (96). As Alondra Nelson notes, theatricality is key to this, a way of attesting to both the affective power and return on investment that genetic testing offered.

Roberts notes a resistance in Black history-making to promoting or believing in genetics, given its provenance in white supremacist ideologies:

Blacks have understandably resisted defining personal identity in biological terms. In America, whites have historically valued genetic linkages and controlled their official meaning. As the powerful class, they are guardians of the privileges according to biology and they have a greater stake in maintaining the importance of genetics. (1997, 261)

Genetics has long been part of a genealogy of Black horror. For Roberts, rather than connoting racial belonging via genetics, group membership among Black communities has been more a question of political and cultural affiliation than any kind of genetically inscribed commonality. This bears on racialized differences in emphasis in uses of genetic technologies; Roberts writes, 'Blacks by and large are more interested in escaping the constraints of racist ideology by defining themselves apart from inherited traits' (261). Roberts was writing before the boom in ancestry testing, but this analysis goes some way to marking a qualitative and historical difference in the significance and cultural power of genetics along the lines of racial identification by the end of the Human Genome Project. Jenny Reardon notes this too, and relates how representatives from a Black community group at Tuskegee were much more concerned by the absence

of a hospital and ‘basic health care’: ‘Genetics is not important. And it is not important because there is *so much else wrong*’ (2017, 64). There was not only little interest in genetics but also a general suspicion of genetic research, and in speaking about it in the first place.

The movement between horror and romance mediates the troubled status of a past that cannot be proved – or compensated for – through empirical forms of evidence. Before going into a reading of Hartman and Gyasi, I consider the fusion of family sagas and Black horror, a merging of genre that attends to the continued vulnerability of Black family life, and which undermines the centrality of the nuclear and hereditary family structure as the primary unit of Anglo-European sociobiological lifeworlds.

Henrietta Lacks and stolen flesh

Black horror registers the scale of theft made possible by enslavement: of bodies, lives, lineages, property, cultures and biopower. This stealing is sustained, rather than repaired, by modern forms of neo-imperial and neoliberal capitalism. It is a genre organized around stolen time, time ripped out of Black bodies to sustain others, and now, in Joy James’s words, ‘the unrecoverable years stolen or spent surviving warfare and murder’ (2016, 254). For Tananarive Due, *horror noire* is borne out of the ‘fear that these people are trying to steal our soul’ (in Burgin 2019). Biological research agendas that have premised the white body as the recipient of medical care and Black flesh as experimental biomatter are embedded in an infrastructure in which this stolen time is made visible and visceral, while left out of methods and conclusions.

In the era of molecular biology, the extraction of Black flesh for the expansion of colonial-capitalist production took on new dimensions, with biomatter becoming uncoupled from the body entirely. Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010), her biography of Henrietta Lacks and the cells that became a global commodity in biomedical research, taken without her permission from a tumour in her cervix, is at once a study in and denial of Black horror. The story of HeLa foregrounds the racialized dimensions of the global molecular biology economy, which – while predating genomics, and with a bigger remit – helps contextualize not only the unevenness of possible health benefits from genomic research, but also grounds molecular biology – and beyond it, genetics – in an affect of suspicion among Black communities. For Alexander Weheliye, the story of Lacks and ‘the ongoing narrative of the eternal life’ of her

cells prove that ‘the hieroglyphics of the flesh subsist even in death . . . transposed from the outwardly detectable to the microscopic interior of the human’ (2014, 80). Weheliye takes the term ‘hieroglyphics of the flesh’ from Hortense Spillers to describe the transformation of subjects into flesh ‘before being granted the illusion of possessing a body’, destruction and re-animation, the resuscitation of ‘black subjects who have “liberated” and granted body in the aftermath of de jure enslavement’ (2014, 39). Skloot’s biography follows this logic, re-animating Henrietta Lacks through the triumph of her cells, shaping a narrative about biotechnological progress through the survival of flesh beyond subject. This difference between body and flesh, for Spillers, marks the difference ‘between captive and liberated subject-positions’, where the liberation of embodiment is not permitted (1987, 67).

Henrietta Lacks’s cells invigorated a branch of science that was in dire need of experimental matter. They were taken without permission by a Johns Hopkins oncologist from a tumour in her womb that killed her soon afterwards. This was a standard procedure in the days before consent was needed for participation in biomedical trials. In the early days of molecular biology, biologists needed to harvest cells outside the human body, but this is a difficult procedure and at the time of Lacks’s death, had been largely unsuccessful: most cells extracted from patients died on extraction and could not be reproduced. Lacks’s cells behaved differently, reproducing in a petri dish at an unprecedented rate, over a matter of hours.

As her cells divided in the laboratory, Henrietta’s tumour spread across her body. She died on 4 October 1951, at thirty-one. Her family had no idea that the cells taken from her body were becoming part of what Skloot calls the ‘HeLa factory’, otherwise known as the HeLa Distribution Centre at the Tuskegee Institute, ‘a massive operation that would grow to produce trillions of HeLa cells each week’ (2010, 108). In the midst of a global polio epidemic, Jonas Salk was developing a vaccine, but to do this required a vast amount of cultured cells. HeLa cells were shipped around the country to polio-testing centres, with the centre’s employees producing twenty thousand tubes of HeLa every week. Lacks’s cells made possible the fast-track development of global exchange in molecular biology, becoming a biomedical object sent to laboratories across the world.

Skloot’s book has three key messages: HeLa as a triumph of modern science; HeLa as the contributions of African Americans (however unwitting) to molecular biology (‘No dead woman has ever done more for the living,’ says Hilary Mantel (2010)); and HeLa and the murky territory of consent. This last message is as far as the political intervention goes. Nonetheless, Skloot layers Black horror into

the narrative, even as she tries to diminish or underplay its significance, as if lured by an alternative and undocumented strand of history that keeps raising its head. This emerges through the perspectives of Deborah and Zakariya Lacks – two of Lacks's children, who read the coerced extraction of Lacks's biological matter as part of a longer history of using Black bodies for research, production and profit. It is they who point, repeatedly, to the disconnect between the massive profits generated from Lacks's cells, while Black Americans are prevented from access to basic health care.

Skloot's omissions show the deployment of Black horror as a peripheral narrative, made subordinate to the bigger story of creating value in global science in the form of cures. The dead Black woman at the centre of the story made a certain kind of medical praxis possible, not through her own skills or knowledge, but through the non-consensual extraction of her biomatter. HeLa's later identification as a 'Black' cell line mattered only when identifying it as the source of a global contamination of experimental cell lines; as shipments were sent across the world, HeLa was transmitted into other cells lines held in laboratories by accident, carried through air particles into petri dishes, changing their genetic composition. The story of Henrietta Lacks that positions the horror of white experimentation on Black bodies as marginal is limited to portraying its protagonist as a diseased, over-productive, suffering Black woman's body, whose tumour cells threaten to contaminate the world with their powerful and inexplicable alchemy.

Lacks's children resist this marginalization of Black horror, insisting on its centrality to the story of their mother's cells. For them, the survival of the HeLa cells offers the possibility of resurrection, wherein Henrietta might be brought back from the dead via test tubes – a prospect both fearsome and enthralling to her family. Deborah watches a TV science fiction film, *The Clone*, where a woman's embryos are taken, without her knowledge, to make copies of her dead son: "That poor woman didn't even know all about the clones until she saw one walk out of a store. I don't know what I'd do if I saw one of my mother's clones walkin around somewhere" (Skloot 2010, 271). Skloot's interpretation of this is that for Deborah, 'the line between sci-fi and reality had blurred years earlier' (271); this interpretation suggests that Deborah's reading is paranoid or even pathological, a neurotic symptom. Yet, science fiction is able to communicate something about the significance of the HeLa cells in the context of Black American history, and the transatlantic slave trade stripping Africans of their rights over biological and political determination and resuscitating them as dead labour.

Deborah Lacks is neither misreading the situation nor exaggerating it; the cells represent the history of enslavement as recursive, rather than relegated to America's shadowed past. Black women's reproductive labour was central to the development of colonial capitalism. Roberts writes, 'Black procreation not only benefited each slave's particular owner; it also more globally sustained the entire system of slavery' (1997, 24). Black women's bodies were vehicles of manual production and biological reproduction; the clone imaginary captures the reduction of Black children into economic units, under conditions of rape. It describes a systemic experience of Black American history that is not just fantasy or exaggeration. The stealing of Henrietta's biomaterial from the part of her body identified with reproduction repeats the stealing of Black women's wombs for the reproduction of capital (James 2016).

Skloot's book is a biography of Black horror which tries, time and again, to resolve itself as family romance: a reconciliation between the world of scientific progress and the realities of life for a single Black family. Skloot cannot recognize the genre her book is situated in, and because of this, Deborah and Zakariya's voices are made peripheral. Zakariya tells Skloot, "You don't lie and clone people behind their backs. That's wrong. It's like me walking in your bathroom while you in there with your pants down. It's the highest degree of disrespect" (2010, 281). What's at stake, for Zakariya, is a failure to recognize Black lives as worthy of ethical consideration. This is not a 'blurring' of fiction and fact: clones describe a coerced condition of being. The mass production of HeLa cells at a global level is part of the *longue durée* of producing value via Black death. When Zakariya and Deborah talk about clones and ghosts, and tell Skloot about the rumours about that scientists from Johns Hopkins snatched Black children for experiments off the streets of Black neighbourhoods in Baltimore – "night doctors" who kidnapped people for research' "'They'd snatch em off the street"' "Snatchin' people!" "Experimentin on them!" (189–90) – this is neither fantasy nor an exaggeration of history. They are telling a story about the way Black life is attached to a necropolitics of experimental practices for the sake of white prosperity, situated in a long history of 'atomizing of the captive body' in which the 'ethics [and] relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features' is lost (Spillers 1987, 68).

Reparation, romance and kinlessness

The abrasion between personality and anatomy – the severing of the intimate from fleshly elements – bears on the forms of kinship it is possible to declare in

public. If to be known is to take a place in a sphere of intimate relations and to offer up that being known to a public sphere as condition of entry, then to be reduced to flesh is to be denied access to both spheres. This, in turn, is a problem of form and genre: in what ways and in which modes should and could narrative stage and subvert this abrasion? The blurring of horror and family history unsettles the assumed primacy of genetic accounts of heredity and kinship, tracing a continuum between contested, obscure or denied kinship networks across the history of enslavement and into modern biopolitical articulations at the border of race, family and community. In Hartman and Gyasi's texts, the family romance cannot hold this abrasion of personality and anatomy. Instead, they explore a condition of kinlessness, whereby all 'future increase' for the enslaved was severed in advance from the lineage of the parent, as Nancy Bentley writes on Hartman (2009, 270).

Bentley identifies two understandings of genealogy that derive from this racialized infrastructure of relatedness, organized around distinct figures: first, the genealogy of genetics, property and lineage (represented by the individual), and second, that of tribe, custom and ancestry (represented by the population). After abolition, this second version equated to 'genealogical debaseness . . . mirroring whole populations in a state of genealogical unfreedom and exclusion from the intimate sphere of biological kinship' (2009, 273). For Bentley, following Spillers, this debaseness was not signified by a lack of kinfolk, but rather by the imposed consensus that 'one's ties to kin have "no decisive legal or social efficacy"' (270). Kinlessness is not a historical 'fact' of enslavement, but a condition imposed from above

to isolate and extract the sheer materiality of a human population – their bodies, labour, and reproductive capacities – from the sphere of the familial, a sphere undergoing its own restructuring as the bourgeois *Intimsphäre* [private sphere] began to emerge in transatlantic liberalism as the touchstone of the human. (271)

The *Intimsphäre* is the site of genetic kinship which determines agency via the property metaphor; outside this are 'diasporic kin worlds . . . created and shaped' by this exteriority and 'their forced exclusion from legal, social, and discursive formations of proper familism' (Bentley, 278). Following Gilroy, the attempt to represent kinship in Black vernacular culture is fraught with problems of exclusion from the 'architecture of middle-class kinship' (Bentley 2009, 277), particularly in 'the form of the novel and the different types of memory and remembrance it solicits from its readers' (Gilroy 1993, 218). While the novel

form has historically privileged the genealogy of individual property, African American novels representing Black history – for Gilroy – ‘all exhibit an intense and ambivalent negotiation of the novel form that is associated with their various critiques of modernity and enlightenment’ (218). Carrying this argument into readings of Hartman and Gyasi, I suggest here that their critiques of family romance – its generic impossibility accentuated by the disappearances of characters and ellipses in family history – are organized around kinlessness both as indictment of this history and as the transformation of the terms of bourgeois kinship that produce these distinct genealogical forms.

These critiques are connected to another invention of narrative form in the early 2000s. In its potential to reveal severed kinship ties, ancestry testing heralded a remaking of social life through biotechnologies, as Nelson argues in *The Social Life of DNA* (2016). Genetic ancestry testing was already its own multibillion dollar industry by the time Skloot published her book on Lacks, a way of imagining kinship across the Atlantic, from the Americas to West Africa, offering – in theory, at least – a new evidentiary toolkit for proving the need and validity of claims for reparation. Mario Chandler calls this ‘biotechnography’, and suggests that this is an example of how ‘the dissemination of black narrative has always relied on the use of contemporary innovation and technology’ (2018, 32). Genetic ancestry testing offered a tool for social justice when national law failed to account for a *longue durée* of expropriation and enslavement, and – later on – a way of exposing unjust legal processes of criminalizing Black communities via initiatives like The Innocence Project, which uses genetic forensics to overturn wrongful convictions. Nelson argues that matrilineal and patrilineal DNA tests presented ‘new language in the long-waged battle over the repayment of a debt now four centuries overdue’ (107). If ancestries of enslavement could be traced, new possibilities emerged for holding the descendants of those who profited from the system to account.

This formed the basis for legal cases in the early 2000s. Nelson recounts the example of the insurance provider Aetna Inc. being taken to court by lawyer Deadria Farmer-Paellmann – head of the Restitution Study Group – on the grounds that it had profited from its policies by insuring the lives of enslaved peoples as property of their enslavers. The argument for the prosecution was that a genealogical link to enslaved Africans could be proved by genetic ancestry tests; the case was dismissed because this link was considered not direct enough with regard to family trees. The judge ruled,

The only suitable means to establish ‘a decisive link to a homeland’ was DNA evidence that could show an uninterrupted, definitive line of ancestry from

a former slave to an aggrieved present-day descendant or descendants, and simultaneously a direct line of capital gained from an accused corporation to expropriated labourers and their offspring. (Nelson, 135)

This ruling delineates contesting descriptions of genealogy and inheritance, and the imposition of the legal requirement for a direct correlation between biological evidence and historical argument over other forms of evidence. It is a dazzling sleight of hand: the biologization of race as a justification for enslavement disappears into the (assumed) lacunae in genetic evidence of enslavement. This gets to Simone's formulation of a triple darkness, where the loss of genealogical archive is compounded and sustained by the insistence on 'definitive' proof, which here codes as legible genetic code. The fact that the legibility of this code is itself unstable and not necessarily trustworthy is not the point: the underlying message here is not that if it could be proved, reparation would happen, but rather that there is no socio-historical obligation for reparation in the first place.

It is this second message against which politicized – if speculative – discourses of genetic testing set themselves. The case for the prosecution understands the relation between genealogy, ancestry, relatedness and reparation in a much broader sense. What is key here is how genetics, Nelson contends, cannot prove origins but rather highlights the 'social death' that the chattel slavery system functioned on, through the ongoing severing of family ties (Patterson 1982; Gutman 1977; Baptist 2014; Stack 1974). 'Expropriation' in this sense means the severing of enslaved Africans from their genealogical history. Rather than restating the centrality of the genetic as proof of origins, practices of ancestry testing instead challenge the fiction of reducing genealogy and kinship to the genetic. Alternative structures of kinship and iterations of belonging open up where the lure of genealogy falls short. This is critical, also, for the resurrection of Pan-Africanist politics at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a movement hindered by the imposition of finance institutions, rather than shared histories, as the basis for internationalism from the 1970s onwards. Ancestry testing promises a reconciliation between diasporic and continental peoples of African descent, or at least a tool through which affinity can be speculated upon.

Against the rarefication of genetic lineage, histories of adoptive, non-patrilineal and non-biological kinship ties come into play. These also move between genres of horror and family romance, but in ways that do not rest on what Roberts calls the 'cultural artefact' of genetic relatedness (1997, 267). This has complicated legal implications – relationships that cannot be proved

or verified at borders or across the movements of history, and the falling away of genealogy. But genetic ancestry testing functions as a route to the ancestral precisely through its resistance to biological descriptions of belonging. In its failures to offer either legal evidence or historical transparency, the metaphor of testing the past is extended out to non-biological kinship. As metaphor, testing becomes an articulation of impossible proofs rather than a technique of reification, part of a longer history of searching for roots via 'cultural, rather than genetic preservation' (Roberts, 261). This conjures a precolonial West African history, too, where children were the responsibility of the whole community, rather than sole property of their parents, and where the primary unit was not the immediate family, but composed of extended kinship relations (Scannapieco and Jackson 1996, 191). These interventions in the historiography and cultural memory of enslavement necessarily involve encountering the anachronisms of decoloniality and the difficulties of sustaining Pan-Africanism amid the pressures of neoliberal globalization.

In these texts, testing for ancestors links poetics to political praxis – horror and romance, folklore and myth – taking chances with the absences of historical documentation. Imaginary lifeworlds push back at historical repetition with the force of resurrection, and going back and back again to find a different way into an inaccessible past is a political strategy: not for the sake of individual development, but for collective articulations of Black worlds outside sociobiological determinisms. Moving between genres is crucial for the kinds of time-travel that genetic ancestry testing cannot fulfil, and for holding open the *longue durée* of enslavement.

On the plantations, there was always the risk that an enslaved person might not recognize their closest kin. Edward E. Baptist notes that establishing new ties of 'pseudo-blood' – through adoption, and the making and remaking of free households – had a speculative dimension to it: those who did so 'chose to shelter under their wings far-off futures that might only arrive long after their own deaths. . . . For this future to arrive, however, someone had to survive' (2014, 284). Survival here is not genetic, but cultural. That is, it does not equate to ensuring a genealogical legacy in the form of biological property (of name, of finances, of territory); it involves an extended and often unverifiable concept of transgenerational influence that goes beyond the routes of genealogy, outside what it is possible to establish in historiography, because of an absence of record required by the logics of capital under which slavery was sustained. Absences of record are countered by the influence of nameless ancestors on the present. This reparation in advance, a theme that I consider in my readings of Hartman

and Gyasi, is a form of speculative ancestry-making that builds futures in the uncertain alliances of the present.

Leaving: Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*

One of the key claims of this book is that the idea of the genome not only offered a description of the self, but also a technology for remaking that self according to new standards of human potential: genomics as fabrication. With this came a whole imaginative apparatus for constructing the self into a coherent narrative, via the lexicon and syntax of the molecular. This takes on a different kind of relevance in uses of ancestry testing, where this personal narrative is attached to the idea of a genetic past – journeys that may or may not be documented, origins that may or may not come as a surprise. The convergence in the affordability of genome sequencing and charter flights during the early 2000s points to a synchronized appeal from private genome companies and tourist boards to middle-class consumers who might be persuaded to take bigger steps across space and time in their annual vacations. Trips abroad need no longer just be about taking time off work; they could be explorations into the shadowed passages of lost time, where personhood might be fabricated during an all-inclusive package tour.

The fabrication of personhood propels the Saidiya of Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* across the Atlantic to Ghana in search of lost ancestors. Stepping off the bus in Elmina – the site of a castle with a dungeon where captured humans were held for days on end before ships took them across the sea – she finds herself cast as ‘a wandering seed bereft of the possibility of taking root’ (4). An African American or a Black American? A long-lost sibling, or *obruni* [stranger] (4)? She is looking for roots, but in this place, she is ‘the stranger in the village’, a source of shame, a reminder of a past from which the Ghanaians of the present seem to have moved on.

The text is structured like an hourglass. The early chapters on seeking home that form the first half of the book move inexorably towards a narrow channel of impossibility in the centre of the text. In the middle of the book, Hartman expresses the paradox of needing roots while being unable to stay anywhere for long:

‘Don’t go.’ ‘Stay put.’ These are the words of the master. The slave must stay put or stay in her place. . . . But staying is at odds with the very definition of a slave;

the bought-and-sold person comes and goes by way of the transactions of the market. The slave is always the stranger who resides in one place and belongs to another. The slave is always the one missing from home. (87)

Dwelling is not just difficult in this situation; it is antithetical to the dynamics of Black life, historically, in the United States. Genetic forms promise the possibility of belonging to a code, to a family history, and to the idea of being embedded in a place, and tied genetically to a lineage. On the other side of this promise is the severing of the body from genealogy, and – in Spillers's words – the inscription of 'ethnicity as a scene of negation', and the confirmation of 'the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements' (1987, 66). The enslaved body is split between place of residence and site of belonging, chopped into traits by market fluctuations – what might be needed at a particular moment, or what might fall out of use. The body is at once reduced to the biological while split from its processes, which are harnessed for the benefit of the enslaver. In this situation, Hartman says, 'love' is not a remedy; it 'encourages forgetting' and 'extends the cover of belonging and shrouds the slave's origins, which lie in acts of violence and exchange, but it doesn't remedy the isolation of being severed from your kin and denied ancestors' (87).

Isn't seeking the romance of origins inevitable for those 'stranded in a hostile country' (98), she wonders? When you lose your mother somewhere along the passage from village, to dungeon, to ship, to auction block, and to and from plantations, 'the old ways become precious, imperilled, and what your great-great-grandchildren will one day wistfully describe as African' (98). This is a mode of ancestry-making as a speculative gesture towards a lost origin – a fantasy of African belonging sustained through generations. Lineage and descent were not privileges afforded to the enslaved: 'slavery made the past a mystery, unknown and unspeakable' (14). This unspeakability is what initially draws her to the people she meets in Ghana. As she asks questions that her hosts try to divert her from, it becomes gradually clearer that all of Hartman's characters – including herself – are circling round an abyss of unrecorded experience, the silences of people who fell off the map, 'people who left behind no traces' (15).

This is in contrast to the way the present offers up its documentations as evidence – names, passports, archives, photographs, genomes. She reads an article on genetic ancestry testing in the *New York Times*. This is *Lose Your Mother's* only mention of the practice which, by this point, was taking off in unprecedented ways among Black Americans in the early 2000s, as discussed

earlier. While she has come to Ghana to fill in the blank spaces of her history, others are attempting to do this with DNA tests:

History had failed to solve the mystery of an unknown past, so they had put their faith in science, despite the ambiguous and inconclusive results of the test. One man's words stayed with me. Having discovered that his ancestors were from Cameroon, he remarked that he felt more lost than before. Now he was estranged from an ancestral tribe as well as the country of his birth. 'It's like being lost and found at the same time,' he said. Being in Elmina Castle was like that too. (90)

What's striking here is the sense of commonality Hartman feels with this man, whom she knows only through the mediation of a story that promotes the cultural power of genetic testing, even as it registers its omissions. The idea of the man's words 'staying with me' has a particular force in this context, where words – not genetic evidence – are often all descendants of enslaved peoples have to go on in tracing a route back to the homes from which they were stolen. This is a declaration of kinship between two strangers, both – in different ways – finding themselves further estranged from their ancestral histories, even as they deploy the tools of knowing the self (DNA tests, transatlantic flights).

Key, too, is the movement from science as a site of horror to one of possibility, however 'ambiguous and inconclusive'. The effect of an article like the one in the *New York Times* is to at once validate the science, and to promote public investment in it (whether imaginative, corporate, commercial), while also to keep the spectre of not knowing – the great risk that the mystery will remain unsolved – hovering over the narrative. It positions consumers as detectives into their own past, embedding them more deeply into the logic of a technologized present, while the past is estranged still further. 'Cameroon' is a place on a map not drawn by the communities from which their descendants were stolen. The man and Hartman find themselves lost in maps (genetic, geographic) where other ways of reading land and marking territory do not appear. The man is 'from' Cameroon, in the sense that his genetic origins can be located in a vast area of land that does not offer any kind of route home, or at least in the sense implicitly (and on his side, unknowingly) shared between him and Hartman, across the pages of a global broadsheet.

While this is the only explicit reference to genetic ancestry testing in the book, it is held in the same affect of failure that Hartman experiences while in Ghana – of arriving at a place that you have thought might be some kind of home, and finding oneself in a strange land that does not recognize you. The

body and the territory cannot offer ways into the past, or at least not in the places that both Hartman and this nameless man in the *New York Times* article identify: the genome and Elmina Castle. Both sites fail to give an account of belonging; while the man can point to Cameroon on a map and say his genes tell him that he is 'from there', this is not accompanied by any sense of being part of a wider and longer history located in that place. These intersecting failures of territory (molecular and national) correspond to the diminishment of Pan-African utopianism at the turn of the twenty-first century, after two decades of global neoliberalism. The technologies that Hartman and the man have been offered as tools of self-discovery – affordable flights and affordable DNA tests – cannot traverse this. All that is left is a series of disembodied indications towards a possible past, which will never fully be known.

Hartman situates the Saidiya of this text in a generation trying to reclaim history for the present, a generation looking back, looking for 'Afrotopia', using genetics not for the sake of establishing racial lineage, but historical ties. But instead of offering a sense of stability and rootedness, she finds that these ties are fractious and unreliable – just as the man cannot find his ancestral tribe, Saidiya cannot find her kin. Towards the end of the memoir, just before its final act, Hartman notes her feeling of isolation among her Ghanaian hosts and new friends:

What had I expected of our little African union? I suppose I had wanted to build a bridge across our differences. But nearly two months of working daily together had only made it more difficult for us to find a common vocabulary about slavery, or anything else for that matter. No matter how expansive the category 'sister', I always fell outside its embrace. Whatever remained of Pan-Africanism, which had espoused solidarity among all African people, promoted the idea of continental fraternity and sorority, and encouraged each and every one of us in the diaspora to dream of the continent as our home, no longer included the likes of me. (217–18)

This moment is taken over by another possibility for solidarity, which grows out of the phrase 'working daily together' and the kinds of contingent and unsteady relations that this kind of ensemble work involves. But nonetheless, this admission – late in the text – arrives at a crisis point in the memoir. Saidiya is alone; she has not found what she came for. Her genealogy, whether fictive or real, remains obscure. There is no common way of speaking together – the members of this small group, a 'little African union', have not been able to find the words to express their connection to each other.

This inability to find a common vocabulary of kinship through the wreckage of the past extends between continent and diaspora, and upholds the political borders between nations on the continent, the division of territories into discrete units of GDP, GNP, mortality and natality rates, literacy levels, and other measures of human development: the cumulative barometer of national progress. 'The likes of me' is a colloquialism that transforms a generic 'wrong side of the tracks' identification to 'the wrong side of history', a body that is excluded from a dream of unity. The phrase points to the typologizing weight of Saidiya experiencing herself as *obruni*, an alienation from her fabricated self ('my self-proclaimed African identity . . . my Swahili name' (218)) as much as an externally imposed exclusion, in the place where she has come to seek some sense of shared history, however indeterminate and untouchable. The separation of 'expansive' from 'embrace' is central to this: a shared history should be a way of holding those who experience it in a sense of collectivity, a mode of protection and care; whatever forms of care exist here, they do not include her.

Saidiya wants to touch the dead. If new technologies of identification and transport reduce their consumers to dead matter – to segments of DNA vaguely connected to vast expanses of land, or 'slave babies' (4) – then speculative and recursive ruminations on blank spaces in history give form to acts of resurrection. The slave trade was based on an ongoing economy of ending one kind of life and resuscitating it into another – '[it] annulled lives, transforming men and women into dead matter, then resuscitated them for servitude' (68). Hartman's intervention in this is to replace both action and form – endings are transferred into a mode of recursivity, and resuscitation becomes resurrection. In a place where the disappearance of mass numbers of people had 'no witnesses' (232), she goes back over the same ground again and again. Physically, she describes going back to Elmina Castle, moving around it in different ways, trying to find some key to the past. And formally, the text keeps restating itself, calling on figures of *Négritude*, Pan-Africanism, and anti-colonial struggle in the process: W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon. 'I shall return to my own land. . . . I shall return to my native land. . . . Return is what you hold onto. . . . I shall return to my native land' becomes a refrain, breaking into the past and reiterating the claim passed down and across the diaspora, a code that transports the descendants of those taken to other lands back to where their ancestors came from (91, 96, 99). This is not just a promise of resurrection – the intertextuality of Black thought propels her into the past, without the help of flight or test.

She also knows that this return signifies a loss, and that this loss 'inaugurates one's existence . . . it is to lose your mother, always' (99). This lost mother,

nameless, sits alongside 'ghostly patriarchs that can be named', who correspond to a line of descent (78). This mother is signified not by a name but by a stamp on the skin tattooed by enslavers:

The mark of property provides the emblem of kinship in the wake of defacement. It acquires the character of a personal trait, as though it were a birthmark. . . . The mother's mark, not the father's name, determined your fate. No amount of talk about fathers could suture the wound of kinship or skirt the brute facts. The patronymic was an empty category, a 'blank parody', a fiction that masters could be fathers and wayward lovers more than the 'begetters of children'; it was the placeholder of the banished black fathers. (80)

The language of property is explicitly tied to that of heredity, a mark of property becoming a kind of 'trait' to be passed down to subsequent generations. The system of using people as capital becomes embedded in a biological metaphor, an inheritance of anonymity and defacement (spoiling the surface, scratching out the face, reducing the body to a brand). The founding privilege of liberal humanism – the father's lineage, and with this, the claim to personhood – is denied from the outset. The language of placeholder and category runs up against 'the wound of kinship', a new origin formed by the repetition of wrenching away: kinship as the mark of a wound left open down the generations. The idea of the father is voided out of existence, and the enslaved become 'ghosts in the machine of kinship', stopped from knowing and attesting to their own inheritance (194).

The failed witness is an important character in Hartman's text. Halfway through, she describes herself as one: 'Reckoning with my inheritance had driven me to the dungeon, but now it all seemed elusive' (129). The failed witness is reduced to giving endless evidence on injustices of the present, treading the same ground, 'fumbling' with history and 'struggling to connect the dots between then and now' (129). The continuation of racial capitalism voids the power of her arguments about 'the devastating effects of having been property' (129): the dungeon is not a site of memory, but place of origin for enduring inequities. While genetic ancestry testing offers to mend this wound, and to speak into the wake of stolen genealogy, it inevitably fails to do so – to resuscitate the stolen time of the Black Matrix (James 2016). DNA tests are not an impediment to belonging, but a false promise – the biotechnological equivalent of repeated trips to the dungeon, hoping to touch the dead. It becomes just one of multiple streams of return narratives, the arrangement of chromosomes on the surface of the genome failing to match up with the small dots of villages visible from the air, as a plane from the West comes from across the sea: a technology that enables

seeing the geographical routes of the past, but which can only ever allude to its true history. The genome is also a failed witness, reducing bodies in the present to the accumulated 'dead money' through the sale and capture of anonymised humans (210).

Instead of what is expressed and visible – the ghostly patriarchs and living Ghanaians – Hartman's narrative begins to attend to silence, and to what remains unexpressed. She begins filling in blank spaces in history, where a historical account ends or falls quiet, or where none exists at all. This, too, has a genetic analogy: the failure of the human genome to provide answers on human complexity. Writing just after the publication of the first draft in 2001, Stephen Jay Gould noted that what was compelling about the relatively underwhelming results of the HGP – that humans express between 25,000 and 30,000 protein-coding genes, rather than the predicted 100,000 – is that human complexity cannot be explained by molecular biology alone, and by the idea that there is one-directional flow of information from DNA to RNA to protein. So-called junk DNA means more than geneticists had long assumed, and biotechnology's assumption that 'each aspect of our being, either physical or behavioural, may be ascribed to the action of a particular gene "for" the trait in question' had been shown to be both 'simplistic and harmful [and] false' (2001). Complexity is about combinations and interactions, not numbers, and these to a large extent are determined by what Gould calls 'the unique contingencies of history' (2001).

Hartman's turn to speculation in the latter parts of *Lose Your Mother* shares ground with these statements, if indirectly. Rather than dwelling on and in the loss of genetic proof, she moves towards another kind of evidence: the practices of endurance and survival that might have taken place, which are not recorded or written down, but which nonetheless have left traces in the architecture of history. In this sense, the failure of genomics to give a full account of both social and biological worlds does important cultural work: it draws science into the realm of the unverified and speculative, and to the centrality of narrative in world-building. This undermines genomic descriptions of life itself, and makes space for historical silence.

Towards the end of *Lose Your Mother*, the title of the text takes on a different significance: not just a description of loss, but an injunction towards other kinds of kinship that do not rely on property as a claim to belonging. Rather than trying to reconstruct a genealogy, Hartman turns instead to formations of community outside the logic of genetic ties. She imagines what the archives leave out – the junk and forgotten stories that never made it in, or what has been coercively forgotten, or never written down – for the sake of 'the promise of affiliation

better than brothers and sisters' (172). Pan-African hopes might be resurrected, but not within the terms dictated by liberal humanism. Central to this is a mode of survival premised on collective ties that extend beyond genetic lineage. In Gwolu, further north, she finds routes that people used to flee slave hunters. There are different stories here, not tied to a 'memory of loss or of captivity, but of survival and good fortune' – those who had 'been able to reconstruct shattered communities' (232). This reconstruction happens, necessarily, beyond the biological family and beyond the borders of individual tribe.

A long passage details an imaginary collective flight, a journey away from captivity, and the fugitive dream with which Hartman ends the memoir:

Newcomers were welcome. It didn't matter that they weren't kin and that they spoke in a different language, because genealogy didn't matter (most of them couldn't go back three or four generations, anyway), building a community did. If the willingness to receive new arrivals and foreigners was what it took to make a world different from the one they had left, then so be it. So they put down their roots in foreign soil and adopted strangers and intermarried with other migrants and runaways, and shared their gods and totems, and blended their histories. 'We' was the collectivity they had built from the ground up, not one they had inherited, not one that others had imposed. (225)

Here, inheritance does not equate to freedom but to imposition – to something being pressed from the outside, or from above. Genealogy does not matter in more than one sense – either in terms of social organization, or in terms of material inheritance. This is a reading that is making an intervention in the present: we do not really know whether this supplanting of genealogy with community-building was a significant and deliberate choice. Hartman speculates on a way of being in the present by imagining this past, an alternative ancestral history to which she has no biological claim. Kinship, here, is speculative, formed through the difficult social work of living with that which cannot be immediately known, that which is not yet intimate, that which needs translation. This world cannot be found in any straightforward sense, but it reconstructs a history out of escape. It becomes 'the legacy I chose to claim . . . articulated in the ongoing struggle to escape, stand down, and defeat slavery in all its myriad forms' (233). This does not involve claiming territory, but reinstating a dream of flight.

At a moment when genetic ancestry testing promised a route across the Atlantic to precolonial pasts, *Lose Your Mother* appears alongside the failures of genomics to give full or accurate accounts of the past. This makes space for a form of survival that is not restricted to individuals, but which takes the 'messy

complexity of social life' as its point of departure and the kinds of tactics necessary to endure it, across multiple generations, involving vast and speculative bounds across lacunae of record and map. In the following section, I consider how *Homegoing's* narrative energy is derived from the ways that enslavement creates fictions of genealogy, and from the effort of staying – in place, in time.

Staying: Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

There are no dates in *Homegoing*. It is up to the reader to piece together time from the details of each section. Dates sometimes pierce the surface of the text through bigger world events – decolonization, Civil Rights, the Great Northern Migration – but often characters sit in ambiguous time-scales that correspond to generations, rather than particular years or months or days. This generational time evokes the temporality of a family saga, following characters of the same genealogical tree over a long period of history: here, over four hundred years of capture, forced displacement and migration. The difference here is that family history is often hidden. The family tree on the book's opening pages reconstructs a lineage of which those who form its branches are unaware. The narrative comes either from the realm of spirits – who watch over the movement of the characters on this tree – or from speculation, the possible forkings and splittings of lives that would have remained together if not for the slave trade.

The tree becomes a map for the reader to refer back to throughout the book, an archive of names and the relations between them that roots the stories about individual characters in a context. *Homegoing* is also formed by absences – the brevity of chapters, glimpses of a character's life who we might meet once or twice throughout the book; the way that some members of a generation fall off the tree, while the lineage of others forms new branches. The splitting of biological origins and the displacement of family history are reiterated in the disconnections, interruptions and fragmentations of Gyasi's narrative. The tree structure is repeatedly hacked into by ruptured kinship, both a document of family history, and a monument to lost branches of family history.

This enduring pivot between what is expressed and what remains undocumented roots the narrative in a key of insurgent nostalgia, as opposed to the pay-off of family romance. Neither horror nor reunion, but the pressing insistence of lost history. The past is formed by an absence that structures forms of the present, and this absence is instrumentalized as a tool of narrative rebellion. A form of speculative kinship is modelled from the necessity of

adopting other people's children – non-genealogical love as remedy for broken and stolen familial ties – and extends to encompass the kinds of bonds that will permit recursivity, as opposed to repetition. When staying in place is not possible, going back in time becomes essential. The analogy of junk, repressed or forgotten DNA becomes an issue of historical time, not genomic space.

In historiographies of Black American life, fictive kinship is a site of endurance: the adoption of children who are not one's own, to the adoption of a constellation of influences across time. The book is divided into fourteen chapters and two parts, each chapter given the name of someone on the genealogical tree. It follows the descendants of two sisters, Effia and Esi, who never learn of each other's existence, but whose descendants meet at the end of the narrative. Both parts of the novel end by calling up ancestors, through the mediation of a black stone necklace passed through generations – the object that signifies the gene-line. Leaving her home in a Ghanaian village sometime in the eighteenth century, Abena is given the necklace by James – her father, and the son of an enslaver and his Asante wife – who tells her that the necklace once belonged to her great-grandmother Effia:

It was the first time she had heard the name of one of her ancestors, and she savoured the taste of the name on her tongue. She wanted to say it again and again. Effia. Effia. (152)

At the end of the novel, set in the present, Marjorie and Marcus swim in the sea by Elmina Castle, and Marjorie gives Marcus the necklace, before heading back 'towards the shore' (300). Marcus is scared of water, and Marjorie is scared of fire: they carry the fears of their forebears inside them. Marjorie's grandmother could hear ghosts, 'the people who were stuck on the ocean floor talking to her. Our ancestors' (H, 294). This transgenerational transmission of a ghost story gives Marjorie a sense of being in time. Ghosts in the water break into history's silence.

There is ambivalence among the characters towards chronology and forms of time marked by colonial capitalism. Ness, Esi's daughter, picking cotton on an Alabama plantation sometime in the early 1800s, cannot remember how old she is: 'Her best guess was twenty-five, but each year since the one when she was plucked from her mother's arms had felt like ten years' (H, 70). Time is measured, for her, in the distance between her and her mother, swelling into decades where she ages at a rate that unwrites the developmental time of human life. The time of enslavement is not included in the temporality of the free world. The stories she has inherited begin in this time, not the memories of a distant

homeland. The bedtime stories her mother told her were about ‘the Big Boat’: she ‘would fall asleep to the images of men being thrown into the Atlantic Ocean like anchors attached to nothing: no land, no people, no worth’ (H, 70). The time of enslavement becomes the horizon and the origin story.

Understanding the self in chronological time cannot function as repair. Knowing where you are from becomes supplanted, gradually, with forms of what Simone describes as “rogue care” and strange alliances, inexplicable and provisional’ (2018, 90). When the force of history that keeps time moving forward forces characters to lose each other, forms of care that are on the run, outside the law, become ways of enduring the present. Ness’s husband was lynched and her son taken into freedom while the family was trying to escape. Pinky, a little girl whose mother died who “ain’t spoke a word since”, becomes Ness’s adopted child (H, 76). Ness remains in the fields of the new plantation, mourning and caring for another child, while her son grows up without parents in the North. Her son’s story is held back for another chapter, and Ness’s story ends in the cotton field, one eye on Pinky, with a prayer for the safety of her son: “And protect my son, wherever he may be.” These truncated vignettes of stolen lives engender a form of history marked by continual cuts and abrasions, forced to punctuate itself with prayer, rather than documentation. These simultaneous adoptions – Pinky’s and Kojo’s – are left out of the record, cut out of burgeoning family tapestries.

The easy interchange between freedom and belonging promised by liberal humanism cannot be counted upon in this text. Freedom is never guaranteed; what becomes more pressing is the passing on of influences – a bric-a-brac of possible ways out – rather than a singular inheritance that might at some point be cashed in. Ness’s son Kojo is brought to the North and cared for by Ma Aku – the woman who took him to freedom – in the Chesapeake Bay, working in the shipyards. Ma Aku teaches him to be scared of slave catchers, as well as acting as an interim guide for rituals of the old country, the Gold Coast – taking an offering to a woman’s father if you want to court her. She takes on the role of parent and ancestral voice, stealing back time from what has been stolen from them. This ‘rogue care’ is not attached to genealogy, but uses the ancestral as a borrowed resource in a present that is understood to be fleeting and transitory. What becomes paramount is passing on the lessons that may save a life under the cover of darkness. Creating a passage between old rituals and new enemies is what forms the basis of kinship, a constellation of influences that may or may not come in useful. Any notion of inherited traits – in a biological sense – is superseded by these other codes of enduring.

Homegoing laces a suspicion around genealogy into its bursts of direct violence. Genealogical knowledge becomes a weapon of colonial violence against those who are able to keep records, and who uphold and impose a correlation between knowledge of family history and self-determination. Mixing up the two can mean playing into the hands of the enemy. In Akua's section, a white missionary tries over many years to convert to his Christian God, and refuses to let her leave the orphanage where she has grown up to get married to the Akan man of her choosing:

'I'll tell you about your mother,' the Missionary finally said. He dropped the switch to the floor and walked toward Akua until he was standing so close she could smell the faint stench of fish on his breath. For ten years, he had come no closer to her than the length of that switch. For ten years he had refused to answer questions about her family. 'I'll tell you about your mother. Anything you want to know.' (189)

Here, discovering her past is only possible on the condition that Akua remain in the infrastructure of colonial violence. Akua is attempting to leave the colonial site in search of her own future, and in response, the Missionary replaces one oppressive tool – the switch – with another. Family history is used as an instrument of restriction, a way of holding off freedom, a method of discipline and control. Akua's wish to know about her mother is subsumed into the Missionary's arsenal of control tactics; 'I'll tell you' is a declaration of absolute certainty, as if he knows all there is to know. His proximity to her at this point is a strategy of intimidation, rather than an offer of repair.

This scene disturbs the idea of family history as a site of refuge, and learning about personal history as a force of liberation. Akua learns the truth about her mother in a set-up that resembles rape – the sadomasochistic overtones of the switch being laid down, a length that holds her at a distance, while extended towards her, across many years, keeping her in place. The Missionary tells her that when he tried to baptize her mother, he had to hold her down in the water to stop her thrashing: 'She thrashed and thrashed and thrashed, and then she was still' (189). This is the legacy passed on from him, the adoptive father, to her: a mother reduced to a body undergoing an extended moment of terror before death, at the hands of a substitute parent. Knowing the truth about one's family history brings with it the danger of resurrecting the violence of the past, within the infrastructure that continues to enact it.

In the America chapters, genealogy is similarly dangerous terrain. The growth in popularity of eugenic science across Western Europe and the United States

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries corresponds to accelerating demands for freedom in anti-colonial movements across colonized territories, as well as the groundswell of Black Americans moving from a Jim Crow South to northern cities. These movements were met by a ramping up of racial profiling, under the guise of tracking 'phenotypic diversity'. In Gyasi's text, the assumed confluence between race and heredity is the basis of the narrative's social environment, while never being fully declared. When it comes to Black communities, genetic accounts of race are extensions of blood science, where race is calculated via equations of genealogical proximity.

Willie and Robert's story rehearses the family tragedy of the 'one-drop rule': nineteenth-century race science that categorized a person as Black if they had one drop of 'Negro blood'. Willie marries a 'mixed-race' man – poor, like her – who is 'the whitest black boy she had ever seen' (H, 201). 'Mixed-race' here signifies proximity to whiteness, reifying genetic identity and centring (an assumed) biological heredity as a defining characteristic of both appearance and behaviour. When they move to New York City from Birmingham, Alabama, as part of the Great Northern Migration, 'mixed-race' means that Robert can pass as white, while Willie cannot; and white signifies intellectual aptitude, moral rectitude and with these, the right to access certain spaces. Falling either side of the colour line ends up breaking the family apart. Robert's interest in becoming a mensch of the jazz clubs and white-only shops of the city take him towards the promise of a family tree with stable roots and visible branches; for Willie, 'her own skin had started to look to her more and more like the thing her father brought home from the mines, under his fingernails and dusting his clothes' (201), another legacy passed on from parents to children: dirt, not blood. In Harlem – the supposed site of freedom for Black southerners, Willie 'cannot move' (209). Robert marries a white woman, and his shared history with Willie and their son is erased, pushed aside for the sake of a new timeline. Willie becomes a cleaner in the clubs Robert frequents with his white work colleagues. Phenotype becomes an alibi for legislating the disappearance of Black women from calculations of social capital, while incorporating them as essential labour to keep new urban dreamworlds moving for those positioned as their protagonists and beneficiaries.

All this places pressure on the nuclear family structure, which derives part of its stability from knowledge of one's own genealogical tree. *Homegoing* underscores the fragility of this as a basis for social organization, because those cut off from knowledge of their biological pasts cannot participate in public affairs. This is a moral economy of lineage. The fragility of the nuclear family

is not to do with the way that it excludes those who do not know their history; rather, its exclusions indicate the compression of the public sphere into a very narrow set of social obligations to others, limited in a normative sense to biological offspring. And this compression is what history becomes. Part of the strategy of this text – as in *Lose Your Mother* – is to find a way of pluralizing Black history within incomplete archives and in the absence of names, and to confront the obliteration of these histories in biological descriptions of human destiny.

In these texts, the ambivalence of ancestry creates a politics and poetics of space and time across the cartography of the modern world and mappings of human genealogy. Hartman and Gyasi consider the ongoing crisis of genealogy by subverting its supremacy as a description of human belonging, and a keystone of what it means to stay in place. The idea of the genome as a ledger of the past and its failure to offer new forms of evidence for reparation offer new routes to Pan-African futures. This happens not by proving genetic relatedness, but through exposing the inadequacy of genealogical claims to belonging in a particular place and temporality. In these texts, ancestry is not something to be discovered in code, but is made through practices of making and remaking pasts for the sake of speculative futures. These are strategic uses of genetics as a way of getting to the fiction of national belonging. In the final chapter, I consider other border fictions – empire, organism and species – placing epigenetic imaginaries next to anxieties around the long-term effects of climate change and industrial toxicity.