Reading the Family Tree

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the genre of the multigenerational family saga alongside the institutions that have encouraged its popularity and prestige. Reading *Homegoing* and *A Kind of Freedom*, I argue that the genre has flourished by appealing to the interpretive strategies of both the university English department and the middlebrow book club. Its recent focus on marginalized peoples is well-suited to the "empathetic" and pedagogical reading practices of both institutions. I close by questioning whether empathetic reading practices have become a recipe for learned and compassionate inaction.

> *Kunta lay awake thinking how so many things—indeed, nearly everything they had learned—all tied together. The past . . . with the present, the present with the future, the dead with the living and those yet to be born.*
>
> —Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*

GENEALOGY AND GENRE

What does it mean to begin a novel with a family tree? What claims does it make about the narrative that follows and its relation to the historical past? What work does it do for readers, and what work, in turn, does it ask of them? Louise Erdrich's now-canonical debut novel, *Love Medicine* (1984), which chronicles three generations of Ojibwe families from the 1930s to the 1980s, begins with such a family tree. Likewise, Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992) and Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* (1995)—both multigenerational family sagas, both debut novels, both shortlisted for the National Book Award—open with the same device. Add to this Yaa Gyasi's debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016), a similarly ambitious family saga that garnered a seven-figure advance and won awards from

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the National Book Foundation, the National Book Critics Circle, and the Center for Fiction; and, more recently, Namwali Serpell's debut novel, *The Old Drift* (2019), winner of the Arthur C. Clarke Award and placed on "best of" lists by *The New York Times,* NPR, and *The Atlantic,* among many others.[1] Even this small sample reveals quite a bit about both the genre of the family tree novel and its position in the contemporary American literary field.

First, and most obviously, these are novels that derive their narrative structures from the heuristic of the heteronormative family and its rhythm of marriages, births, and deaths.[2] These family sagas are likewise sweeping in their historical scope, inspiring what Julia Creet has called "the genealogical sublime" by following three, four, seven, or (in the case of *Homegoing*) nine generations across anywhere between five decades and three centuries.[3] As a result, each novel is marked by a process of selection and exclusion, choosing one narrative path to follow through the family tree but nodding visually to other, untold stories. As you might suspect of any book that begins with a detailed diagram, the family tree novel is also insistently structural, replete with section and chapter breaks, subtitles that identify narrators, settings, and moments in time. Moreover, though the genre of multigenerational historical fiction has been taken up by everyone from Gabriel García Márquez to William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, and Thomas Mann, the array of novels just mentioned—by Ojibwe, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Ghanaian, and Zambian authors—suggests that, over the last several decades, the genre has been especially common among racialized and ethnicized writers, and women writers in particular. That these debut novels have all been consecrated by the cultural organizations most central to contemporary canon formation signals that the ambitious historical scope of the multigenerational family saga is one way that novelists now announce their talent, one way that literary institutions identify such talent, or both.

The family trees that open these novels operate as both textual and paratextual devices, visualizing the narrative that follows, but also organizing it for writers, categorizing it for critics, and summarizing it for readers. Yaa Gyasi "didn't really outline" *Homegoing* before she began to write it, but she did make a family tree of its characters and hang it on the wall above her desk.[4] In an early review of the novel, the critic Ron Charles declares that "the speed with which Gyasi sweeps across the decades isn't confusing so much as dazzling," but mentions parenthetically that "the family tree at the front of the book is an invaluable reader's crutch."[5] Likewise, Kimberly N. Parker, author of the "Teacher's Guide" that Penguin Random House released alongside the novel, suggests that "bookmarking the family tree allows for frequent reference as students read

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1 Gyasi's seven-figure advance is said to have resulted from a ten-bidder auction in advance of the London Book Fair. As Laura Miller puts it, "that makes 'Homegoing' what publishers call a 'big book,' the object of promotion and marketing campaigns designed to present it as the glorious flowering of a precocious talent." Laura Miller, "Descendants," *New Yorker,* May 23, 2016, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/05/30/yaa-gyasis-homegoing.

2 As such, the genre both embodies and narrativizes what Lee Edelman has called "reproductive futurism." Lee Edelman, *No Future* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

3 Julia Creet, *The Genealogical Sublime* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 4. Though the generational scope of the family saga genre varies from book to book, three or four generations—just long enough to imagine one's grandparents as children—is the most common.

4 Jill Owens, "Powell's Interview: Yaa Gyasi of *Homegoing*," Powell's Book Blog, May 23, 2016.

5 Ron Charles, "'Homegoing,' by Yaa Gyasi: A Bold Tale of Slavery for a New 'Roots' Generation," *Washington Post,* June 13, 2016.

the text," adding that "teachers might spend time studying it" with their classes.[6] In each of these cases, the family tree not only works on behalf of a given figure in the literary field, but it also reveals their assumptions about what, exactly, multigenerational historical fiction is: epic, ambitious, "dazzling," pedagogical.

This paper investigates Gyasi's *Homegoing* as a fascinating case study of the contemporary family tree novel to demonstrate how it represents the wider genre, and contrasts it with Margaret Wilkerson Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom* (2017) to interrogate that genre's imaginative limits. Reading these exemplary and exceptional works, I argue that the multigenerational family saga has become one of the most celebrated genres of contemporary fiction precisely because it appeals to the interpretive strategies shared by institutions as seemingly disparate as the university English department and the middlebrow book club.[7] Given its recent focus on historically marginalized groups, the genre's twenty-first-century manifestations are particularly appealing to the empathetic and pedagogical reading practices that now dominate both the seminar room and the living room. In both venues, *reading to learn* and *reading to feel* have become increasingly intertwined, and multigenerational historical fiction allows for both. Part of what makes a text like *Homegoing* so attractive to instructors of literature and history courses alike is how the novel both narrativizes and personalizes such a wide swath of historical time in a single text. Yet if one of the novel's greatest strengths is its ability to trace the afterlives of transatlantic slavery across several centuries, I propose that this comes, somewhat ironically, at the cost of its characters, who serve as stand-ins for key moments in African and African American history. The question that *Homegoing* provokes, by way of its vast plot, ambitious character system, and even its individual paragraphs, is whether chronicling "something that stretched so far back" ultimately stretches the limits of what can be felt at all.[8] If literary fiction not only works to memorialize the stories of the past but also dilates to encompass an entire survey course of history, it can ultimately undermine the very empathy that many claim it is uniquely capable of producing.

As *Homegoing* hastens from descendant to descendant without looking back, the novel produces a feeling of loss directed at those whose stories have been disregarded by the historical record, even as it subsumes those stories in a larger narrative of intergenerational progress. Though Gyasi's chronicle begins in the colonialism of the mid-eighteenth century, it ends—despite its 2016 publication—amid the Obama-era optimism of the early twenty-first, a choice that celebrates personal and political struggles while also sequestering them firmly in the historical past. By contrast, Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom,* which narrates the lives of three generations in a Black family in New Orleans from 1945 to 2010, not only challenges Gyasi's long arc of progress through its cyclical narrative structure but also pushes against the boundaries of the genre by historicizing the near past with equal intensity and political force. In these novels, whether history is a narrative of incremental improvement or a never-ending cycle of injustice is as much a question of politics as literary form.

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6 Kimberly N. Parker, "*Homegoing* Teacher's Guide," Penguin Random House, 2018, www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/533857/homegoing-by-yaa-gyasi/9781101971062/teachers-guide.

7 Stanley E. Fish, "Interpreting the 'Variorum,'" *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3 (1976): 465–85. As Jeremy Rosen argues, literary genres "don't get 'seized on'…by accident, magic, or the extraordinary ken of great authors. A succession of interested agents—writers, editors, reviewers, scholars—actively search for and promote forms that will serve their interests and resonate with readers." Jeremy Rosen, *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 30.

8 Yaa Gyasi, *Homegoing*, 2016 (New York: Vintage, 2017), 295; hereafter cited parenthetically.

The end of this paper turns from the multigenerational family saga to empathetic reading itself, questioning (as Namwali Serpell and others have) whether that interpretive strategy has become "a distraction or a palliative" for readers, divorced from any clear "imperative to take action." As Serpell puts it, "systemic change," of the kind that multigenerational historical fiction is particularly adept at narrating, "needs deliberation, yes, but we've deliberated much of this already."[9] Ultimately, the multigenerational family saga represents the apotheosis of American literature's turn toward the historical past, exemplifying its pedagogical, political, and affective imperatives to amplify the historically voiceless. But it also typifies the limits of contemporary literature's fixation on historical fiction, chief among them the increasingly imperceptible disconnect between knowledge of the past and action in the present.

A proper history of the multigenerational family saga would require a monograph of its own. Tracing the family resemblances between the various "links in the chain" of this genre—from Mann and Galsworthy, to Woolf and Faulkner, and on to García Márquez and Allende—would be fascinating. But genealogy is the subject of this paper, not its strict method. Given that, let us jump a few branches on the family tree to the moment when the *decline* of Mann's title, *Buddenbrooks: Verfall einer Familie*, (*Budddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family*) and the genre as a whole, was flipped on its head. That moment was the 1976 publication of Alex Haley's novel *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and its adaptation to broadcast television one year later. These were national events, which provoked a "popular awakening," by both scholars and the wider public, to the power and promise of genealogy.[10] Haley's *Roots* narrates seven generations in a family, from the iconic Kunta Kinte all the way to the author himself. Along the way, the novel not only ignited a national conversation about the history of American slavery, it also transformed the family saga and its place in the literary field. After *Roots*—for the novel stands as a clear dividing line in the literary history of this genre—multigenerational historical fiction began to focus increasingly on historical events, not as mere background but as central to the narrative.[11] Moreover, the family tree novel became largely the domain of racially and ethnically minoritized writers, who traced ambitious tales of immigration, assimilation, progress, and uplift rather than the decline and disgrace of the genre's (primarily) white and male authors in the first half of the twentieth century.[12] Whereas the genre was previously invested in linearity, continuity, and the bourgeois "illusion of causality," trauma was now its central theme, breaks and gaps

9 Namwali Serpell and Maria Tumarkin, "Unethical Reading and the Limits of Empathy," *Yale Review*, Winter 2020, yalereview.yale.edu/unethical-reading-and-limits-empathy.

10 Creet, *The Genealogical Sublime*, 16.

11 Throughout the novel Haley's characters directly address capital-H Historical events, such as the British monarchy's role in the thirteen American colonies (227–28), the Revolutionary War (230–34), the Haitian Rebellion (295–96), the War of 1812 (379), Nat Turner's rebellion (438), Frederick Douglass's and Sojourner Truth's activism (468), Harriet Tubman and the "Undergroun' Railroad" (469), the American Civil War (534), and the Emancipation Proclamation (547). Haley's discussion of these events often comes at the start of chapters, setting in motion events in the lives of individual characters. Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of An American Family* (New York: Doubleday, 1976).

12 These include Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), Cristina García's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), Michael Cunningham's *Flesh and Blood* (1995), Rosario Ferré's *The House on the Lagoon* (1995), and Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* (2002), to name just a few.

its key devices.[13] Characters became figures of absence, speaking on behalf of history's voiceless, fictional embodiments of the forgotten or misremembered. Drawing the family tree became a revisionist and even recuperative endeavor.

The multigenerational family saga has become particularly central to the contemporary American literary canon in large part because it fulfills many of the pedagogical objectives of contemporary literary study. To borrow a common phrase from teachers of literature, the family tree novel *teaches well*. Whereas the genre formerly insulated its central families from capital-H History, key events and periods are now at the forefront. This is particularly useful for classroom teachers, at both the secondary school and university levels, looking "to entertain and to teach, to simplify and to complicate, to make history both palatable and challenging."[14] This focus on literature's ability to transmit historical knowledge has much to do with the rise of New Historicism as a scholarly methodology, which is itself a response to the marginalization of literary studies within the late twentieth-century university. "By drawing connections between literature and its social contexts," Timothy Aubry argues, "New Historicism was implicitly drawing connections between English departments and *their* social context, thus seeking to establish the relevance of what they taught to other political and economic spheres."[15] Multigenerational historical fiction fulfills the earnest pedagogical imperative to *trace the longer histories* of certain phenomena, while also responding to institutional pressures to cover more (history and literary history) with less (financial support, class time, space on the syllabus). The same is true across campus, where history teachers (and educators in other disciplines) are drawing on historical fiction to "set the scene" and "stimulate initial interest in a topic," as well as to "give a more human shape to individuals and cultures badly underrepresented in the historical record."[16]

Beyond the genre's ability to function as a kind of single-serving historical survey, the family tree novel also satisfies the expectation that literary studies can and should furnish "an affective investment in the lives of social others."[17] Elena Machado Sáez argues that this "ethical imperative" is only intensified for minoritized writers of historical fiction, for whom "the struggle to imagine an ethical pedagogical relationship between reader and author is encoded"—within the novels themselves—"in the depictions of student-teacher encounters."[18] This does much to explain the proliferation of teachers, students, and scenes of instruction in Gyasi's *Homegoing*. Of course,

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13 Yi-Ling Ru, "The Family Novel: Toward a Generic Definition," *Comparative Literature: East & West* 3, no. 1 (2001): 128.

14 Elena Machado Sáez, *Market Aesthetics: The Purchase of the Past in Caribbean Diasporic Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 26. See also Parker, "*Homegoing* Teacher's Guide."

15 Timothy Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 137.

16 Victoria Mills, "Fiction, Empathy and Teaching History," *Teaching History* 81 (October 1995): 7; Kevin Vanzant, "Problems with Narrative in the US Survey and How Fiction can Help," *The History Teacher* 52, no. 4 (2019): 687.

17 Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 13. On the "empathy defense" of literature's value, see also Michael Fischer, "Literature and Empathy," *Philosophy and Literature* 41, no. 2 (October 2017): 431–64. For a telling example of how the family saga genre relates *to this defense*, see Jeremy Knoll, "How 'Homegoing' Has Changed My Teaching," *Learning for Justice*, February 13, 2017, www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/how-homegoing-has-changed-my-teaching. On midcentury reading practices and "reading with feeling" in literary institutions, see Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), especially chap. 2.

18 Machado Sáez, *Market Aesthetics*, 21. Though Machado Sáez focuses particularly on fiction of the Caribbean diaspora, her theorization of what she calls "market aesthetics" is invaluable for understanding how racial and ethnic difference is commodified (by publishers and scholars alike) in the contemporary literary field.

the opportunities presented by these novels to empathize with the historically marginalized also explain their tremendous uptake by university instructors. According to the Open Syllabus Project, *Roots* has appeared on nearly 200 university syllabi, *Middlesex* on more than 350, and *Dreaming in Cuban* on 470. *Love Medicine* has featured on nearly 800 university syllabi, far more than, say, Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* (401 syllabi) or Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (196), two canonical novels from the same period. In the years since its publication, *Homegoing* has appeared on more than 110 university syllabi and been selected for campus-wide Common Reads programs at more than a dozen public and private institutions, including the Community College of Baltimore County, Connecticut College, Grinnell, Rutgers, Stanford, and the University of South Alabama.[19] As Machado Sáez makes clear, higher education's embrace of the multigenerational family saga genre, or any genre for that matter, has "market currency in the publishing field" because of "the centrality of the classroom to the publishing economy."[20] Publishers know, perhaps best of all, that a great portion of the readership for literary fiction consists of students; therefore what teachers teach can ultimately influence what gets published in the first place.

The pedagogical and affective affordances of the family saga novel are similarly well suited to the contemporary book club. As Beth Driscoll explains, "book clubs have some overlap with universities in terms of their reading material" because they are thoroughly "middle-class institutions, part of a package of values that includes education and self-improvement."[21] Not unlike university English departments, book clubs and their members are under pressure (self-imposed, in this case) to make their activities enriching. Yet the desire to learn and the desire to feel are not opposed, but commingled, in the contemporary book club. Though its readers are "eager to acquire cultural capital," Driscoll argues, "its central goal is emotional engagement," "encourag[ing] people to read for empathy."[22] Aubry agrees, adding that these informal institutions work to "mediate encounters across racial and cultural boundaries," wherein difference serves "not to preclude but to intensify [readers'] experience of identification."[23]

As Driscoll notes, "publishers' attempts to specifically court the book club market are increasingly visible," including "free reading group guides" published online, like the ones that Grand Central Publishing and Penguin Random House released for *Homegoing*.[24] Dissimilar as these literary institutions may first appear, the contemporary book club and the university English department are both driven by a shared set of priorities that have encouraged the publication, prestige, and canonization of the multi-generational family saga. Publishers have appealed directly to these readerly expectations in their marketing strategies, as have critics in their early reviews. Reviews of *Homegoing* lauded how the novel offers both "a panoramic view and an empathetic entry point into . . . the effects of slavery and colonialism."[25] Despite these grand pronounce-

19 "Open Syllabus Explorer," *Open Syllabus*; Campus Reads Penguin Random House, "Homegoing," Common Reads, www.commonreads.com/book/?isbn=9781101971062.

20 Machado Sáez, *Market Aesthetics*, 4.

21 Beth Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century* (Camden, NJ: Palgrave, 2014), 55.

22 Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 26, 32–33.

23 Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), 14.

24 Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 56.

25 Yaa Gyasi, "The Rumpus Interview with Yaa Gyasi," interview by Abigail Bereola, *The Rumpus*, July 29, 2016. See also Michiko Kakutani, "Review: In 'Homegoing,' What Slavery Costs One Family," review of *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, *New York Times*, June 13, 2016.

ments, the pages that follow will argue that the contemporary literary field's twin imperatives to historicize and empathize can, if pushed too far, result in a failure to do either.

THE LONG MORAL ARC

Who—or what—is the protagonist of *Homegoing*? It is not an easy question, given that all of Gyasi's central characters eventually disappear from the action of the novel.[26] When asked in an interview if she wished she could "revisit some of these characters" as *Homegoing* progresses, Gyasi replied, simply, "not really . . . because, again, I had that long arc in mind."[27] In other words, the protagonist in the service of whom each of Gyasi's fourteen focalized characters is compressed and then abandoned, the cause for which the voices of minor characters like Felicity and Grade are overlooked, is both the family tree and the "long arc" of history that it indexes. While the multigenerational family saga is a kind of leviathan genre composed of miniature marriage plots and bildungsromans, each of these is nested in a larger structure wherein (as one critic wrote of *Buddenbrooks)* "the family is the real hero of the book."[28] Just as in the bildungsroman, where "the hero's progress is facilitated through a series of interactions" with characters who "stand for particular states of mind, or psychological modes, that the protagonist interacts with and transcends," in the family saga this process is played out across and *by way of* successive generations.[29] Although *Homegoing* is often discussed as a novel of contemporary African migration, as Brian Yothers rightly points out, only one of its fourteen main characters is actually an immigrant; thus, the there-to-here narrative of migration stretches beyond any individual character's experience, unfolding instead over the course of multiple generations.[30] Though it is often harrowing, this process is presented as largely positive. If the superstructure of *Buddenbrooks* is one of deterioration and failure—the novel's subtitle is, after all, *The Decline of a Family*—the overarching plot of *Homegoing,* and a great many contemporary family sagas by writers of color, is one of mobility, advancement, and ascent. The novel's protagonist is progress itself.

Of course, Gyasi's passing mention of the "long arc" that she had "in mind" when writing the novel betrays this. However consciously, the phrase evokes Martin Luther King Jr.'s adage that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," and perhaps still more, Barack Obama's adoption of it as a kind of mantra for his presidency. (Obama not only drew on the quotation as a common refrain in his speeches, he also had it woven into a rug in the Oval

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26 Woloch argues that "every minor character . . . by strict definition . . . disappear[s]," and it is this disappearance that most provokes the reader's "interest and outrage, painful concern or amused consent": "not simply their fate within the story (whether they marry or die, make their fortune or lose it, find a home or become exiled) but also in the narrative discourse itself (how they are finally overshadowed or absorbed into someone else's story, swallowed within or expelled from another person's plot)." Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 38.

27 Ismail Muhammad, "'If You're Going to Tell the Story of Slavery, I'm Going to Listen All Day': Q&A with 'Homegoing' Author Yaa Gyasi," *ZYZZYVA*, June 21, 2016, www.zyzzva.org/2016/07/21/if-youre-going-qa-with-yaa-gyasi/.

28 A.E. Zucker, "The Genealogical Novel, a New Genre." PMLA 43, no. 2 (June 1928): 551–60.

29 Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, 29.

30 Brian Yothers, "Contemporary African Immigration and the Legacy of Slavery in Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing," *The Immigrant Experience*, ed. Maryse Jayasuriya (Amenia, NY: Salem Press/Grey House Publishing, 2018), 209. See also Stephanie Li, *Pan–African American Literature: Signifyin(g) Immigrants in the Twenty-First Century* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

Office.)[31] In its twenty-first-century reincarnations, the bromide seeks to emphasize the triumph of postwar liberalism, the steady improvement that is at once persistent and passive, inevitable and indefinitely deferred. The moral arc bends, we are told, but who or what is bending it—and how? The same logic pervades *Homegoing* and its insistently linear plot. Unlike the high modernist blending of past and present, unlike Morrison's or Nguyen's modernist-influenced convolution of periods, which are themselves haunted by the specters of history, Gyasi's chronology moves in only one direction (echoing another triumphal Obama slogan): forward. Unlike Sexton's *A Kind of Freedom,* which we will turn to in a moment, *Homegoing*'s chapters continually ask the reader to *wait and see,* to keep reading as its characters suffer under the hope that their children may lead better, freer lives.

At one point in the novel, Abena's father comes upon her in tears and asks why she is crying. "The plants have all died, and I could have helped them," she answers, "between sobs." To this Abenas' father responds, "then next time bring more water, but don't cry for this time" (144–45). This is, to some extent, the narrative and affective gambit of *Homegoing,* asking the reader to defer passing judgment—on the family, on the novel, and on the history it recounts—until it has arrived at its conclusion. As Gyasi herself puts it, "the long arc of the book . . . the accumulation of all of the chapters was more important to me than the individual chapters."[32] The end of the "long arc"—where the characters, particularly the *last* characters, end up—is what matters most, legitimizing both the stories and the suffering that come before.

The idea that the conclusion is what gives a story its meaning is not unique to Gyasi or her chosen genre. Shakespeare tells us that *"la fin couronne les oeuvres."*[33] Peter Brooks tells us that "the end writes the beginning and shapes the middle."[34] But in contemporary iterations of the multigenerational family saga, the end acquires still greater importance, as it not only provides closure to the chronicle of an individual family but also proffers a coherent shape to history and its moral arc. "We often love grand, sweeping, multigenerational narratives," Michelle Wright claims, "for providing us with a sense of clarity, for affording us the sensation of standing outside space and time so that we may fully comprehend the long, complicated, and awesome journey our ancestors made across the centuries."[35] As readers, we have the privilege of historical irony, knowing what is going to happen, which is to say what *has happened,* in a way that the characters, particularly the ones most removed in historical and genealogical time, do not. A number of family sagas incorporate this irony, and the pleasure it affords, by paying particular attention

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31 Mychal Denzel Smith, "The Truth About 'The Arc of the Moral Universe,'" *Huffington Post,* January 18, 2018, www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4.

32 Muhammad, "If You're Going to Tell the Story of Slavery." Patricia Tobin, writing on García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* has described this way of thinking as a "genealogical imperative," a narrative structure that stresses "causality," and within which "seemingly random events and gratuitous details are brought into alignment at its conclusion, when all possibility has been converted into necessity in a kinship line of events." "Thus," Tobin concludes, "in both life and literature, a line has become legitimized—whether the family line, the timeline, or the story line—because our causal understanding" works ultimately to equate "descent and destiny." Patricia Tobin, "Response, 1: García Márquez and the Genealogical Imperative," *Diacritics: A Review of Contemporary Criticism* 4, no. 2 (1974): 53.

33 William Shakespeare, *Henry VI,* Part Two, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008), 5.2.28.

34 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 22.

35 Wright problematizes this desire, adding: "Yet to what degree is our desire for knowing a desire for power and control, an urge to be at the top of the hierarchy?" Michelle Wright, "Diaspora and Entanglement," *Qui Parle* 28, no. 2 (2019): 233.

to scenes of formal instruction, especially in the final generations. That is, in both senses of the word, *the end* of a great many multigenerational historical novels lies in education.

Take the close of *Buddenbrooks,* for example, which finds young Hanno Buddenbrook in a primary school classroom, dreading every minute. Asked by his teacher to recite a bit of Latin, Hanno reluctantly accepts, bungling the attempt despite cheating off a friend's notes. "You have dragged beauty through the dust," his schoolmaster chides, "you have behaved like a Vandal" (704). One chapter later, Hanno dies of typhoid fever and the "decline of a family" is complete. While, for Mann, Hanno's scholastic failure typifies the family's descent, for more contemporary novelists, the opposite is true: Progress means that the highest branches of their family trees are stocked with star students.

Homegoing's final chapters feature characters en route to the honor roll, and allusions to a changing canon. When we first meet Marjorie—who, like Gyasi herself, was born in Ghana and moved to Alabama at a young age—she is working her way through high school and its library: "By senior year, she had read almost everything on the south wall of the school's library, at least a thousand books, and she was working her way through the north wall" (270–71). Whereas Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* allegorizes the canon wars that marked his time at Harvard in the early 1990s, Gyasi dramatizes how those same debates over literary multiculturalism are still playing out at the secondary school level decades later. At the start of the chapter, Marjorie is nose-deep in *Lord of the Flies,* she has just checked out *Middlemarch* from the library, and she is anxiously looking forward to her *Great Gatsby*-themed prom. In other words, whether her high school experience most resembles an island of adolescent rage, a study of provincial life, or a bacchanal of romantic ambition, it is couched decidedly in the themes and tropes of a largely white canon. That is, until her English teacher, Mrs. Pinkston, "one of two black teachers in a school that served almost two thousand students," approaches her at lunch to ask what she thinks of Golding's novel. When Marjorie replies that she likes the book, her teacher pushes further: "'But do you love it? Do you feel it inside of you?' Marjorie shook her head. She didn't know what it meant to feel a book inside of her, but she didn't want to tell her English teacher that" (270).

By the end of the chapter, Marjorie puts down *Middlemarch* and picks up her pen. Encouraged by Mrs. Pinkston, Marjorie writes a poem that both recognizes her two homelands and acknowledges the parts of her heritage that are lost to history. "Split the Castle open, / find me, find you," Marjorie begins, performing her work before the school's two thousand students, and revising Langston Hughes's iconic "I, too" as "We, two," a pithy miniaturization of the novel itself (282). Whereas Hanno Buddenbrook bungles his recitation and is silenced by his teacher, Marjorie is lauded for finding her voice, creating something she can truly "feel inside." In its final chapters, *Homegoing* performs—in a high school auditorium, no less—precisely the virtues that attract so many secondary school and university educators to it: literature's ability to make diverse histories available to empathy, and the power of that empathy in turn to energize a new generation of readers and writers.

If each of Gyasi's characters metonymizes a given period—H, Reconstruction; Willie, the Harlem Renaissance—then Marjorie and Marcus (the novel's final focalizer) suggest, somewhat paradoxically, that education is the end of history. Or, rather, that after suffering and enduring and overcoming it, *learning* history represents an end in itself. Six generations after Effia and Esi are torn asunder by the violence of colonialism, Marjorie and Marcus become friends while both are living in northern California and studying at Stanford—the former pursuing a degree

in African and African American literature, the latter a PhD in sociology. The university thus provides a spatial bookend to the Fanteland village in which the novel begins. There the bonds of family, community, and culture held the two sides of Maame's family together; here the institution, its myth of meritocracy, and its structures of knowledge do the same work. Learning the horrors of the past and also the vocabulary with which to render them, *Homegoing* suggests, is where family history finds its natural conclusion. The long moral arc bends and bends, but for Gyasi where it stops is Stanford.

This is not entirely surprising, given that Stanford is where Gyasi, herself the daughter of a literature professor, "first heard the word 'diaspora'" and won a research grant that would both send her to Ghana and launch what would become her first novel.[36] *Homegoing*'s history—which is to say, both the development of the novel and the development of its historical narrative—is inflected by the institutions that sponsored it. In this way, Gyasi's prizewinning novel appears as a prime example of the phenomenon, described by Claire Grossman, Juliana Spahr, and Stephanie Young, in which authors "with an elite degree (Ivy League, Stanford, University of Chicago)" are far more likely (nine times more likely, in fact) to win a literary prize than those without one. For minoritized writers, this correlation is even more pronounced. "In the contemporary moment," they argue, "serious literature is more or less written by graduates of elite institutions, often to be read in educational or education-adjacent settings."[37]

That said, this book argues that contemporary American fiction is deemed more or less "serious" not simply because of its author's curriculum vitae but more precisely as a result of the shared political and aesthetic priorities of academic and literary institutions. The twin promises of the multigenerational family saga genre—to cultivate empathy with historically marginalized individuals *qua* individuals and to narrate vast swaths of history in the *longue durée*—are prized by university English departments, campus Common Reads programs, literary awards organizations, and "education-adjacent" book clubs alike. And yet, while these radically different scales of attention appear to pose little problem for such disparate interpretive communities, their juxtaposition does create a tension that is registered in the works themselves—a tension described, not coincidentally, as a problem of academic discipline.

At the end of *Homegoing,* Marcus's and Marjorie's academic projects figure transparently as metatexts for the novel itself. As Marcus works toward a PhD in sociology, he is frustrated by the inextricability of historical phenomena:

> The deeper into the research he got, the bigger the project got. How could he talk about Great-Grandpa H's story without also talking about his grandma Willie and the millions of other

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36 Gyasi's father is a professor of Francophone African literature. Kate Kellaway, "Yaa Gyasi: 'Slavery Is on People's Minds. It Affects Us Still,'" *The Guardian*, January 8, 2017. Owens, "Powell's Interview." Though Gyasi began the novel at Stanford, the University of Iowa, where Gyasi studied at the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop, was where it "really started to take shape." Wayne Catan, "Interview with Yaa Gyasi, 2017 PEN/Hemingway Award Winner," THR Blog, The Hemingway Foundation and Society, May 31, 2017, www.hemingwaysociety.org/interview-yaa-gyasi-2017-penhemingway-award-winner. See also Mirakhor, "More at Stake"; Sam Scott, "The Story Behind 'Homegoing,'" *Stanford Magazine,* July–August 2017, stanfordmag.org/contents/the-story-behind-homegoing.

37 Claire Grossman, Stephanie Young, and Juliana Spahr, "Who Gets to Be a Writer," Public Books, April 1, 2021, www.publicbooks.org/who-gets-to-be-a-writer/. See also Claire Grossman, Juliana Spahr, and Stephanie Young, "Literature's Vexed Democratization," *American Literary History* 33, no. 2 (2021): 298–319.

> black people who had migrated north, fleeing Jim Crow? And if he mentioned the Great Migration, he'd have to talk about the cities that took that flock in . . .

and so on, tracing the trajectory of the latter half of the novel, from convict leasing to the "war on drugs" (289). Gyasi has commented that she shares both "Marcus's frustration" that "you can never capture the fullness of history in a single novel," as well as his "desire" to "get as close as possible."[38] When Marcus asks Marjorie how she came to study African and African American literature, she responds, echoing Mrs. Pinkston and her ethos of literary representation, that "those were the books that she could feel inside of her." "It was one thing to research something," Marcus concludes, "another thing to have lived it. To have felt it. How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back" (295). For Gyasi's fictional descendants, the challenge of understanding historical injustices and their contemporary effects is transfigured into the challenge of choosing a major.

The last chapter of *Homegoing* takes place at the turn of the twenty-first century, when Marjorie and Marcus not only reunite and therefore reconnect the long-separated halves of the family but also return to Cape Coast Castle together. This last sequence parallels the end of Haley's *Roots,* which follows the author-narrator as he returns to the Gambian village of Juffure (where Kunta Kinte was born) and comes to the "staggering awareness . . . that *if* any black American could be so blessed as I had been to know only a few ancestral clues then [they might be] able to locate some wizened old black *griot* whose narrative could reveal the black Americans ancestral clan."[39] But if the tantalizing fantasy held out by Haley is the prospect of the recovery *of history,* the promise of the end of Gyasi's novel is the therapeutic recovery *from history.* In *Homegoing*'s final lines, Gyasi writes that Marjorie "lifted the stone [pendant] from her neck, and placed it around Marcus's. 'Welcome home,'" she says, before they splash one another and swim, laughing, back "toward the shore" (300).

Gyasi describes her own visit to the castle—a week or so before Barack Obama's historic trip there in 2009—as "a healing moment," in which she was "thinking a lot about the way we try to heal ourselves and heal these wounds that stretch for centuries."[40] Obama, too, focused on the recuperative in his remarks at the castle, emphasizing that while "on the one hand this place was a place of profound sadness; on the other hand, it is . . . where the journey of much of the African American experience began." Capturing not only the "post-racial" optimism of his early years in office but also the sense of progress that *Homegoing*'s historical narrative emphasizes, Obama concluded: "to be able to come back here in celebration . . . of the extraordinary progress that we've made because of the courage of so many, black and white, to abolish slavery and ultimately win civil rights for all people, I think is a source of hope. It reminds us that as bad as history can be, it's also possible to overcome."[41] In retrospect, this triumphal declaration appears premature at best.

In contrast to both Obama's and Gyasi's narratives of progress, Saidiya Hartman's description of her own journey to Cape Coast Castle in *Lose Your Mother* acknowledges both "the

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38 Anton Dechand, "ILB interview: Yaa Gyasi," EXBERLINER, September 5, 2018, www.exberliner.com/whats-on/international-literature-festival-blog-yaa-gyasi-interview/

39 Haley, *Roots*, 577–80 (original emphasis).

40 Muhammad, "If You're Going to Tell the Story of Slavery."

41 Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Cape Coast Castle," White House Archives, July 11, 2009, obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-capecoast-castle.

hope . . . that return could resolve the old dilemmas, make a victory out of defeat, and engender a new order," as well as "the disappointment . . . that there is no going back to a former condition. Loss remakes you. Return is as much about the world to which you no longer belong as it is about the one in which you have yet to make a home."[42] Like Gyasi, Hartman recognizes how the present is shaped by the traumas of history, but unlike Gyasi, she also recognizes that "healing" cannot take place while fresh wounds are being inflicted: "I, too, live in the time of slavery, by which I mean I am living in the future created by it. It is the ongoing crisis of citizenship . . . If slavery feels proximate rather than remote . . . this has everything to do with our own dark times."[43] While *Homegoing* is decidedly *about* "the future created" by slavery, it ultimately—and quite deliberately—avoids the darkness of recent history, choosing instead to focus on Marjorie and Marcus's shining return to Ghana. "Everything was brilliant here, even the ground," Gyasi writes. "Sunlight bounced off of the sand, making it shimmer. Sand like diamonds in the once gold coast" (297).

This is where and when *Homegoing*'s three centuries of history come to a hopeful close. In this way, both the novel and genre it represents point to the promise, and the central problem, of American literature's overwhelming historical turn. Though a generation of minoritized writers has been canonized for excavating previously disregarded histories, and though a generation of teachers and readers has drawn on those writers' work to keep the memory of the past alive, does all this historicism come at the cost of engaging meaningfully with the present? As Machado Sáez has argued persuasively, the sizable "academic market" for contemporary fiction is "oriented toward the commodification of literary representations of resistance, equating resistance with a progressive ideology of contextualization."[44] This desire for contextualization—and, in particular, the misunderstanding of contextualization *as a form of resistance*—has worked, on the scale of both individual educators and educational institutions, to elevate the multigenerational family saga as a central genre of contemporary fiction. Yet this is a pedagogy that attempts to alchemize historical knowledge into contemporary political action. As Yaw, Gyasi's teacher-historian figure, puts it, "if you point the people's eye to the future, they might not see what is being done to hurt them in the present" (238). The same is true if one looks only backward.

ROUND AND ROUND

"At some point, long after we are gone, there will be stories about our time, too," Yaa Gyasi offered in an interview the week *Homegoing* was published.[45] Not ten days later in another interview, Gyasi provided one such story, in which her twelve-year-old brother "had the police called on him by our new neighbors while riding his bike on a nearby lot. . . . This is the tame version of this too common story of black boys in America. In the other version my brother dies."[46] Despite how autobiographical the later sections of her novel are, neither version of this encounter with police ended up in *Homegoing*. Instead, the novel touches on contemporary police violence and mass incarceration only by way of historical analogy. By contrast, Margaret Wilkerson Sexton explains that part of the inspiration for her own debut novel was the story of her dear cousin, who "went to jail for the first time" in 2012, the same year Sexton herself was "sworn into the bar to practice law."

42 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 100.

43 Ibid., 133.

44 Machado Sáez, *Market Aesthetics*, 30.

45 Mirakhor, "More at Stake."

46 Yaa Gyasi, "I'm Ghanaian-American. Am I Black?" New York Times, June 18, 2016.

Both "haunted and curious" about the distance between these "parallel" lives, Sexton started researching and writing about Black families in New Orleans throughout the twentieth century.[47] The result is *A Kind of Freedom,* a multigenerational historical novel that follows one such family from World War II to the War on Drugs and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Like Gyasi, Sexton is a graduate of elite schools (studying creative writing at Dartmouth College and law at UC Berkeley) and her semi-autobiographical debut received considerable acclaim (winning the First Novelist Award from the Black Caucus of the American Library Association; appearing on the longlist for the National Book Award, as well as annual best-of lists from the *New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Ebony,* and the BBC). Sexton's publisher even listed *Homegoing* as a "comp" for the novel, a "comparable" or "comparison title" used to predict a book's sales and guide its marketing.[48] Despite these similarities, what sets *A Kind of Freedom* apart from the majority of multigenerational historical novels, and *Homegoing* in particular, is the novel's cyclical structure. Rather than plow ever forward through linear historical time, Sexton runs her three settings on a kind of continual loop, subverting the easy correlation between narrative progress and political progress.

In his *New York Times* review of *A Kind of Freedom,* Jesse McCarthy writes that "Sexton pursues [the] family's history in a downward spiral," but this is less a dead metaphor of decline than it is a deft description of the novel's cyclical structure.[49] Sexton circles back again and again, revolving through her three historical settings, demonstrating both the traumatic legacies of the past in the present (as Gyasi does) and the power of the present to act as a kind of clarifying solvent to the idealism of that past. In several moments, Sexton draws on this structure in the service of a particularly dispiriting irony that works both ways in historical time: forward, as when we learn that "T. C. didn't remember meeting his father" (64) on the page after Terry promises to be more present in his son's life; and backward, as when we realize that Evelyn's brother has died years earlier of a drug overdose, only to find him "playing cops and robbers" a few pages later and four decades before (91, 98–99).

In an interview with the For Colored Girls Book Club, Sexton explains that her use of these "parallel timelines" demonstrates "how little, despite popular belief, has changed, though we've made significant progress. There are some strands of history that just weave themselves into the present over and over."[50] One such "strand" that Sexton emphasizes in the novel is the continuity of racist policing and racial disparities in the American criminal justice system. In 1944, Renard and Evelyn are accosted by a police officer, "clutching the baton at the side of his waist," simply for walking in a city park (33). Four decades later, in 1986, Jackie and Terry witness a young man violently assaulted by two cops as he pleads his innocence (144).

Nearly twenty-five years later, in the summer of 2010, T. C. feels "his heart tense" when a police car passes him in a restaurant parking lot, hopeful that "the most they would do was throw

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47 Hanna Powers, "A Conversation with Author Margaret Wilkerson Sexton," *Sarasota*, July 25, 2019, www.sarasotamagazine.com/arts-and-entertainment/2019/07/margaret-wilkerson-sexton.

48 On the promotion of Sexton's novel, see the online publisher catalog platform Edelweiss+, www.edelweiss.plus/#dashboard. On "comps" and the politics of race, see Laura B. McGrath, "Comping White," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 21, 2019, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/comping-white/.

49 Jesse McCarthy, "'A Kind of Freedom' Follows Three Generations of a Black Family in New Orleans," *New York Times*, September 5, 2017.

50 For Colored Girls Book Club, "For Colored Girls Book Club + Margaret Wilkerson Sexton," www.forcoloredgirlsbookclub.com/interviews/interview-with-margaret-wilkerson-sexton.

him up against the car, search his empty pants' pockets, and slap him up for their lost time" (73). In moments like these, *A Kind of Freedom* offers an essential revision to the well-worn adage that those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it. This unyielding repetition of anti-Black racism and violence, Sexton makes clear, is precisely what those who learn from history *must learn.* The choice of the novel's three historical settings further undermines the idea of neat historical progress, skipping over the civil rights era and the election of the first Black president entirely. Whereas Obama and his optimism are a kind of absent presence in the final chapters of *Homegoing,* in *A Kind of Freedom* they are played for sardonic irony. Speaking with Evelyn after getting out of jail, T. C. smiles while boasting that he "was able to vote for Obama." "That's it now though, huh?" Evelyn replies, marking the limits of that milestone which, in a novel published in 2017, rings somewhat hollow (92).

In a literary genre long partial to narratives of familial decline, *A Kind of Freedom* is made all the more heartrending by the perpetual belief—on the part of Sexton's characters and her readers—that things will get better. After Terry promises to get clean, Jackie wakes "with a new resolve . . . as if she'd been shown a reel from their future . . . and in it they were impenetrable to threat" (133). Later, when T. C. is pulled over by the police with a backpack full of marijuana, Sexton ends the tense episode on a cliffhanger, with "T. C. just wait[ing] for a miracle to kick in" (184). But in the end, T. C.'s and Jackie's lives are impenetrable only in their imaginations: Terry relapses and leaves; T. C. is sent away for three more years in prison.

In a kind of epilogue to the novel, Sexton returns one final time to winter 1945 and Renard's homecoming from service overseas. As Evelyn's father predicted, and as Renard himself had feared, his time in the military is marked by segregation, inequality, and even racist violence—a grim portent of what is to come and what, in the novel, has already occurred. The night before Evelyn and Renard's wedding, her parents give them a key to "a two-bedroom old shotgun house down the block . . . a perfect starter house" for the new couple; though, as readers are well aware, this also marks the start of their move from the Seventh Ward to FEMA trailers (225). The next day, Renard—with eyes "so hopeful, so impossibly hopeful"—slides a ring onto Evelyn's finger and Evelyn "squeals" with delight, imagining that "their lives lay out uncharted before them" (228). The dramatic irony in these final lines is nearly unbearable, as readers confront the irreconcilability of the couple's optimism and its inevitable ends. Sexton has described the "false sense of hope" that attends this moment, as well her desire to "demonstrate on a visceral level what it would feel like to be in the circumstances that inhibit my characters' lives."[51]

Throughout *A Kind of Freedom,* Sexton leverages the reader's expectation that narrative and political progress will travel together only to frustrate that expectation, evoking the very disappointment that plagues her characters. As if to emphasize these deflated hopes still further, even the novel's family tree structure withers over time: Evelyn, one of three children, gives birth to two daughters, Sybil and Jackie, whose only child, T. C., fathers a single son. Likewise, the novel's title holds out the possibility of "freedom," qualifies it, and ultimately ironizes it as the story unfolds: the phrase appears only once in the novel, as a disillusioned T. C. reflects from prison that "everybody knew it was better to adjust to the kind of freedom available on the inside" (211–12). Sexton's novel may be bleak at times, but it also offers a necessary corrective to the multigenerational family saga's narratives of incremental advancement. In this way, *A Kind of Freedom*

51 Marian Kaufman, "Interview with Margaret Wilkerson Sexton," *Bayou Magazine,* January 2018, bayoumagazine.org/interview-with-margaret-wilkerson-sexton/.

embodies what McCarthy has described as "the urgent appeal" of contemporary activists to reject the "racial politics that . . . reached its apogee in both the persona and policy offers of Obama's presidency": namely, the "rose-tinted conception of politics as the transactional but egalitarian rule of the demos by the best and the brightest"—a conception reified in Gyasi's rosy final chapters.[52]

If one of the family tree novel's chief pedagogical affordances is its ability to represent crucial moments of historical transition, then perhaps it is Sexton's disavowal of transition, her commitment to repetition, that accounts for the novel's ambivalent institutional reception. Though both *Homegoing* and *A Kind of Freedom* were nominated for and received several awards, Gyasi's multigenerational historical novel has been embraced far more by readers, book clubs, and educators. As of this writing, *Homegoing* has received more than forty times as many reviews on Goodreads as *A Kind of Freedom,* and more than fifty times as many ratings, one indicator of readership and readerly engagement.[53] According to Open Syllabus, *Homegoing* has appeared on more than 110 university syllabi, while *A Kind of Freedom* has been included only once (perhaps on mine).[54] This is likely also the result of the difference in the two novels' publishers—*Homegoing* was published by Big Five publishing giant Penguin Random House, *A Kind of Freedom* by the independent Counterpoint Press—and the vast disparity in their budgets for marketing and promotion. Yet that, too, points up which kinds of multigenerational sagas are seen as most marketable.

When a reviewer writes that "*A Kind of Freedom* challenges, illuminates, and inspires," it stresses the pedagogical mission that subtends so much of the canonization of historical fiction by minoritized writers.[55] Yet this program not only comes at the cost of engaging critically with the recent past as much as distant history, as in *Homegoing,* it also elevates readerly empathy as an end unto itself. As Driscoll makes clear, in the contemporary book club, "emotional engagement trumps social engagement" and books are positioned as "tools to transform the lives of readers, with the implicit promise that this will lead to social change."[56] On the other hand, in an essay titled "The Banality of Empathy," published in the *New York Review of Books,* Namwali Serpell argues that "empathy is, in a word, selfish." Despite its lofty intentions, "the idea that [readers] can and ought to use art to inhabit others, especially the marginalized" can all too easily lead to the "relishing of suffering by those who are safe from it" and become "an emotional palliative that distracts us from real inequities."[57]

These concerns are all the more acute in the case of multigenerational historical fiction, which, despite its deftness at chronicling historical injustice, frequently stops short of narrating

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52 Jesse McCarthy, "On Afropessimism," Los Angeles Review of Books, July 20, 2020, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/onafropessimism/.

53 As of February 2023, *Homegoing* had been rated nearly 292,000 times and reviewed more than 31,000 times; *A Kind of Freedom* had been rated 5,200 times and reviewed only 700 times. Though Gyasi's novel was published thirteen months before Sexton's, this is unlikely to account for the disparity. "Homegoing," Goodreads; "A Kind of Freedom," Goodreads.

54 "Open Syllabus Explorer," *Open Syllabus*.

55 Ann Mayhew, "The Canon: Books to Read in September," *The Riveter*, September 7, 2017.

56 Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 66.

57 Namwali Serpell, "The Banality of Empathy," *New York Review of Books*, March 2, 2019, www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/03/02/the-banality-of-empathy/.

Gyasi, too, has lamented that the work of so many minoritized writers is treated "as though it were a kind of medicine," prescribed after "the murders of black people [for] the subsequent 'listening and learning' of white people." Yaa Gyasi, "White People, Black Authors Are Not Your Medicine," *The Guardian*, March 20, 2021, www.theguardian.com/books/2021/mar/20/white-people-black-authors-are-not-your-medicine.

recent historical events. This is often the formal and indeed political limit of the genre. Looking over "the family tree of the Buddenbrooks [that] had been plotted out with parentheses, rubrics, and clearly ordered dates," little Hanno finds his own name "at the very end," and, "with great yet somehow thoughtless and mechanical care, he [draws] two neat, lovely horizontal lines across the bottom." When his irate father asks what he could have possibly been thinking, Hanno replies, "I thought . . . I thought . . . there wouldn't be anything more" (509–10). A century later, in another novel about the decline of a family, Evelyn asks, "That's it now though, huh?" But *A Kind of Freedom* succeeds in fictionalizing and historicizing 2010 as if it were as significant as 1986 or 1945. The multigenerational family saga pushes the form of the historical novel to its very limit, stretching its temporal boundaries so as to hold multiple centuries in their grasp. A