

Article

# Sexuality and Healing in the African Diaspora: A Transnational Approach to Toni Morrison and Gyasi

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**Abstract:** This article examines the literary production of two writers from the African diaspora, specifically African American Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008), and Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016), to explore their significance as counter-narratives that defy the “official” historiography of enslavement times in order to set the records straight, as it were. By highlighting these women writers’ project of resistance against normative definitions of black bodies, it is my contention that these works effectively mobilize notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Revisiting the harmful and denigrating legacy of stereotypical designation of enslaved women, these writers make significant political and literary interventions to facilitate the recovery, wholeness, and sanctity of the violated and abjected black body. In their attempt to counter ongoing processes of commodification, exploitation, fetishization, and sexualization, I argue that these writers chronicle new forms of identity and agency that promote individual and generational healing and care as forms of protest and resistance against toxic definitions of hegemonic gender and sexuality.

**Keywords:** sexuality; healing; African diaspora; Toni Morrison; Yaa Gyasi

## 1. Introduction

Since the slavery era, black people have increasingly become more vocal in their denunciation of the lingering effects of the historical appropriation and mistreatment of black bodies by the dominant ideology. By devising a “new politics of the black body”<sup>1</sup>, I argue that contemporary women writers of the African diaspora have especially contributed to destabilizing the hegemonic gaze by providing novel ways to represent black bodies and reclaim their right to sexual desire and pleasure. Indeed, drawing from African-based philosophies, they have been able to reconstitute, reconnect, and inhabit those black bodies as sites for self-enunciation, empowerment, and agency.

Thus, this essay intends to examine these women writers’ project of resistance against normative definitions of black bodies by highlighting their pluralistic representations, effectively mobilizing notions of race, gender, and sexuality. More importantly, their work explicitly articulates alternative forms of subject formation—both personal and collective—attuned to antihegemonic critical discourses on a transnational scale. Specifically, I would like to explore the literary production of two writers from the African diaspora, African American Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (Morrison 2008), and Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (Gyasi [2016] 2017). Their works offer powerful counter-narratives that defy the “official” historiography of enslavement times in order to set the records straight, as it were. It is my contention that these writers have made significant political and literary interventions to facilitate the recovery, wholeness, and sanctity of the violated and abjected black body, specifically the female black body. In their attempt to counter ongoing processes of

<sup>1</sup> I proposed this concept in my article “Black Female Bodies on (Dis)play: Commodification, Reembodiment and Healing” (Gallego 2016).

commodification, exploitation, fetishization, and sexualization, I contend that these writers chronicle new forms of identity and agency that promote individual and generational healing<sup>2</sup> and care as forms of protest and resistance against toxic definitions of hegemonic gender and sexuality.

As I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup>, the concept of healing proved essential in African philosophical systems. Particularly, healing played a significant role for enslaved Africans in order to remain whole and healthy despite the unspeakable atrocities they had to witness, both in Africa and in their forced displacement to the Americas. Indeed, their notion of healing helped them to care for their material and spiritual well-being at both an individual and collective level, enabling both self and communal care. This double dimension of healing, physical, and spiritual was concomitant with a holistic approach to the wellness of a person. As Mokgobi and Patton, among others, note, healing was and is intimately connected to religion/spirituality in African-based philosophies (Mokgobi 2014, p. 7; Patton 2015, p. 4). This is also reflected in Morrison's and Gyasi's novels, concretely in the diverse ways in which female characters make use of healing and care as both individual and communal coping mechanisms to overcome the extremely harsh circumstances they have to deal with in their everyday lives, ensuring both self and generational healing and care.

## 2. Individual and Generational Healing in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*

*There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity,  
no need for silence, no room for fear.  
We speak, we write, we do language.  
That is how civilizations heal.*

Toni Morrison, "No Place for Self-Pity. No Room for Fear" (Morrison 2015)

### 2.1. Reclaiming the Enslaved Female Body: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

Morrison's revisitation of slavery in her groundbreaking novel *A Mercy* (2008) is perhaps among her greatest contributions to the rewriting of American history, and subsequently of the workings of gender and racial categories. The author skillfully manages to present a historical account that predates racial slavery to draw attention to the forging of a female identity related to fundamental notions, such as humanity and motherhood, but also love and sexuality. The text reveals the patriarchal limitations and gender hierarchies to which these women are subjected, while simultaneously illuminating the resistance strategies deployed by them, both individually and collectively. I would argue that Morrison seems to intimate that a more robust "epistemology of resistance" (Medina 2013) needs to be activated at both individual and communal levels in order to pave the way for nurturing ways to envision gender and sexuality away from the patriarchal hold, and to promote strategies that can lead to self and generational healing.

To further develop Medina's proposal, this analysis will focus on how Morrison's novel helps to defy the racist and sexist hegemonic order by deconstructing notions of what it means to be an enslaved woman. On the one hand, in this text, Morrison rejects the dominant belief in enslaved people as non-human that started to be prevalent in the 17th century. So, racist dehumanization figures prominently, despite the fact that the novel is located in the period of pre-racial slavery, featuring Virginia as a microcosm of colonial America. As Tauney Banks explains, "During the first half of the seventeenth century notions of American *whiteness* and *race* were in their formative stage as were the notions of English subjecthood that greatly influenced American ideas about citizenship"

<sup>2</sup> In many contributions, I have encountered the notion of individual/collective, or even social healing, but I would like to place emphasis on how one generation of women takes care of the next one. For a social/national sense of healing, see, for instance, (Waterton et al. 2010).

<sup>3</sup> In "'Cultures of Healing': Spirituality, Interdependence and Resistance in the African Diaspora" (Gallego 2019).

(Banks 2015, p. 802; author's emphasis)<sup>4</sup>. I also contend that in her portrayal of the late-17th-century Virginia, Morrison is purposely writing to counteract what she herself calls the attempt to "romance slavery" (Morrison 2017, p. 1), precisely by showing how her enslaved characters try to remain human overcoming very adverse circumstances. Indeed, the author also addresses the manifold ways in which her female characters attempt to debunk that profoundly racist ideology.

Moreover, the novel also textualizes the fight against the sexual abuse enslaved women had to endure, focusing on "women's specific oppression(s) under slavery, which leaves them prey to all forms of sexual abuse and dysfunctional relations" (Armengol 2017, p. 481). As is well known, these forms included rape, sexual harassment, sexual violence, or "concubinage", as they were often kept as enslaved mistresses of their masters against their will<sup>5</sup>. Other common practices would comprise the so-called "fancy girls" that usually were mulatta women who would be "sold" in slave markets like that of New Orleans. All these practices indicate the processes of sexualization and racialization that enslaved women had to face, which marked them as sexually compelling, even reducing them just to their bodies, "expendable" bodies in bell hooks' coinage. Morrison terms these bodies as "slavebody" (Morrison 2019), which helps her to distinguish between slavery and racism as two distinct phenomena<sup>6</sup>. Enslaved bodies were exploited, commodified, and sexually violated, since "sexualized and racialized violence terror" was "endemic to the transatlantic slave trade" (Winters 2016, n.p.). Hence, enslaved women were deprived of any right to control or make use of their own bodies and, by extension, of any right to femininity and motherhood.

Thus, sexuality solely seemed to define and condition enslaved women's lives, as they were helpless victims that could not even resort to the ruling code of femininity of the time, the so-called "cult of true womanhood". As Barbara Welter famously puts it, "the attributes of True Womanhood by which a woman judged herself, and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (Welter 1966, p. 152). Hazel Carby in her groundbreaking contribution, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, brilliantly discusses the reasons why black women were systematically excluded from this racist and sexist code. Enslaved women could never be considered "true women", as they repeatedly failed the main requirement of purity dictated by that cult. Moreover, as Carby reminds readers, the fact that these women survived systemic rape unlike sentimental heroines was also used as a justification for their mistreatment and objectification as "Jezebels". Hence, black women were codified as deviant and dangerous, as hyper-sexual, because they radically departed from the socially sanctioned ideology of women's respectability. Many critics have studied the stereotypes that resulted from this racist and sexist conceptualization, such as Patricia Hill Collins in her classic *Black Sexual Politics* (Collins 2005) or Melissa Harris-Perry in *Sister Citizen* (Harris-Perry 2011).

Invalidating that horrendous legacy, Morrison's text deeply invests in questioning the racist and sexist legacy that perpetuated and normalized notions of black female promiscuity and their presumed sexual availability. As Dorothy Roberts rightly observes, the sexual exploitation of enslaved women was supported by a demeaning mythology based on "the dichotomy between the mythical Jezebel, which portrayed black female sexuality as inherently depraved, and the Mammy, which portrayed black female respectability as necessarily asexual", which she argues is "the source of the paradox of silence and display" about black female sexuality that continues to resonate nowadays (Roberts

<sup>4</sup> La Vinia Jennings also writes: "Race slavery was not an inherent ideology that was socially and psychologically in place at the founding of Jamestown but was instituted one law at a time during the second half of seventeenth-century colonial America" (Jennings 2009, p. 648).

<sup>5</sup> An exemplary case is described in Solomon Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave*, where Patsey is kept as his reluctant master's mistress while she has to undergo the psychological and physical abuse on the part of her mistress. As Northup notes: "It had fallen to her lot to be the slave of a licentious master and a jealous mistress. She shrank before the lustful eye of the one, and was in danger even of her life at the hands of the other, and between the two, she was indeed accursed" (Northup 2013, p. 123).

<sup>6</sup> Separating slavery from racism is one of the main preoccupations that guides the writing of *A Mercy*. As Morrison postulates: "The origins of slavery are not necessarily (or even ordinarily) racist" (Morrison 2019, p. 75).

2010, p. 42). The resulting imagery concerning their sexuality was that enslaved women would gladly engage in sexual intercourse due to their “natural” propensity to depravity. Hazel Carby accurately stated that the rape of black women was institutionalized in the slavery era bolstered by “patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting sexual attacks” (Carby 1987, p. 39), and consolidated the link between black women and “illicit sexuality” (p. 39)<sup>7</sup>. Not only rape, but all forms of sexual oppression and violence against enslaved women were then justified, clearly projecting the blame onto the victims, not the victimizers.

It is my contention that in *A Mercy*, Morrison offers a powerful counternarrative that eschews this oppressive racist and sexist ideology by enabling acts of defiance that destabilize the foundational myths on which this ideological apparatus is based. Especially relevant for the purposes of this analysis are two of the main characters in the novel: Florens’ mother and Florens. Both of them are portrayed as rebellious women that resist the dominant *status quo* and claim agentive roles in their attempts at effecting changes, which will mobilize notions of identity, gender, and sexuality.

The novel evolves around the “mercy” that Florens’ mother asks from Jacob Vaark, a Dutch trader and landowner, who visits a Portuguese Maryland planter D’Ortega to settle a debt. Despite Florens’ mother’s own traumatic experiences of continuous sexual abuse at the hands of the cruel D’Ortega, perhaps precisely instigated by those experiences, Florens’ mother is intent on saving her daughter from the hell she lives in. So, when Florens’ mother begs Vaark to take her daughter, her act of resistance speaks volumes about her understanding of her vulnerable position, but also about her willingness to stand for her daughter: “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (p. 24). Vaark cannot but register “the terror in her eyes” (p. 24), and promptly accepts Florens to comply with her mother’s wishes. Two scripts follow suit: While D’Ortega values her as “twenty pieces of eight” (p. 25), Vaark instead thinks he has been called “to rescue an unmoored, unwanted child” (p. 31). Reinstating Florens’ humanity is consequently a prerequisite to her mother’s claim for freedom and control over her mind and her body. Florens’ mother realizes she is powerless to change her own situation, but she still manages to invoke enough courage and dignity to search for an alternative life for her daughter.

Although Florens’ mother cannot shake the shackles of the sexual oppression that suffocates her, she deeply understands the plight of many enslaved women who unfortunately suffer from it, and does not want her daughter to be another victim of the enslaving system. In the final chapter, she explains her acute awareness of what was going to befall Florens: “But you wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor’s eyes” (p. 164). With this explanation, Florens’ mother aptly summarizes the ways in which the enslaving order mistreated slave women, making them fall prey to their masters’ sexual advances with total impunity. With their right to ownership over bodies and souls, slave owners like D’Ortega turned a deaf ear to enslaved women’s sheer agony while their victims bore the brunt of sexual exploitation and commodification. However, Florens’ mother rejects that her daughter becomes another “abject” body, using Kristeva’s useful conceptualization (Kristeva 1982). Although she has to submit herself to the seemingly endless sexual assaults perpetrated by D’Ortega<sup>8</sup>, she successfully saves her daughter from the traumatic results of the sexual violence she would have to face, in this case probably adding incest to D’Ortega’s sexual offence. By freeing her daughter from D’Ortega, Florens’ mother demonstrates her own freedom, or at least freedom of choice, and subsequently, the assertion of her agency and her subjecthood. Moreover, I consider her act as one clear example of her care for her daughter, which in turn involves a sense of generational healing. That is, Florens’ mother cannot change her own situation, but asserts her

<sup>7</sup> Treva Lindsey and Jessica Johnson state that “serial rape of enslaved women by slave owners/masters and forced sexual activity of all kinds, from breeding to coerced intimacy, was deeply embedded in the institutionalization of white supremacy and domination, and has become central to how we imagine the period of slavery” (Lindsey and Johnson 2014, pp. 172–73).

<sup>8</sup> As Cathy Covell Waegner reminds readers, the mother has been systematically abused by the master, and that is the reason behind “her willingness to put her daughter in the hands of a man who laughs rather than leers” (Waegner 2009, p. 93).

motherhood by rescuing the next generation represented by Florens. It is her who rescues Florens with Vaark's help.

Turning now to Florens, her evolution from childhood to womanhood also proves her passage from an enslaved to a free status. From the novel's inception, hints at her emerging sexuality are present in Florens' depiction, especially in her taste for shoes: "My mother, a *minha mae*, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild" (p. 2). As has been stated above, Florens' mother shows a sharp appreciation of the femininity codes that dictate that slave women are not to access dominant respectability standards, which indeed may turn perilous for them. Here, she seems to be echoing Harriet Jacobs's admonition about the "trials of girlhood" for slave women: "She will become prematurely knowing in evil things. Soon she will learn to tremble when she hears her master's footfall. She will be compelled to realize that she is no longer a child" (Jacobs [1861] 1987, p. 361). For both Florens' mother and Jacobs, womanhood becomes a really difficult and trying period, which Jacobs calls "a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl" (p. 361). The unquestionable fact of enslaved women's vulnerability and impotence is intimately tied up to the sexual predation to which many of them were subjected.

Counteracting this racist legacy built upon black women's imposed sexual availability for white men's consumption, the novel presents a love affair between Florens and the blacksmith, which actually chronicles Florens' initiation into sexual intercourse as something satisfactory and joyful, another intentional act of defiance on Morrison's part. Following Lindsey and Johnson's notion of the "possibility of sexual transactions, erotic sensations, intimate relationships [ . . . ] factored into resistance, survival and liberatory strategies" (Lindsey and Johnson 2014, p. 189), it is possible to complicate notions of sexual desire and fulfillment during the slavery era and beyond. Morrison evidently disrupts the conventional narrative of black women's sexual instrumentalization on the part of slaveholders by portraying this relationship with a free black man, which at least initially is depicted as a positive and healthy way for Florens to channel her sexuality. Florens' infatuation is obvious from the first time she sets eyes on him: "My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look how you move" (p. 35), and very quickly the sexual attraction is registered: "My mouth is open, my legs go softly and the heart is stretching to break" (p. 36). On the one hand, the detailed depiction of Florens' growing sexual desire marks a departure from sentimental narratives that practically erase female sexual desire, or view it as a taboo or a prohibited topic in the 17th century. Indeed, in these narratives, if women expressed any sexual desire or fell prey to sexual advances out of wedlock, they were to be severely punished. In this case, Florens is not blamed for having a satisfying sexual affair with the blacksmith.

On the other hand, Morrison also challenges preconceived notions of black female sexuality as "devious" or "abnormal". Jennifer Nash contends that, to counteract that legacy of deviance and alterity engendered by dominant racist representations and to facilitate resistance, recovery, and the performance of black women's wholeness, they need to "act as authors of their own images" (Nash 2014, p. 147). By conjuring and then negating the stereotypical designation of enslaved women as promiscuous or "loose beasts", Morrison pointedly rewrites the master narrative, replacing it by an account of emerging sexuality on the onset of puberty. I consider that in this novel, Morrison is intent on "making space for black women's pleasures", in alignment with Nash's "intervention into a long scholarly tradition of reciting the discursive absence of black women's pleasures" (Nash 2014, p. 148), and thus negating the pull of policing black female sexuality<sup>9</sup>. What the novel chronicles is a quite predictable black female teenager's incipient sexual pleasure, which thus conveys a powerful message of denunciation against all charges of licentiousness and promiscuity directed towards black

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<sup>9</sup> As a reaction against the legacy of slavery denigrating practices, many critics have tackled this tendency to de-emphasize and erase black women's sexual drives and desires, going from Hortense Spillers' concept of black women as "beached whales of the sexual universe", Evelyn Hammonds' "problematic of silence", or Evelyn Higginbotham's "politics of respectability", among others. See (Lee 2010, pp. viii–ix).

women. Moreover, I suggest that Florens' affair offers a (rather limited) model to express desire and deregulate black female sexuality, which is also an instrument of "insubordination against the politics of respectability" (Lee 2010, p. xii). At least initially, Florens is portrayed as a woman who freely decides to enjoy sex with an attractive young black man and does not feel in the least attracted by the surrounding white men<sup>10</sup>.

Although Lina, Florens' surrogate mother on Vaark's plantation, tries to warn Florens about the blacksmith, she clearly perceives that "there was an appetite in the girl that Lina recognized as once her own. A bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience. The young body speaking in its only language its sole reason for life on earth" (p. 58). For Florens, it is clear that her body is not hers anymore: "With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging" (p. 135). This reveals a problematic attitude in Florens, which in turn exemplifies one of the last statements issued by Florens' mother at the closing of the book: "To give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (p. 165). Florens' willing act of surrender can also recall Sethe's "too thick love"<sup>11</sup>, and is further regarded as one of the reasons why her love affair cannot continue because of its negative impact on Florens' life.

Florens' first encounter with the feeling of freedom is even hindered by her love for the blacksmith:

It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don't like it. I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you. (p. 68)

She narrates it as a choice between freedom and love, and she consciously chooses her lover as her "shaper" and her "world" (p. 69), which is the climatic point in the narration on a telling page. Then, she also regards him as her "home" (p. 113). But she is utterly wrong, as the novel further proves. Whereas the blacksmith is able to cure first Sorrow and then the mistress from smallpox using traditional healing powers, he is not willing to "save" her. In this case, healing does not seem to be working because there is no mutual love and respect. Florens thinks that the hosted boy Malaik is preferred over her, but the blacksmith makes it clear that the real problem is that she has become a slave to him, "a slave by choice": "own yourself, woman [ . . . ] you are nothing but wilderness" (p. 139). According to Markus Nehl, the tensions and subsequent conflict between Florens and the blacksmith reflect "the intricate relationship between a female captive and a free black man", but also "the specific vulnerability of enslaved women in seventeenth-century North America" (Nehl 2016, p. 67). Ultimately, it is not a celebratory love affair that can offer relief or healing, because of the complex race and gender hierarchies within the black community, which profoundly upset black-black relationships too.

Florens actually needs to own herself in order to free herself from her chosen slave status. And she seems to heal herself by the end of the novel, or at least that is what her final words suggest: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens [ . . . ] Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (p. 159). One of the most fascinating and innovative aspects of Morrison's neo-slave narratives like *A Mercy* is that she provides insights into "the interior lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants", which are conducive to "readings that challenge and subdue previously held, universally accepted [ . . . ] ideologically and politically irresistible assumptions" (Seward and Tally 2014, p. xvi). And this is essentially what Florens' and Florens' mother's stories demonstrate, as both of them struggle with socially sanctioned conceptions of enslaved women in order to highlight the possibilities of agency and self-ownership. In the face of the blunt denial of their subjecthood and reduction to their bodies, these

<sup>10</sup> Many Morrison's novels are deeply invested in articulating black-black sexual attraction, for instance, Consolata and Deacon's affair in *Paradise*. As Candice Jenkins writes, theirs is "a passion beyond the revisionary power of memory, beyond external control and linguistic translation," conjuring "a level of emotional and physical pleasure that supersedes social regulation" (Jenkins 2007, p. 143). I argue that Florens' affair may also be perceived along these lines.

<sup>11</sup> In most novels by Morrison, there is a recurrent interest in the investigation of the nature and limitations of love, as well as its (often devastating) consequences. This is what outstanding scholars Adrienne Lanier Seward and Justine Tally call "Morrison's abiding concern with the nature of love" (Seward and Tally 2014, p. xviii).

women are able to devise resistance and healing strategies that subvert the stereotypical designation their bodies and subjectivities are exposed to, making room for a “new politics of the black body”, which can accommodate other views about gender and sexuality. Eschewing the discursive absence of black female sexuality, this novel chronicles the story of a mother who helps to ensure generational continuity in a daughter, a free black woman who feels confident enough to reclaim the inviolability of her body and the wholeness of her identity.

## 2.2. *Yaa Gyasi's Homegoing: Sexuality Revisited for "Wenches" and Enslaved Women*

Gyasi's debut novel has been critically lauded from its publication in 2016<sup>12</sup>, becoming a landmark in the investigation of a multigenerational family saga that encompasses almost three centuries starting with Maame, an enslaved African woman, and continuing with her descendants across seven generations who dwell in three continents. Arguably, most studies on Gyasi's novel concentrate on the racial aspects of the novel<sup>13</sup>, but I would contend that sexuality is also a major component in the text. Mathem Shiferraw notes: “Gyasi explores the complexities of slavery and race relations in America while pondering small, intimate moments” (Shiferraw 2017, p. 6). Registering those “intimate moments”, the ensuing analysis specifically centers on the systemic sexual exploitation of the black female body, and the denigrating stereotypes associated with it and how this deeply affects their subject formation, aspects that were studied in *A Mercy*; but also seeks to unearth the healing strategies they develop in order to deal with the traumatic effects derived from that structural oppression and commodification. It is interesting to compare both novels, since *A Mercy* could even be seen as a precedent to *Homegoing* in many ways, especially regarding the exploration of the effects of slavery on enslaved women. As A. Boyton et al. (2017) rightly assert: “Gyasi chronicles the lasting legacy of slavery and the ways that the trauma of slavery have affected and continue to affect black women in America, bringing a uniquely humanistic perspective to her writing” (n.p.). In so doing, the authors grant voice to their otherwise silenced stories, articulating the suffering and victimization these women must have felt, revealing how “the sexual violence” was effectively “crucial to slavery's operations” in Lisa Ze Winters's words (Winters 2018, p. 339). I would add that Gyasi's text offers a much darker picture of the traumas for black women caused by enslavement, as her characters seem to have less possibilities to rebel against the unjust and inhuman treatment they are subjected to. However, as in *A Mercy*, there are some hints about their need to claim agency and subjecthood through certain acts of defiance and care that are going to be traced in the text.

As Clarence Reynolds writes, the novel evolves around the stories of the two sisters Effia and Esi, who “are two half sisters, who are unbeknownst to each other and live in two different worlds, but not quite: Effia is married off to a white man who is a slave trader; Esi is a slave imprisoned in the very castle where Effia lives” (Reynolds 2016, p. 58). Concretely, the novel is set in the Gold Coast, present-day Ghana, where British colonial troops began trading in slaves in 1562, and managed to acquire the monopoly of the slave trade: “At the peak of the slave trade from 1700 to 1808, when more slaves were transported to the New World than any other time, the English were the largest carriers, shipping more than a quarter of all enslaved Africans” (Abaka 2012, p. 230)<sup>14</sup>. Although, in theory, Effia's and Esi's stories are quite divergent, as the former is married to one of those English officers and the latter is a slave, I contend that both stories complement each other and illuminate the hideous beliefs and practices of sexual subjugation and objectification that African women had to experience

<sup>12</sup> The novel garnered different important prizes, such as the 2016 National Book Critic Circle John Leonard Prize, the 2017 PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Novel, and a 2017 American Book Award, among others.

<sup>13</sup> One excellent example is Ava Landry's “Black is Black is Black?: African Immigrant Acculturation in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*” (Landry 2018).

<sup>14</sup> I mentioned the strategic choice of this location as the setting for the novel in “The Liminal Black Body: Slavery and Healing in Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing*” (Gallego forthcoming).

regardless of their social position. But the interest also lies in bringing to the foreground the survival strategies employed by these women that could enable care and healing.

In the case of Effia, she is traded for “thirty pounds up front and twenty-five shillings a month in tradable goods” (2016, p. 15). Her presumed mother Baaba is actually thrilled at getting rid of her. In order to accomplish it, she starts spreading rumors about Effia’s evil nature: “She has the body of a woman, but something evil lurks in her spirit” (p. 15). Resorting to patriarchal notions of female bodies as polluted and abjected, Baaba also points at the conventional patriarchal link between women and evil. This clearly signals Baaba’s compromised position because she acts against her alleged daughter’s interests. Not till the end of the chapter are readers told that Baaba’s actions were motivated by revenge and resentment because of having been obliged to take care of a slave’s daughter. It is also interesting how Effia’s beauty is thrown against her as if it were an offence. Even being called “The Beauty” is to no avail to her. And she is finally sent off to the castle used as a slave prison to be married to Governor James Collins. As Edmund Abaka reckons, Cape Coast Castle was one of the most salient slave forts operated by the African Company of Merchants, especially in the 18th and beginning of the 19th century. These slave forts inspired a “model” for colonial administration (p. 232), where the slave trade with Africa took place<sup>15</sup>.

The narration of Effia’s life with her husband is fraught with contradictions and ambiguities, especially regarding polygamy and their sexual life. From the very beginning one issue to take into account is how polygamy does not seem to be a problem for James and, by extension, for any of the other soldiers at the fort who have “wives” while in the Gold Coast<sup>16</sup>. Indeed, the white men refer to them as “wenches, not wives” (p. 19). And even more surprising is the fact that Effia and James talk about his wife, so they normalize the situation. On the other hand, their sexual life is narrated as a complex and multifaceted reality. Their first sexual encounter is quite revealing, as she is the one who takes the initiative: “She was the one who laid her body down. She was the one who lifted her skirt” (p. 18), following what Baaba had explained to her. Knowing how Baaba held her in contempt, readers may wonder what kind of instructions she gave Effia, and how her sexual availability would have been interpreted by her husband. Or if that was precisely what he was expecting, conditioned by his Eurocentric misconceptions about black women commented earlier. What is obvious in this first encounter is that Effia’s perception about James’ lack of knowledge regarding sexual relationships is completely misguided, given that he is already married in England and has two children with his “official” wife. I would rather read his nervousness in approaching her as a sign of his misgivings about sexual intimacy with a black woman, once again dictated by the stereotypical images that populated European imagination about black women, as I have previously mentioned in the analysis of Morrison’s *A Mercy*. Interestingly enough, both novels share a similar timeline, at least in this chapter of Gyasi’s text. So, it can be argued that in a way, both books speak to each other by providing accounts on the two sides of the Atlantic, and how women devised similar healing and resistance strategies in order to survive and thrive.

Another complicated issue for them evolves around fertility and descendants. When James expresses his wish to have children, Effia worries that Baaba’s curse about her infertility may come true, so she uses roots that her friend Adwoa gives her with the following advice:

Tonight, you must be like an animal when he comes into the room. A lioness. She mates with her lion and he thinks the moment is about him when it is really about her, *her* children, *her* posterity. Her trick is to make him think that he is king of the bush, but what does a king matter? Really, she is king and queen and everything in between. (p. 21; author’s emphasis)

<sup>15</sup> Also discussed in “The Liminal Black Body: Slavery and Healing in Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing*” (Gallego forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> Probably, these marriages were not valid legally because of bigamy reasons, although most of them involved some kind of “formal” ceremony.

This passage may seem problematic at different levels: First, because it may invoke the troubling connection between black women and animality from an Eurocentric point of view. Secondly, because of the implicit sexual connotations that mark sexually active women as deviant from a sexist standpoint too. However, if the extract is read according to African-based parameters, Adwoa clearly appeals to positive representations of femininity and matrilineage, whereby African women claim their descendants and their prominent socio-cultural positions in African societies. In a way, this also represents an act of defiance against the sexist and racist established order, because these women are acting autonomously, following their own set of beliefs. Countering their powerless situation, these women feel empowered by the memory of their traditional beliefs to articulate another view about their important role as mothers and ancestors of future generations. Arguably, this alternative view can also be considered as a means for healing, both individually and communally, one more instance of generational healing.

Nevertheless, James' reaction when he discovers the roots is quite telling, as he expresses the irrational fears about black magic or voodoo and, by extension, about all Africans as inherently dark and dangerous. So, he even suspects his own wife. But those suspicions or apprehensions do not deter him from having sex with her or desiring children with her. Moreover, the story becomes particularly disturbing when one new "wench" named Eccoah articulates what most of them avoid even thinking about: How their husbands relate them to the "cargo" (p. 17) or the "beasts" (p. 25) in the dungeons. Eccoah narrates how her husband comes back from the dungeons and looks at her "like he has seen a million ghosts, and he cannot tell if I am one of them or not", she also adds that she tries to break the spell, telling him to wash before touching her, but "sometimes he pushes me to the floor and pushes into me like he has been possessed" (p. 24). This quote poignantly reveals the precarious situation in which these women live, who are allegedly wives, but literally treated like prostitutes, or even worse, compared to the enslaved women in the dungeons who are repeatedly regarded as animals or objects of sexual abuse.

At this point, Esi's story seems to fill in the gaps of Effia's by providing a look into those terrible dungeons, and the way in which enslaved women are stacked there one on top of the other, barely surviving severe conditions and all kinds of indignities. Especially painful is the description of how Esi, just turned 15, was raped by one of the soldiers: "His foot at the base of her neck so that she couldn't turn her head to breathe anything but the dust and detritus from the ground" (p. 30). This shows the violated and abjected body in the cruelest way, since Esi is just reduced to a body, actually just a body part seen as a hole<sup>17</sup>, which becomes one with all the dirt and waste that litter the floor. It also textualizes the way in which the white soldiers did not feel any scruples to use and abuse the enslaved women's bodies in the midst of that degrading and disgusting ambience. Being the ones that provoke that situation, these white men become even more abjected than their poor victims. Later in the narration, another soldier takes Esi to his room and rapes her. When he finishes, he is "horrified, disgusted with her", and Esi pointedly interprets this: "As though he were the one who had something taken from him. As though he were the one who had been violated [ . . . ] He looked at her like her body was his shame" (p. 48). This is once more another example of how the blame/shame are projected onto the victims, when it should be placed upon the victimizers. In addition, it also reveals how Esi is able to question that hegemonic racist and sexist order by feeling more human than her sexual predator, thus demonstrating her keen awareness of the need for self-healing and self-protection despite the horrid mistreatment and abuse.

And last but not least, the scene of the "checking" is even more monstrous. Governor James, Effia's husband, is the one who inspects the women's private parts without any hesitation nor remorse: "He ran his hands over their breasts and between their thighs" (p. 49). This terrible scene epitomizes even further these enslaved women's reduction to their sexual body parts, so it emblematically embodies

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<sup>17</sup> In that way, following the tendency of the white gaze "to mutilate black female bodies" (hooks 1992, p. 124).

their ultimate objectification and sexualization. They are only seen as “sexual merchandise” to be used, and then sold and made profit from. Moreover, it also stages the utmost abjection for James, as he is the one who is in control and does not feel any reluctance nor disgust at what he does to the powerless women. In a way, this scene speaks back to the one previously narrated by Eccoah, in which she voices the ignominy she feels at being penetrated by her husband. It also makes readers wonder about how James can then proclaim that he has a “Christian” marriage with Effia.

All these horrors of the slave trade substantiate the claim of these white men’s animality and abjected status while enslaved women unfortunately can be defined as “abject helplessness”. Gyasi’s narrative is notorious for the way in which stories are intertwined to provide a veritable account of what black women had to face in the slavery era. In the case of Effia and her sister Esi, their stories certainly register the manifold difficulties they had to suffer on a daily basis, either as a “wench” or an enslaved woman. Certainly, these women were not allowed space for many acts of defiance against the enslaving order, but their stories also register their resistance in the face of the horrific circumstances they lived in and the willingness to heal themselves and the future generations.

For instance, the novel mentions one symbolic act by Maame, Effia and Esi’s mother, who exhibited a rebellious spirit when she decided to escape her enslaved condition in Effia’s father’s household after Effia was born. Although she was obliged to search for her freedom, and could not mother Effia, she left some kind of legacy in a present for her: A black stone. As I mentioned earlier, at the end of the chapter when Effia is about to leave after her father’s death, she finds out that her mother had been a slave for a Fante family, and that she was raped by her master and had a child as a result. Her half-brother Fiifi eventually reveals the whole truth to her: “Our father had you by a house girl who ran away into the fire the night you were born. She is the one who left you that stone you wear around your neck” (p. 27). Before her marriage, Baaba had given her a black stone pendant stating: “A piece of your mother” (p. 16). The black stone emphasizes the love Maame felt for her daughter, but also indicates a strong woman who successfully fought against an unjust situation of enslavement and was able to break free and control her body and life from then onwards.

Significantly, Maame founded her own family and had another daughter, Esi, with whom she established a loving mother–daughter relationship. This can also be a clear signal that shows the way in which Maame is able to heal from her previous horrible experiences and lead a meaningful life together with her family. She makes the decision to remain silent about her troubling past till she and her daughter are about to be captured as slaves and is forced to reveal the truth to Esi while giving her another black stone: “I left one like this for your sister. I left it with Baaba after I set the fire” (p. 42). The black stone eventually becomes a symbol of the connection among the diverse generations of women in the novel. I would argue that the black stone also discloses their will to survive despite the very adverse circumstances they have to cope with on a daily basis, so it could be read as an indication of their care strategies and their legacy, ultimately another act of defiance and generational healing.

By granting voice and articulating these enslaved women’s experiences, Gyasi also provides a glimpse into “the interior lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants”, according to Seward and Tally that I already mentioned above (Seward and Tally 2014, p. xvi). Their difficult lives, either as “wenches” or enslaved women, also defy socially sanctioned conceptions of sexuality and gender by proclaiming their right to agency and self-ownership. Being repeatedly used and commodified, these women attempted to create self and communal healing strategies that also hint at a “new politics of the black body”, which denies their sexualization and racialization, and asserts their right to selfhood and self-control.

### 3. Conclusions

This article has explored two works from the African diaspora, namely African American Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (Morrison 2008), and Ghanaian-American Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (Gyasi [2016] 2017) in order to prove on the one hand, the need to rewrite the “official” historiography of enslavement times by revisiting the processes of exploitation, commodification, and sexualization that enslaved

women were subjected to. It is still necessary to revisit this traumatic past, to “rememory” it in Morrison’s coinage, in order to come to terms with it; on the other, these women writers’ project of resistance against normative definitions of black bodies, and concretely black female bodies, facilitates the recovery, wholeness, and sanctity of the violated and abjected black female body. In so doing, these writers claim new forms of subject formation, agency, and resistance that help to promote healing and self and communal care. Both Morrison and Gyasi are intent on depicting moments of rupture and challenge of the hegemonic status quo that allow for an alternative politics of healing that can connect individual rebellious and dignified women to their future generations.

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