Negotiating Race: Blackness and Whiteness in the Context of Homecoming to Ghana

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Abstract
This article aims to analyse the dynamics of the making and unmaking of racial identities by looking at the ways in which the issue of race is debated in the context of historical and more recent return movements of African Americans to Ghana. The discourse surrounding the return, or homecoming as it is commonly phrased, is determined by notions of an African family and Black kinship. In official rhetoric, race is represented as an irrefutable reality, and a shared racial identity appears as the key to the mutual understanding and common cause of Africans and African Americans. Going beyond this rhetoric, the author shows how the categories of Blackness and Whiteness, while being constructed as mutually exclusive, are rather flexible and constantly re-negotiated in the course of the homecoming practice. She argues that the entangled movements of diasporic return speak in profound ways of the complexity and ambivalence that are at the heart of processes of racialisation.

Keywords
race, Ghana, diaspora, homecoming, slave trade

Résumé
Cet article vise à analyser la dynamique de construction et de destruction des identités raciales en étudiant les voies par lesquelles la question de la race est débattue dans le contexte des mouvements

1) This article has been the outcome of many conversations, in Ghana and elsewhere. At this point, I would like to thank my African American interlocutors in Ghana for sharing their thoughts, especially the late Nana Okofo, Rabbi Kohain, Remel Moore, Kinamo Moyowazi Fza, Renée Neblett and Dr. Robert Lee. Different versions of the article have been discussed at the COMPAS Michaelmas Term Seminar ‘Racism and the New Immigration: Theories and Practices’ at the University of Oxford, the Anthropology Seminar Series at Brunel University, the African Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago as well as the Research Colloquium at the Martin-Luther-University Halle-Wittenberg. I want to thank the participants in these forums as well as the reviewers of ‘African Diaspora’ for their valuable comments.
historiques et plus récents des Afro-Américains au Ghana. Le discours entourant le retour, ou le retour au pays tel qu’il est généralement exprimé, est déterminé par les notions de la famille africaine et de la parenté noire. Dans la rhétorique officielle, la race est représentée comme une réalité irréfutable et l’identité raciale partagée apparaît comme la clef à la compréhension mutuelle et à la cause commune des Africains et des Afro-Américains. En allant au-delà de cette rhétorique, l’auteure montre que les catégories de noirceur et de blancheur, bien qu’étant construites comme mutuellement exclusives, sont plutôt flexibles et constamment renégociées au cours du retour au pays. Elle soutient que les mouvements enchevêtrés du retour de la diaspora parlent de façon profonde de la complexité et de l’ambivalence qui sont au cœur des processus de racialisation.

**Mots-clés**

Race, Ghana, diaspora, retour au pays, commerce d’esclaves

**Introduction**

In January 2007, almost ten years after the publication of its ‘Statement on ‘Race’” (AAA 1998), the American Anthropological Association launched its interactive website: ‘Race: Are We So Different?’ (AAA 2007) It offers a three-legged approach to the issue of race (now written without inverted commas) that encompasses the areas of History, Human Variation and Lived Experience. The website emphasises that there is no biological basis for the concept of ‘race,’ since genetic variation within one so-defined group is far greater than between different ‘races’ (cf. Lewontin 1972). It also makes clear that apart from biological classifications, ‘race’ has always carried social meaning, serving as justification for an ideology of inequality from the eighteenth century onwards.² Both the AAA statement and the new website vehemently reject the perpetuation of this ideology which equates so-called ‘group behaviour’ with ‘race.’ Present-day inequalities need to be viewed rather as a product of historical as well as contemporary social, economic, educational and political circumstances.

The question remains of how to deal analytically with those very circumstances that have moulded ‘race’ into such a powerful concept which still serves as the base for profound hierarchies of privilege and discrimination, but

²) Recently, the distinction between biological and social realities that is underlying the AAA-statement has been challenged by authors such as Peter Wade (2002) and Jenny Reardon (2005) who have analysed the effects of genomics on the conceptualisation of ‘race’ (see Koening, Soo-Jin Lee & Richardson 2008). For the purposes of this article, however, I find it useful to differentiate between the two spheres, as I aim to show how ‘race’ and racial classifications are being produced and negotiated in a specific socio-political context that does not necessarily rely on biological categorisations.
also, in resistance to such categorisations, for the positive self-ascription and political articulation of the so-defined. One suggestion has been to do away with ‘race’ once and for all. Thus, Robert Miles and Rodolfo D. Torres (1999) have argued with reference to theories of ‘race relations’ that the use of ‘race’ as an analytical concept would only help to reproduce the very biological categories that are to be criticised. It would therefore be obsolete, even dangerous. In a more far-reaching argument, Barbara J. Fields has maintained that ‘race’ should not be viewed as an idea which has developed ‘a life of its own,’ but rather as an ideology that is always contextually (re-)produced – not only in everyday life but also in academic discourse (1990: 116). Far from advocating ‘colour-blindness,’ she calls for the critical analysis of ‘race’ in relation to political economy and other aspects of social life. ‘Race’ then appears as a historically determined process and flexible practice.

In this article, I want to examine these dynamics of the making and unmaking of racial identities as I look at the ways in which the issue of ‘race’ is debated in the context of historical and more recent return movements of African Americans to Ghana. The discourse surrounding the return, or homecoming as it is commonly phrased, is determined by notions of Black kinship, clad in the image of an ‘African family.’ On the ground, it sometimes goes along with a very strong ‘anti-whitism’ (West 2001: 111) on the part of the returnees. In the official Afrocentric rhetoric that dominates the public discourse on homecoming (and which is common among Ghanaians and diasporans alike), ‘race’ appears as an irrefutable reality, and a shared racial identity is called upon as the key to the mutual understanding and common cause of Africans and African Americans.

I attempt to go beyond this rhetoric without discarding it as irrelevant. What I aim to do instead is to show the complexities of racialisation, as they become evident in the homecoming-process. This means that I am not going to delve very much into debates about racism. I will rather look at the ways in which racial categories are being produced and negotiated. This process, however, is linked to racism, since racism acts as a decisive force which

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3) It is important to keep in mind that while ‘people of colour’ are often defined in racialised terms, this does not hold true for ‘white people’, whose whiteness (as a historical and socio-political position) remains unmarked. For a critical approach to this issue, cf. Frankenber (1993), Rasmussen et al. (2001). For the notion of resistance, cf. Fields (1990), Baker (1994).

4) For a similar approach, see Gilroy (2000).

may powerfully determine the concrete shape of racial categorisations, especially in the case of African American perceptions of Blackness and Whiteness respectively.

First, I will provide some background information about the specific socio-political and historical frameworks in which my fieldwork took place. Then, I will go on to discuss two different levels on which ‘race’ is debated in the context of homecoming, namely in relation to differing conceptions of Blackness and Whiteness. I argue that the entangled movements of diasporic return speak in profound ways of the complexity and ambivalence that underlie the processes of racialisation.

Central to my analysis is the issue of situational positioning in the negotiation of ‘race.’ According to the particular constellation in which their interactions take place, people locate themselves differently on a continuum of belonging – from all-encompassing inclusiveness that builds on the notion of ‘race’ as phenotype to highly differentiated identities that make historically specific references to ‘race.’ Yet this emphasis on situational positioning should not only be understood in terms of arbitrary choice. It also implies that people are being positioned in terms of racial categories, which, again, may vary contextually.

Such a perspective helps to avoid any conclusion where the relationship(s) between the people involved in the homecoming-encounter would appear in terms of categorical oppositions, such as Black vs. White or African American vs. Ghanaian.\(^6\) It is an approach which must include a reflection on the position/positioning of the researcher; not so much from a moralising point of view (even though one should always pay attention to the ethical implications of one’s work), but even more so as a necessary step towards a better understanding of the dynamics of racialisation which are at work in homecoming.

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\(^6\) Some authors have tended to present the positions of African Americans and Ghanaians as diametrically opposed, cf. Hasty (2002), Kreamer (2006), Holsey (2004), Macgonagel (2006). For a more complex view, cf. Richards (2005). In her recently published monograph, Bayo Holsey (2008) argues in terms of a shared black subjectivity between Ghanaians and African Americans, opposing it to the forces of (white, European) capitalist hegemony. Yet she fails to investigate the tensions in racial classifications that are the focus of my article.
Homecoming to Ghana: Political Background and Research Situation

Homecoming has become a popular term to describe the spiritual and physical return of people from the African diaspora\(^7\) to the African continent.\(^8\) The idea of return has always been an important element of diasporan memory.\(^9\) It became a vital part of pan-African politics from the nineteenth century onward – one only needs to think of Edward Wilmot Blyden’s advocacy of the colonisation of Liberia (Blyden 1971) or Marcus Garvey’s rallying cry ‘Back to Africa’ (Garvey 1969). With the independence movements that swept the continent during the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of return took on new practical relevance. At that time Ghana, under the political leadership of Kwame Nkrumah, was perhaps the leading centre of pan-African activity worldwide. Despite the fact that the country gained full independence only in 1957, one year after Sudan, Morocco and Tunisia, it is still popularly known as the first independent African nation. This can be attributed to the fact that actual independence was preceded by a six-year period in which Nkrumah had already been acting as prime minister of the Gold Coast colony, after he had won the general elections of 1951 and had installed an all-African cabinet. Moreover, his strong advocacy of ‘Freedom Now’ had reverberated across the borders of the Gold Coast and West Africa, and therefore the eyes of the world were focused on Ghana as the pivot of the anti-colonial struggle.

Ghana continuously supported the liberation movements in other African countries, but Nkrumah also welcomed the active participation of people from the diaspora in the nation’s own affairs. Diasporan thinkers and activists like W.E.B. Du Bois from the United States, George Padmore from Trinidad or Ras Makonnen from Guyana were all part of the political elite of newly independent Ghana (cf. Gaines 2006).

Nkrumah not only stated that his own anti-colonial nationalism was inspired by the political vision of Marcus Garvey’s ‘Africa for the Africans’

\(^7\) When I refer to the African diaspora I mean its classical form that came as a result of coercion and enslavement and not such new African diasporas (cf. Koser 2003) that have been formed in the course of more recent migrations. Whenever I use the terms diasporan Africans or Africans from the diaspora, this is due to the self-ascription of the people whom I encountered. The designation African American(s) stands for Black people in the United States, who are the main addressees of contemporary calls for homecoming.

\(^8\) It is also apparent in other diaspora-contexts, cf. Markowitz & Stefansson (2004).

(Nkrumah 1957: 45), but he also employed the language of kinship and racial unity to encourage African Americans to support the Ghanaian government. For example, in 1958, Nkrumah gave a speech before a large audience in Harlem where he emphasised that ‘Africans and African Americans [are] held together by “bonds of blood and kinship” [and] “doctors and lawyers and engineers [should] come and help us build our country.”’ (Nkrumah, quot. in Walters, 1993: 98)

Quite a few African American and Caribbean activists followed the call to support the political and economic struggles of the newly founded nation. They got involved in all fields: politics, education, health and industries. Many of the people who came had been actively involved in the early Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Their individual motivations to abandon that place and to become part of a different struggle may have varied. Yet what is discernable from several accounts that are available on that period of history is a common desire to leave behind the racism and hypocrisy prevailing in the United States. Bill Sutherland, who had come to the Gold Coast as early as 1953, summarised his own motivation in clear terms: ‘For me to continually go to jail, get my head beaten in order to be a part of this [American way of life], I just felt that it simply wasn’t worth it.’ (interview in Dunbar 1968: 91)

Most of the diasporan expatriates, at least those whose history is known, came to Ghana to offer their help. In the spirit of Black Nationalism they wanted to contribute to the experiment of an independent African state; and they were devoted to making it a grand success – a model to which Black people everywhere could relate. In this political project, contemporary Africa, and not solely the achievements of a distant past, became the focal point of Black self-esteem. Yet the initial enthusiasm was not to last. It soon turned out that Ghanaians were often suspicious of the political intentions of the newcomers and that those who came also preferred to keep to themselves (cf. Skinner 1992). A shared racial identity (based on the historical bond of slavery) was by no means a guarantor for acceptance and therefore full integration into Ghanaian society remained an illusion (cf. Angelou 1991, Lacy 1970).

When Nkrumah was finally overthrown in a military coup in 1966, the pro-

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10 At first, he was involved in a school project, where he met his later wife, Efua Sutherland, the well-known Ghanaian dramatist. From 1957, he worked as the personal secretary to the Ghanaian Minister of Finance, Komla A. Gbedemah. In 1960, he gave up this post. When it was hard for him to find new employment in Ghana he left the country and eventually moved on to Tanganyika where he became an official at the Ministry of Information and Tourism. He still lived in Tanzania during the time of my fieldwork (personal communication with Bill Sutherland, 21/08/1999).
cess of intense co-operation between Ghana and the African diaspora came to a temporary halt.

It took almost thirty years before the African diaspora became once again an important factor in Ghanaian politics. After the Provisional National Defence Council (PDNC) under the military leadership of Flt.-Lt. Jerry John Rawlings took power in another coup in 1981, Nkrumah was rehabilitated step by step. For example, in 1991, a grand mausoleum and memorial park dedicated to his memory were inaugurated at the Old Polo Ground in Accra, the site where the declaration of independence had taken place on March 6, 1957, and Nkrumah’s remains were re-interred there. Even though the PNDC administration soon began to adopt a neoliberal economic agenda, it nevertheless made constant references to Nkrumah’s legacy in its cultural politics. After the democratic elections of 1992, this renaissance was given a new twist. The new pan-African rhetoric enabled the government\[11\] to join economic and political interests in its appeal to diasporan Africans to ‘come home and invest.’\[12\] Moreover, the newly developing tourism industry, in the hope of considerably increasing foreign exchange earnings, gave priority attention to African American visitors. Ghana’s historical relevance as the centre of early Pan-Africanism, its rich cultural heritage and last but not least its position as an important transit point during the transatlantic slave trade were all considered as ‘attractive’ features for a potential African American niche market.

In the wake of this gradual re-orientation towards (or re-interpretation of) Pan-Africanism, a variety of cultural programmes with a pan-African scope and agenda evolved, all of which are specifically addressing a diasporan audience. An example for this renewed attention is the institutionalisation of PANAFEST, a pan-African theatre festival which runs under the motto: ‘The Re-Emergence of African Civilization: Uniting the African Family’ (cf. Pierre & Shipley 2003). It was introduced in 1992, after the original proposal by Efua Sutherland had been ignored for about ten years. The fact that there was a ten year period of silence on the part of Ghanaian politicians is significant, since it indicates a discrepancy between the position of Ghanaian intellectuals (like Sutherland herself), who often share a deep pan-African conviction and

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\[11\] In many ways, the new government remained the old one. The PNDC was transformed into another party, the National Democratic Congress (NDC). J.J. Rawlings remained Head of State until 2000, when he stepped down and the oppositional National Patriotic Party (NPP) took over power and induced a shift in political direction.

\[12\] This call was even more effectively directed at Ghanaians living abroad; during the ‘Home-coming summit’ in the year 2001 the focus on their remittances was clad in the emotional language previously used in relation to African Americans.
that of Ghanaian state-officials, whose approach towards Pan-Africanism and the diaspora in general is far more pragmatic and economically orientated.

Another important event in this respect is the annual celebration of Emancipation Day, when the abolition of slavery in the British colonies is commemorated. When it was initially celebrated in 1998, running under the heading ‘Emancipation: Our Heritage – Our Strength,’ Ghana was the first African country to officially recognise this diasporan holiday in grand style (see Schramm 2004). On this occasion, two slave ancestors from Jamaica and the USA were re-buried in Ghanaian soil and the whole event was staged as an elaborate ritual. The return of the bones was represented (and perceived) as a sign that the diaspora had come full circle, that the journey had been completed – I will later show that this is not quite so.

As I have already indicated, one should not misconceive these events as a sign for a massive pan-African renaissance, since other political and economic orientations, for example towards the IMF or the recent HIPC-initiative, whose conditions for debt relief do not necessarily fit the pan-Africanist ideological framework, continue to function as major structuring factors of the Ghanaian political economy.13

Nevertheless, what is definitely noticeable is the fact that the idea of return has gained new weight in the course of the 1990s and continues to do so. Apart from the aforementioned considerations of the tourism industry, the shift to democratic rule and Ghana’s relative political stability in comparison with her neighbouring countries (Liberia in particular, which long used to be a point of orientation for African Americans) must be taken into account as important factors in this development. Consequently, over the past fifteen years, an ever-increasing number of people from the diaspora (mainly from the United States, but also from the Caribbean and Britain) have come to Ghana either on a visiting basis or in order to actually settle. The discourse on homecoming that evolves out of this new influx of people is dominated by an emotional language that speaks of family, roots and racial solidarity, as was already discernible in the aforementioned mottoes of the two festivals.

After the presidential elections in 2000, the new NPP government under President John A. Kufuor continued to reach out to the diaspora. Again, most of the activities take place under the auspices of the Ministry of Tourism, now

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13) HIPC = Heavily Indebted Poor Countries. The initiative is co-sponsored by the IMF and the World Bank. It connects debt-relief to the commitment to economic and political reforms on the part of the receiving countries and operates very much in a neoliberal framework, cutting down state expenses and aiming at privatisation and market liberalisation.
renamed the Ministry of Tourism and Diasporan Affairs. In addition (some say in competition) to the already existing activities, a new programme has been developed, the so-called ‘Joseph Project,’ which aims to ‘bring together, more closely, people in Ghana and brothers and sisters in the Diaspora and establish [Ghana] as the true gateway to the Homeland for Africans in the Diaspora’ (www.ghanatourism.gov.gh/main/advertdetail.asp?id=1; download 12/10/05). The project links the establishment of pilgrimage centres at former slave sites with the affirmation of African spiritual strength and resilience. It also appeals very explicitly to African Americans to come and invest in their homeland in order to make it prosper. In contrast to the time of independence, the call for investments is now framed in the neo-liberal ideology of global capitalism, with privatisation as a major imperative. This strategy, which is pursued by the NPP government, can be seen as a direct continuation of the earlier NDC policy from the 1990s onward. The interest in the diaspora (or rather, perhaps, in its resources) on the part of political decision makers thus cuts across the lines of particular party alliances.

What is striking is the fact that this entire policy appears to be directed at diasporans alone, or, to be more precise, at those who come as tourists/pilgrims and spend a considerable amount of money. If they should opt for settlement, they ought to be highly skilled and with a sound financial background. This governmental strategy not only excludes the vast majority of Black people in the diaspora, but also pushes Ghanaians to the background of events. They are mainly to be involved in the role of hosts to cater for the needs of diasporan visitors, and not so much as active partners in a pan-African project.

Nevertheless, it can be said that expectations are high on all sides. Therefore, it is not only the advertising brochures of the tourism industry that speak about the fundamental unity of Black people in form of kinship ties that ought to be rekindled. African American returnees also apply the metaphor of homecoming in various contexts. To many of them, the journey to Africa indeed resembles a pilgrimage that is linked to the memory of the slave trade and the original dispersal of African people. The large number of slave forts and castles along the Ghanaian coast, which served as transit points in the slave trade, are key assets in this diasporan memory.

14) In addition to the prominent coastal fortifications, the project includes slave sites in the Northern part of the country. Many of those are closely associated with the indigenous slave trade, but they are nevertheless incorporated into a transatlantic interpretative framework. Cf. Schramm (2008, 2008a).
The official discourse on homecoming firmly denies any differentiations within the imagined Black community. Moreover, the emphasis on Black solidarity and racial unity often goes along with a very strict rejection of White people on the part of diasporan activists such as Minister Louis Farrakhan, the leader of the Nation of Islam, or Dr. Leonard Jeffries, a highly controversial Afrocentric scholar. Both of them have been regular visitors to Ghana, where they have always been welcomed by high-ranking government delegations as well as by traditional authorities. In their radical rhetoric, which they have articulated again and again during Panafest and other occasions, Whites (and Jews in particular) are held collectively responsible for the slave trade and ongoing racial discrimination and are portrayed as ‘the enemy.’ Dr. Jeffries and others like him proclaim a strict racial essentialism. In his writings (see Jeffries 1991), Africans (synonymous with Blacks) are referred to as the ‘sun people’: noble, harmonious, concerned about the common good. In contrast, Europeans (or Whites) are called the ‘ice people’: evil, aggressive and individualistic. Such manichaeist classification along racial lines is difficult to sustain if one looks at the actual practice of homecoming in Ghana and pays particular attention to the ways in which ‘race’ and belonging are constantly debated among Ghanaians and diasporans. This intercourse is neither characterised by uniformity nor by a strict dichotomy, rather it is ambiguity which appears as its main feature.

This ambiguity concerns all actors, obviously including myself. As a White person, I was directly addressed by the issues that are being negotiated in the field. People positioned me in different ways, yet always with a consideration of my social and historical ‘Whiteness’ – which is related to phenotype, but by no means reduced to it (see Schramm 2005a).

I now want to examine these dynamics of racialisation further by looking at the ways in which Blackness and Whiteness are being constructed in the context of homecoming.

**Debating Race: Perceptions of Blackness and Whiteness**

*Claiming the Right to Return*

Seestah Imahlkiüs Njinga Okofo is one of the pioneers of the recent wave of diasporan immigration to Ghana. Together with her husband, the late Nana Okofo, she came to settle in Ghana as early as 1991. In her book *Returning Home Ain’t Easy, But It Sure Is a Blessing* (Okofo 1999), she recalls how their
desire to repatriate was formed and how they translated it into practice. In great detail she describes her initial experiences in Ghana, from the joys of meeting people in the villages to the difficulties they encountered with authorities, fraudulent building contractors or the general living conditions. Apart from these ‘guidelines to successful repatriation,’ the central motifs of the book concern the importance of the history of the slave trade to the contemporary identity of diasporan Africans on the one hand and the realisation of a long sought-after Black existence outside the realm of White hegemony on the other.

Those two elements are brought together in a special commemorative service at Cape Coast Castle that she and her husband Nana Okofo together with a few other colleagues, all recent repatriates, have designed for interested groups and individuals. It is entitled: ‘Thru the Door of No Return – the Return.’ This programme differs considerably from the tour which is offered by the regular guides in the castle. This official tour has been the outcome of a collaborative effort by the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board and the Smithsonian Institute, which holds the monopoly on museum presentation in the United States and is regarded as a ‘White institution’ by proponents of an Afrocentric ideology. The official tour narrates the story of Cape Coast Castle under the headline ‘Crossroads of People, Crossroads of Trade,’ thereby emphasising the multiple functions of the castle as well as the positive aspects of mutual exchange in European-African encounters (see Kreamer 2006). Such a ‘neutral representation’ has caused quite a big stir among many (though not all) visitors from the diaspora as well as a few concerned Ghanaian intellectuals, who feel that it detracts from the fact that the history of the castle was above all a history of suffering. In contrast to the official tour, the Afrocentric programme of the Okofos focuses solely on the slave trade and the necessity of cathartic healing. When I asked Nana Okofo about his motivation for this programme, he said:

One day when I came out of the . . . male dungeon, I looked across the courtyard and saw the door. The spirit said, create something that will take the children who are coming home through that door where hundreds of millions of our ancestors went through and never knew what was happening to them, where they were going – I mean you’ve got a guy who is cutting his cassava and the next thing he finds himself down in this hell-hole (...) going through an experience that no one can explain. (...) So the ‘Door of No Return – The Return’ is a process to take us through that experience as much as possible, and try to assimilate the feelings of our ancestors. And to go through that door and outside and give testimony and then returning through that door again, signifying to the ancestors that they didn’t kill us all out there (…).
Then he addressed me more directly:

At the time that we have ‘The Door’ if you would be there, our statement would go out that when we go down in the dungeons we ask those who are not of that experience to give us that moment. We’ve been called racists; we hate the White man. I don’t hate the White man . . . but I want us to honestly recognise our involvement and our experience in this encounter. So when we go down in the dungeons we ask those who are not of African descent to give us that moment. Because when we were down there, there was no one down there but us. We had to lean on one another, we had to answer one another’s question, we had to support. (interview, 05/09/1999, p. 11; my emphasis)

Through his narration he reconstructs Black commonality as a singular subject position which encompasses victimhood as well as victory. It stands in stark opposition to that of White people as perpetrators and main profiteers of the slave trade. He points out the fact that contemporary racial positioning, especially in the United States, comes as a result of an experience of racism that is closely connected to the institution of chattel slavery and the establishment of an ideology of White supremacy. With the abolition of slavery, ruling Whites were interested in sustaining their economic and political power, and racist discrimination was an effective means of keeping the large population of freed black slaves at bay. The existing inequality that resulted from slavery was underpinned with and maintained through a strong ideology of inferiority that became closely interlinked with ‘race’ (Fields 1990: 105).

The restoration and reaffirmation of Black humanity that is asserted in the ritual re-enactment of enslavement and liberation during the performance ‘Through the Door of No Return – the Return’ is thus addressing Black people in general, no matter their being descendants of enslaved people or not. Because, according to the Okofos, following the logic of racism as it is still at work in the United States (and elsewhere), every Black person is potentially affected by the consequences of slavery and therefore in need of healing as it is provided by the ceremony.

Yet to Nana Okofo and the co-organisers of the ceremony, such healing also refers to a necessary re-appropriation of the African cultural heritage. This dimension of Black identity implies a second understanding of ‘race,’ namely one that assumes that different ‘races’ have an intrinsic cultural make-up and share a common cultural sensibility which is inaccessible to others. In this representation, history as a force that continually shapes human experience – and is, of course, also shaped by human action and practice – is cut out from

the conceptualisation of ‘race.’ Instead, there is the idea of an essential bond of blood, or, in the terms of modern Afrocentric rhetoric, of melanin, that is at the heart of Black cultural expression (cf. Young 2000). Returning Africans from the diaspora, so it is ideally assumed, can immediately connect with a singular African culture that has remained largely intact since the time that their forefathers were dispersed. This perception goes along with demands for citizenship rights, that Nana Okofo formulated as follows: ‘…we are not coming home to find our roots, we are coming…to claim our inheritance. Because when I was taken from here, I must have had something, I had a family, I had a village, I had land…so this is an inheritance here that we have come to claim.’ (interview, op. cit.)

**Ghanaian Objections**

There are quite a few problems arising from such claims in the context of homecoming. These are connected to three broad themes: first, the troubles surrounding the memory of slavery in local African societies; second, the upholding of national sovereignty and control on the part of the Ghanaian state; and third, the importance of other social and economic differentiations outside the domain of ‘race.’

If African Americans seem to be preoccupied with the history of slavery (at least when they come to Ghana), the majority of Ghanaians, on the other hand, treat the slave trade and slavery as taboo topics. However, the fact that there is little public debate outside the framework of heritage tourism does not mean that there is no knowledge about the slave trade or slavery among Africans. Slave raiding and trading went on over a long period, supplying the trans-Saharan, transatlantic and indigenous slave systems. African communities and individuals were involved in various ways – as conquerors and traders as well as victims, with fuzzy boundaries between those categories (see Holsey 2008). The eventful history of war and conquest on Ghanaian soil does not allow for a clear-cut division between masters and slaves comparable to Western plantation slavery. Nevertheless, some communities, especially in the Northern part of the country, were more affected than others (see Der 1998) – slave supplies from this area were fed into the trans-Saharan as well as the inner-African slave economy. The latter did not lead to segregation in the same way as chattel slavery did. It rather involved the incorporation of slaves into systems of kinship, where they often occupied lower ranks but were nevertheless regarded as part of the family. Up till today, such slave ancestry is associated with shame and therefore not publicly announced (Akyeampong 2001).
Yet it still surfaces whenever land or chieftaincy disputes arise which involve descendants of former slaves. In customary law, such persons are not entitled to hold offices because they cannot claim a proper relationship with the ancestors and thus violate the spiritual aspects of chieftaincy (interview Nana Kwamina Ansah, Paramount Chief Eguafo, then President of the Central Regional House of Chiefs, 12/04/2006).

Whereas today, on the back of the Black Power movement, many African Americans do see their history as ascendancy from slavery and associate it with pride and dignity, in Ghana, slave descent still carries a certain stigma that cuts across the categories of ‘family,’ ‘nation’ (i.e. Ghanaianess) or ‘race’ (i.e. Blackness). Given the extremely conflictive nature of these issues, the ‘family reunion’ with the ‘brothers and sisters from the diaspora’ that is officially proclaimed is not that easy to achieve. Demands as they were put forth by Nana Okofo on the basis of his slave descent are thus met with scepticism or outward rejection by a majority of Ghanaians.

Now I come to the second problem: what about the position of the Ghanaian state towards the issues that were raised by Nana Okofo? How does its commitment to homecoming look if one leaves the sphere of heritage tourism? Politicians such as the former president Jerry John Rawlings or the former NPP Minister of Tourism, Jake Obetsebi-Lamptey, have repeatedly called upon African Americans to ‘come home and invest.’ In exchange, promises have been made to smooth the progress of return by offering a ‘right of abode’ to African descendents that should eventually lead to a law guaranteeing dual citizenship to all Black people in the diaspora who wish to repatriate. In practice, however, the Bill for the Right of Abode applies more to former Ghanaian nationals who have lost their citizenship in the process of their naturalisation in Europe or America. The conditions under which a person is entitled

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16) Based on her own journey to Ghana, Saidiya Hartman (2007) explores the different conceptions of slavery in Ghana and the United States (contrasting the idiom of kinship with the idiom of race) and the consequences of these for the present-day encounter between Ghanaians and African Americans.

17) Ghanaian chiefs have also allocated land as well as titles, such as nkosohene (or development chief) to people from the diaspora. Yet such titles mainly serve as an enticement for investments on a community level and they do not have much influence on local decision making. Moreover they are also given to White people, a fact that has been resisted by many diasporans. Cf. Schramm 2005.

18) As part of the Joseph Project, a so-called ‘diasporan visa’ was under discussion, which would allow people from the diaspora to enter Ghana without a tourist visa. So far, it has not been put in place.

19) According to Elizabeth Adjei, Director of the Ghana Immigration Service, thousands of
to the right of abode are hard to match for those people in the diaspora who actually desire to return. Thus, the law entails a clause that the applicant needs to have lived in Ghana for at least seven years without interruption – how do you achieve that if your status is always insecure? How do you relate to your family and friends back in the States or elsewhere? It is also stated that the person who applies must be of ‘good character,’ that is, without a police record. Again, this makes it particularly difficult for political activists, such as former members of the Black Panther Party, who have spent years and years in prison for their convictions. It is also considered unfair by African Americans, given the racial screening of the US legal system, where a large percentage of Black males land in prison, even for minor offences. So how did this contradiction between rhetoric and practice in Ghanaian state policy come about?

Demands for dual citizenship have long been on the agenda of diasporan advocates for repatriation. Since present-day national borders in Africa are mostly the result of arbitrary colonial divisions, they are not recognised in a radical pan-African political ideology. Yet they argue, even if those borders have to be accepted, it should be made easier for diasporans to cross them without a visa. Moreover, dual citizenship would also legally manifest the symbolic recognition of diasporans as Africans. To account for this link between identity politics and citizenship, Fran Markowitz et al. (2003) have come up with the term ‘soul citizenship,’ which is not only appropriate in the case of the community of Black Hebrews in Israel, but also fitting in the Ghanaian context.20

However, the emphasis on dual citizenship goes beyond identity claims to the pragmatism of the management of economic and political resources. It leaves an ‘escape route’ to America in case of political upheaval or the failure of individual business ventures and thus privileges diasporans in comparison with their Ghanaian counterparts. Ghanaian authorities are extremely careful to avoid any such impression. They also place high value on national sovereignty and great efforts are made to ensure national cohesion, for example through a long-established cultural politics of ‘unity in diversity.’ This concept, though acknowledging the arbitrariness of colonial boundaries and the historicity of the political entity that is called Ghana today, is nevertheless firmly based on the assumption of the close correlation between nation, blood

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20) Interestingly, quite a few repatriates in Ghana, as well as some Ghanaians, do belong to this religious group which claims descent from the original Jews.
and territory – the Ghanaian citizenship law is consequently founded on the principle of *ius sanguinis*. National belonging is negotiated along very subtle lines of inclusion and exclusion. On the one hand, ‘race’ is indeed a major factor in the conceptualisation of Ghanaianness, as the exclusion of the Lebanese from Ghanaian citizenry shows (Akyeampong 2006). On the other hand, this idea of a racially based cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997, cf. Chalfin 2008) or racial authenticity does not overshadow the strong emphasis on autochthony that does not stretch out to other nationals – be they Black or White. Here, racialisation works only in one direction – it provides a means of exclusion in relation to non-Blacks, yet does serve as an all-encompassing instrument of inclusion for all people of the same ‘race.’

When diasporans in Ghana express a racial and cultural fundamentalism that makes them appear ‘more African than the Africans,’ this attitude is consequently often perceived as arrogant and inappropriate by Ghanaians. At the same time, the radical pan-Africanist agenda of many repatriates is not practical in an age dominated by the neo-liberal politics of global capitalism, to which the Ghanaian state has become firmly attached. The antagonism towards Whites, as expressed by groups such as the Nation of Islam (who speak of Whites as the ‘blue-eyed devils,’ perpetual slave masters who cannot, as one person told me in reaction to my request for an interview, ‘be a soldier in the Black army’), is not shared by Ghanaian economists and business people who aim at large-scale co-operation with European and American companies and governments.

Those concerns aside, people also cited the negative example of Liberia, where the African American oligarchy was, from the very inception of the colony, oppressing the local African population. This historical experience often served as an explanation for the denial of full citizenship rights to diasporans on the part of my Ghanaian interlocutors. In fact, the Ghanaian state reserves the right to decide who is allowed to stay in Ghana or not. I have heard of quite a few cases of African Americans being deported because they got into trouble with Ghanaians or were too critical of the government. Since

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22) For example, the Afrikan (sic) World Reparations and Repatriation Truth Commission (AWRRCTC), which comprises mainly of diasporan returnees in Ghana, has put up the demand of 777 trillion US-Dollars per annum as reparations for the damages caused by the transatlantic slave trade.
23) Similar considerations may be at work in relation to the Lebanese, whose political position in Ghana today cannot be disentangled from their close ties with the British administration during the colonial period (Akyeampong 2006: 300).
a large number of repatriates enter the country on a tourist visa and just stay on, their status is extremely insecure. They are considered illegal ‘aliens’ in the terminology of the Ghana Immigration Service.

This leads me to the third problem: Ghanaians (be they ordinary citizens or in charge of government) are always well aware of differences, such as those of class and origin, between themselves and diasporans. In popular understanding, African Americans in particular are perceived to be well-off. Just like other Westerners, they are called ‘obroni.’ In Ghana, walking down the street, especially in rural settings, can turn into quite a hassle; with children surrounding you crying ‘obroni, obroni’ and asking for money or addresses. ‘Obroni’ is usually translated as ‘White person,’ a fact that is extremely distressing to people who have come to Ghana to escape from White rule and to fulfil their aspirations of an African (meaning Black) identity. In order to avoid such conflicts, the Ministry of Tourism has started an educational campaign among Ghanaians who are urged to replace the controversial phrase with ‘Akwaaba Anyemi’: Welcome brother or sister. This artificial expression joins together two languages, Twi and Ga, in an effort to provide a comforting sense of Black kinship to diasporan visitors. People, however, are reluctant to apply it and continue to use ‘obroni.’ Despite its seeming insensitivity to diasporan concerns, the application of this term to African Americans also shows that ordinary Ghanaians do not put the same emphasis on racial commonality as their diasporan counterparts. Especially those who have not travelled to Europe or the United States find it hard to imagine the difficulties of Black existence there. To them, to call somebody ‘obroni’ or ‘White’ is not an insult, but rather carries positive connotations. For example, it is a sign of affection, as Ghanaian lovers may also call each other ‘obroni.’ This positive association is even harder to understand or accept for some African Americans, who view it as a sign of colonial mentality. One of my interview partners, herself African American, who had been living in Ghana since the early 1990s, explained:

Ghanaians get on much better with White people than with African Americans. And that is because they don’t feel that identity search or problem. When a Ghanaian looks into the mirror, he sees a Ghanaian, not a ‘Black guy,’ with all the implications involved in that self-perception. In America… you are always referred to in racialised categories. And so when African Americans come here and see that Ghanaians do not share their attitude, they think

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24) Commonality is rather achieved outside the symbolic realm of ‘race,’ e.g. in the sphere of charismatic Christianity. The ‘Joseph Project,’ in connection with which the term ‘Akwaaba Anyemi’ was coined, can also be seen as an attempt to exploit this popular linkage, cf. Schramm (2008). For an explicit reference to ‘Pentecostal Pan-Africanism’ in the International Central Gospel Church of Ghanaian Pastor Mensah Otabil, see van Dijk (2004).
they are all Uncle Tom. But Ghanaians have no idea what they are talking about because they are not on that search.

Contextualising Racial Essentialism

Let me now come back to the interview passage in which Nana Okofo referred to the shared Black experience which found its expression in the ceremony ‘Thru the Door of No Return – the Return.’ He had specifically excluded ‘people who are not of African descent’ from his vision of racial cohesion, thereby incorporating Ghanaians.

In contrast, his wife Imahküs takes a slightly different approach in her afo-recited book. She describes the importance of the return to her ‘ancestral homeland’ in a similar vein as Nana Okofo. Yet she continues: ‘Ironically, every Ghanaian we spoke with wanted to go to the United States. We were coming and they wanted to go. We were like ships in the night, passing each other unseeing and uncaring.’ (1999: 17)

This ‘uncaring’ and distant encounter stands in sharp contrast to the positive connotations of the ‘African family’ as they dominate the official rhetoric on all sides. Here, the context in which those two opinions have been voiced is particularly important. Imahküs Okofo’s book is mainly aimed at a diasporan audience. It is advertised on websites such as www.rastafarionline.com or www.rootzreggae.com where issues of repatriation and reparations are debated on a regular basis. Such debates take place in a familiar setting and serve as an exchange forum for people who share the desire to return to Africa. They necessarily take up the difficulties that are involved in the process, since they focus on the practical aspects of homecoming.

In contrast, Nana Okofo addressed me as a White researcher. There was no need for him to go into detail about Black diversity or antagonisms, because he considered it to be none of my business. Instead, he gave me a broad outline of the issues that were at stake for him in homecoming. Through his reference to my Whiteness (as a specific historical position with strong reverberations in the present) I was forced to see myself as part of the research process, by no means as a neutral observer. As I have said before, people reacted differently to my Whiteness, but nobody ignored it. My understanding of homecoming results in great part from this multiple positioning. The ensuing multi-perspective representation is far from coherent, but rather full of ambivalence. Yet to me, it is this ambivalence which makes homecoming a dynamic enterprise, of relevance beyond the immediate return.
Conclusion

Homecoming involves many actors: African American tourists, regular visitors and settlers; Ghanaian chiefs, intellectuals, state authorities and ordinary citizens. Together, they produce a powerful rhetoric of Black kinship and shared racial identity. The apparent essentialism underlying these assumptions dissolves once the homecoming practice shifts to the centre of interest. Then, the heterogeneity of subject positions in relation to ‘race’ and racialisation becomes evident. In the everyday encounter between Ghanaians and African Americans, the racial ideology that is articulated in Afrocentric discourse is hard to maintain, as other factors such as class, religion, socialisation, historical experience or immigration laws interfere. Whereas people like Leonard Jeffries who only come on short-term visits to Ghana, may maintain a radical racial stance that is inclusive of all Africans even beyond his public speeches, this option hardly exists for those people like the Okofos who have decided to repatriate and need to navigate their status on a daily basis. Racial essentialism is thus contextually produced; it is the outcome of complex entanglements – and so is the notion of diasporic belonging.

Homecoming does not necessarily lead to a resolution of the state of diaspora, as it may be hoped for by the returnees themselves (be they tourists or repatriates). The return movement rather signifies the constant interplay of multiple diasporic affiliations. For many of the people who decide to return, the slave trade and the Middle Passage continue to function as central points of reference. The healing that is supposedly realised in the journey is a partial one: it cannot lead to complete wholeness in the sense of an essential African identity. History remains a haunting presence that needs to be continuously addressed, and this is done in different ways by returnees as compared to Ghanaians. As a result, repatriates often find themselves as an African American diaspora in Africa, because their shared memories of the ‘original’ diaspora across the Atlantic (now to be considered as another elsewhere onto which to project emotional as well as political attachments) form a vital part of their collective identity in Ghana. Moreover, the encounter of African Americans and Ghanaians entails confrontations about citizenship and sovereignty which are linked to relations of power in a global framework. It is not only a matter of an identity quest, but also relates to concrete political claims and decision-making. ‘Race’ plays an important role in these processes, not in terms of a pre-established and unalterable fact, but rather as a shifting category that is constantly negotiated among the protagonists of homecoming.
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