

## Guilt, Shame, and the Generative Queer in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013) and shows how Selasi, by challenging conventional modes of storytelling, creates narrative spaces for characters that queer traditional formations of subjectivity, most prominently by emancipating them from the repressive forms of affect of guilt and shame.

**KEYWORDS:** Taiye Selasi; Queer; Affect; Gender; Transnational Literature

### Introduction

In her TED talk "Don't Ask Me Where I'm From, Ask Me Where I'm Local" (2014), Taiye Selasi complicates normative and traditional understandings of belonging, origin, and home: "Nike is multinational. I'm a human being. ... I'm not multinational, I'm not a national at all. ... How can a human being come from a concept?" (Selasi 2014, 00:01:15–00:01:51). In addition to sketching out exclusionary forces that come with the ideas of nations and nation state, she speaks about the concept of Afropolitanism<sup>1</sup>, which, in her understanding, resists the logic of the nation state (00:03:26) and "privileges culture over country" (00:03:31). In her talk Selasi proposes to organize questions of belonging and origin around the "three 'R's': rituals, relationships, restrictions" (00:06:44). These three steps are designed to locate notions of origin according to experience. Selasi's proposal clearly works against normative "logics of location, movement, and identification" (Halberstam 1) since they neglect more traditional questions and answers regarding places of origin such as nationality or home country. In addition to Halberstam's note on queer temporality and place, Jasbir K. Puar's concept of

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'Afropolitan' and 'Afropolitanism' have been coined by Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi. In his text on Afropolitanism, which appeared in Njami Simon's *African Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent* (2005), Mbembe denotes Afropolitanism as a "cultural, historical and aesthetic sensitivity" (28) that captures the many dimensions and facets of belonging, and ways of embracing the intricacies of remoteness and closeness, of familiar and unfamiliar. Selasi elaborates on the concept of the 'Afropolitan' in her essay "Bye-Bye Babar" (2003). Here she defines the Afropolitan as an allegory for a new, hip, global generation of African descent that cannot be defined by their African roots alone, but rather by the blend of cultures, localities and identities: "Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel home at many. [...] We are Afropolitans: not citizens, but Africans of the world" (2003, n. pag.) Black bloggers and activists have voiced critique of Mbembe's and Selasi's concepts by pointing out neo-liberal tendencies furthering a logic of consumerism, fashion and lifestyle "as part of the Afropolitan assemblage" (Dabiri 2014, n. pag.). I will include a more in-depth discussion regarding the concept and its ties to contemporary activist endeavors in a chapter of my dissertation.

“queer assemblages” provides another queer link to Selasi’s observation as “an assemblage [that] is more attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency” (520). Selasi’s skepticism vis-à-vis the logic of ‘a national’ also corresponds to Roderick Ferguson’s definition of a queer of color critique, which “interrogates social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices” (Ferguson 2).

Caroline F. Levander’s approach concerning the locality of American literature, which she discusses in her monograph *Where is American Literature?* (2013), corresponds to the theoretical and conceptual remarks by Selasi, Puar, and Ferguson. Levander takes the question of *what* American literature is as her point of departure when she argues that the boundaries of localities inside and outside contemporary literary texts have been complicated due to an ever-growing globalization and digitalization of the (literary) world. She contends that in addition to asking the *what*, it is necessary to figure out the *where*: “Rather than endeavoring to assess what counts as American literature or determine who is or is not in the club, the following chapters consider *where* American literature can be found” (4, my emphasis). Her suggestion to focus on “endpoints and audiences as well as origins and authors” (5) speaks to Selasi’s proposal to focus more on sites of experience rather than on places defined by a nation. In my view, Selasi’s proposal regarding notions of belonging and identity speaks to questions and concepts developed in discourses of literary studies and a queer of color critique. As I will show in this article, Selasi’s discomfort with normative categorizations also permeates her literary writing. Her novel *Ghana Must Go*, published in 2013, is a family novel which depicts the lives of six family members who, as immigrants in the United States, are exposed to experiences of difference, alienation, and reunion. However, these experiences are not merely generated along the lines of state, country, and society, but also play out within the family and each individual character.

In what follows, I want to examine how Selasi’s quest for new forms of identity and belonging relates to literature and narratology by investigating literary forms that question traditional and normative modes of storytelling and character formation. In order to do so, I focus specifically on dimensions of queerness, affect, and narration in my discussion of

conceptions of identity and agency. As I will discuss in more detail later on, the fact that there is “no entity, no identity to queer” (Puar 520) and “no pure or somehow originary state for affect” (Gregg and Seigworth 1), makes a conjoined usage of queerness and affect intriguing for literary close readings.

In my analysis, I distinguish between ‘affect’ and ‘emotion’ and in so doing I draw on the work of Lisa Feldmann Barrett and James A. Russell. They write: “[Core] affect [refers to] the most elementary consciously accessible affective feelings ... that need not be directed at anything. ... Although core affect is not necessarily consciously directed at anything ... it can become directed, as when it is part of a prototypical emotional episode” (806). Emotions, moreover, are “a complex set of interrelated subevents concerned with a specific object” (806). Thus, the emotion directed at a specific object can then be expressed in terms of feelings.

My understanding of queerness relates to realms of the political, the social, and the sexual. I relate my theoretical framework to a queer of color critique, as most prominently developed by Roderick Ferguson. I especially draw on Nadia Ellis’s remarks on queerness, which she generally interprets as a “positive affective orientation” (Ellis 5). I am particularly interested in the potentialities, the “new forms” and “figures” (3) that are generated through queerness’s disruptive potential, and in how these forms correspond to new emotional frameworks. While Ellis’s work *Territories of the Soul* (2015) aims at emphasizing the “structural relationship between queerness and diaspora” (5), hence taking into account notions of geography, location, belonging, and “elsewhere” (2), I am interested in examining and discussing the conjunctions between queerness, affect, and agency in contemporary literary texts by authors of color.

Taiye Selasi’s novel tells the story of the Sai family, of Kweku and Fola Sai and their four children Olu, Kehinde, Taiwo, and Sadie. Kweku and Fola migrate to the United States in the 1970s to fulfill their ‘American Dream’ and to escape the hard, impoverished living conditions in Ghana (Kweku) and Nigeria (Fola) with a scholarship for medical training at university. The primary social environment in Taiye Selasi’s novel is the family. Selasi tells a success story of an immigrant family whose members represent in a boon-and-bane manner the spirit of achievement and success: “*A Successful Family*, with the six of them involved in

the effort, all, striving for the common goal, as yet unreached” (Selasi 123, original emphasis). The story depicts the characters’ struggle concerning alienation and being ‘Other,’ a struggle that plays out along the lines of being immigrants and being Black in a *white*, neoliberal society. But even more so, it sheds light on processes of estrangement and assimilation and how they permeate the structures of the family. The text thereby highlights the complexity, multiplicity, and ubiquity of forms of exclusion and constraints on the level of community, family, and the individual. Selasi’s characters represent the intersecting struggles that ensue from living in a “national culture [that] constitutes itself against subjects of color” (Ferguson 3), while at the same time trying to come to terms with “home as a site of contradictory demands and conditions” (Reddy 357). As one structuring and stabilizing strategy against external and internal complexities, Selasi’s text time and again introduces identity roles that serve as a default for each character to find their place and responsibility in their family:

There was ‘him,’ [father] straining daily to perform the Provider, and Fola’s star as Suburban Housewife, and Olu’s as fastidious-cum-favored First Son; and the Artist, gifted, awkward; and the Baby. Then she [Taiwo]. Determined to deliver a flawless performance, to fly from the stage chased by thunderous applause, Darling Daughter of champions, elementary school standout, the brightest of pupils in bright-eyed class pictures. (Selasi 123)

The tensions among the family members arise from these assigned roles and responsibilities and lie in the disappointment of having failed them. In my reading, identity roles and performances as depicted in the novel adhere to hegemonic heteropatriarchal imaginaries that suggest stability and closure. Regulatory frameworks of affect, specifically feelings of shame and guilt, are complicit in maintaining these hegemonic structures. However, as I want to show, the narrative in Selasi’s work simultaneously complicates and disrupts constraining emotional frameworks, identity categories, and notions of stability.

In this article, I focus on the relationship between the father figure Kweku, the ‘Provider,’ and his second son, Kehinde, who is an ‘Artist, gifted, awkward’. At first sight, their conflict seems to depict a struggle between two clashing generations. On closer examination, however, it is their different capabilities to react to internal and external change, pressure, and negative experiences that lay the ground for their disconnection: while Kweku perpetuates heteronormative gendered roles that grant him social approval and prevent him

from experiencing shame and guilt, his son Kehinde learns to emancipate himself from heteronormative frameworks of shame and guilt by disclosing parts of himself through art and therapy. Relating this observation to queerness, I assign to Kehinde a mode of generative queerness, as he dismantles and disrupts fixed identity roles and generates alternative forms of subjectivity. I read his character as an example of Ellis's call for "new forms" and "figures" (3) that in queer moments of transition offer glimpses at subjectivities that disidentify from racial, gendered, or sexual roles and performances. As I will show, the contrast between the characters is further emphasized through different narrative forms.

To that aim, I will sketch out a theoretical framework that incorporates approaches from both queer and affect theories in order to discuss conjunctions of subjectivity and agency. In a second step, I will discuss aspects of temporality and spatial structure, which I read as queer because they dismantle chronological ways of story-telling. In the last two sections, I will offer close readings of the two characters Kweku and Kehinde Sai. As already mentioned, I read Kweku as heteronormative, due to his obsession with maintaining fixed identity roles, while the text represents Kehinde as a queer character who dismantles the emotional torpor of his father.

### **Queer(ing) Affects**

The experience of leaving, loss, and distance is central for the characters in Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go*. As critic Nell Freudenberger notes, "Selasi suggests that the enormous psychic strain of emigration might take its toll ... producing a kind of torpor" (Freudenberger n. pag.). To this I add that feelings of shame and guilt, as "primary negative affects" (Ahmed 2004, 103), play a major role in creating and maintaining this torpor. With regard to my literary analysis, I am particularly interested in the feelings of shame and guilt. Both function as "emotional moral barometers, providing immediate and salient feedback on our social and moral acceptability" (Tangney et al. 346).

In her work *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, and Performativity* (2003), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduces her understanding of shame and guilt by relating these emotional states to the individual as well as to the social. She distinguishes between shame and guilt,

whereby the former “attaches to and sharpens the sense of what one is” while the latter “attaches to what one does” (37)<sup>2</sup>. Sedgwick writes:

Shame is ... often considered the affect that most defines the space wherein a sense of self will develop. Which I take to mean, not at all that it is the place where identity is most securely attached to essence, but rather that it is a place where the *question* of identity arises most originally and most relationally. (37, original emphasis)

Sedgwick’s understanding of affect as specifically located in identity forming processes ties into my use and idea of queerness, which, too, lingers where identity is most questionable and unstable — and therefore bears the greatest potential to generate new aspects.

Relating the idea of ‘new aspects’ and of generative dynamics inherent to queerness to a more general discourse in the field of queer theory, I follow a more optimistic approach along the lines of José Esteban Muñoz’s work, and distance myself from the associations of queerness with the “embodiment of the antisocial” (Edelman 470), “negativity” (471), or “death drive” (474), which we can find, for example, in the work of Lee Edelman (2007). Following Edelman’s idea that queerness’s disruptive power toward the “heteronormative social dispensation” (470), I want to elaborate on Muñoz’s acknowledgment of queerness as the “warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (Muñoz 1). I argue that Muñoz’s vision of queer ‘potentiality’ allows for a “generative logic” of subject formation as discussed by Lois McNay in her introductory remarks to *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (2000). This logic considers forms of agency and “unexplained capabilities of individuals to respond to difference in a ... more creative fashion” (3). McNay follows a trajectory that emphasizes the possibilities and potentials concerning subjectivity rather than highlighting constraints or impossibilities.

Regarding intersections between queerness and affect, I draw on Gregg and Seigworth’s description of affect as being “born in *in-between-ness* and [residing] in accumulative *beside-ness*” (Gregg and Seigworth 2, original emphasis). The vague spatial capacity of affect hints at a logic of non-traceability, and, like queerness, of its refusal to be intelligible, identifiable. Further, Gregg and Seigworth see affect as “in many ways synonymous with *force* or *forces*

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<sup>2</sup> To create a clear-cut binary of action and being is of course debatable and contestable. Yet, for the sake of showing the different effects on processes concerning subject formations, matters of agency, and the power of thoughts rather than the power of drives, it is useful to make this distinction.

*of encounter*” (2, original emphasis), conforming to Edelman’s remarks on queerness. I see the striking difference between queerness and affect in their capacity and urge for belonging and relating: “Affect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters or; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters but also, in *non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities” (2, original emphasis). Queerness, I claim, does not aim at belonging but — through its disrupting forces — very much creates spaces and moments in which notions of belonging and relating are enabled. Thus, queerness is the force that affect necessitates to realize its own force to belong and not-belong, and to reside in the offs and in-betweens of being.

With respect to feelings of shame and guilt, it is queerness that allows for the emancipation from these negative regulatory frameworks, to un-belong, to disidentify, and to generate new emotional forms of relating and affinity. Relating to Ferguson, a queer of color critique allows to identify and dismantle “odd bedfellows” (3) that perpetuate *white* heteronormative structures of oppression<sup>3</sup>. In my reading of Selasi’s novel, I see moral emotions of shame and guilt as potentially complicit to these structures and will show how characters, through a mode which I call ‘generative queerness,’ generate ways of experiencing more productive or constructive feelings such as anger or rage, hope and enthusiasm.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the readings offered in this article, I will primarily focus on scenes in which notions of gender and sexuality are foregrounded. Bearing in mind that they can never be thought and read isolated from intersecting and assembling dynamics of other social variables such as race, class, and religion, I want to point out that I will provide readings in which these assemblages are given more space in another chapter of my dissertation.

<sup>4</sup> Anger is often relegated to negative, paralyzing affects. In her work *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Sara Ahmed states with respect to the political impact of affects to “feel a sense of empowerment, rather than anger or sadness” (Ahmed 2004, 21). Yet, when later elaborating on feminist activism and affect, Ahmed relates anger to hope and states: “Hope is crucial to the act of protest: hope is what allows us to feel that what angers us is not inevitable, even if transformation can sometimes feel impossible” (184). It is in the emancipatory vein of the work of Black feminists such as Audreya Lorde that I read anger as an energetic affect that, when generated in a hopeful moment, can be highly productive and effective for emancipatory processes: “my anger and your attendant fears, perhaps, are the spotlights that can be used for your growth in the same way I have had to use learning to express anger for my growth” (Lorde 1997, 278).

## A Generative Narrative

The events depicted in *Ghana Must Go* develop like a drop of ink on wet paper, an ever-ongoing complication of family ties, relations, love, and disappointments. The family novel is organized into three parts: “Part I: Gone,” “Part II: Going,” “Part III: Go,” and many enumerated subchapters that do not necessarily further an organized and guided reading experience but leave the impression of being arbitrarily composed.

In the first part of the book, Kweku Sai’s death serves as the point of departure for the plot, which then develops along the events of his children learning of their father’s death, their reaction to it, their thoughts, memories, and complicated feelings arising from this news. The second part, “Going,” still hinges on the aftermath of Kweku’s death but it also focuses in more detail on the careers, love lives, relationships, and struggles of the four siblings. The third part, “Go,” predominantly focuses on the family members’ reunion in Ghana for Kweku’s funeral as well as on their timid approaches to restore familiarity, trust, and affinity among themselves and in relationship to their past. It is not the mere loss of the father but, rather, a wave of considerations and struggles concerning each individual’s position within the family and towards one another as well as the concomitant roles and expectations that spur the plot’s complexity.

From the very beginning, the reader learns that the original constellation of the family (two parents, four children), has been broken up and that the individual family members live geographically and emotionally apart from one another, as is emphasized by daughter Sadie’s thoughts: “they are weightless, the Sais, scattered fivesome, a family without gravity, completely unbound” (Selasi 146). Taiye Selasi creates a narrative that suggests comfort and security while eradicating the desired security in the same moment by contrasting the lengths of sentences, shifting lines, and changing the narrator’s perspective. Additionally, memories and flashbacks spur the unsettling narrative construction of the novel. The anachronistic order in which the story is narrated includes situations of recollection and memory that complicate the intelligibility of events. While the story spans roughly 45 years, the focus shifts from scenes in the past, in which Kweku is depicted as a child, to events taking place in the story’s narrated present. The emotional impact of a certain event,



conversation or utterance can only be fully comprehended pages later when the motivation or reason for the preceding event is revealed.

It is this formal setup which queers the reading process through its refusal to provide linearity and cohesion. In line with the work of Judith Halberstam, who proposes a “concept of queer time” (6) in her book *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), I argue that Selasi’s use of temporality in her literary writing needs to be understood as queer. By developing her story not according to a coherent logic of space and time, Selasi creates a narrative that follows “nonnormative logics and organizations of ... activity in space and time” (Halberstam 6). Her story does not develop along the lines of one event that then serves as nodal point for hegemonic meaning-making processes and that ultimately impacts the interpretation of succeeding incidents. Rather, the storyline creates notions of simultaneity and complexity that alter the significance and meaning of the event. It thereby shows aspects of queerness “as dissenting, resistant, and alternative ... it underscores the contingency and complicity with dominant formations” (Puar 516). Kweku’s death scene resonates with Puar’s notion of an underscoring dominating formations of storytelling: “Kweku dies barefoot on a Sunday before sunrise, his slippers by the doorway to the bedroom like dogs” (Selasi 3). While the story unfolds from this scene, the narrative of the book’s first part keeps coming back to this moment (Selasi 9, 21, 37, 46, 62, 86, 89), shedding light on different aspects of Kweku’s last minutes before entering his garden and of the moment of his final collapse. As the reader learns about the conditions he in which he grew up, how he started and left his family, lead his life, and struggled with the decisions that he made, the perceived meaning of his death alters from that of a sad, tragic event, to that of a release from the strains and torpors built on feelings of guilt and shame. The fact that the story never ends with his death but, rather, keeps on taking off to elaborate on another character’s perspective on this incident, underlines the emotional hardship Kweku caused and experienced at the same time — hardship that in his lifetime would never leave him but which was repeatedly echoed to him through his ex-wife and children. The looping narrative pattern not only increases the perceived emotional and psychological impact on the characters but also creates an intriguing reading experience as well. In search of order, linearity, familiar patterns, and closure, the reader is challenged to start anew and to never be fully released from the impact of Kweku’s death. I read the narrator’s refusal to provide

linearity as a form of resisting normative forms of identifying the ‘ultimate meaning’ of Kweku’s death, and thereby as queer narrating mode.

*Ghana Must Go* not only unsettles notions of death and family but it also disrupts aspects of gender identity and sexuality. Throughout the novel, Taiye Selasi’s narrative strategies emphasize Kweku’s aim to perform gendered identity roles that represent an alleged essential notion of masculinity: “And with a boy-child on top of it, a luckier-Moses. A father and a doctor. As promised. A success” (Selasi 52). The all-encompassing terms ‘father’ and ‘doctor’ insinuate both for the characters in the novel and for the reader that there is a common, even essential understanding of what ‘father’ and ‘doctor’ are. Whatever the roles of father and doctor entail, Kweku delivered them, ‘as promised’: He convincingly performs these identity roles and urges to perform these alleged self-contained identities that represent stability and closure. In so doing, Kweku seeks to avoid disruption, and, hence, queerness.

By inserting short, determinant sentences that disrupt and destabilize, the narrative itself challenges moments in the text that aim for finiteness, closure, and essence. Long, poetic, narrating passages that develop an almost Woolfian stream-of-consciousness mode suggest a comfortable, flowing framework of storytelling. Yet these narrations are then disrupted by indented short lines that Selasi includes, especially when focalizing on one specific character:

He imagined this moment every day in Pennsylvania, how his cameraman would film it, panning up to her face. Cue strings. Tears in mother’s eyes. Wonder, joy, amazement. The awe of the siblings. The jubilation. Cue drums. Then the dancing and feasting, fish grilled, a goat slaughtered, red sparks from the fire leaping for joy in the sky, a black sky thick with stars, the ocean roaring contentedly. The reunion a bridge, her fulfillment the brick.

This is how he planned it.

But this isn’t how it happened.

By the time he returned she was gone. (Selasi 52–53)

The form of the first part of the passage suggests continuity, which is then interrupted, taking the reader out of the narrative flow. By contrasting the indented, short lines with the preceding long lines, the weight of their content is elevated and intensified: The impact of what was *not* realized, of what was *lost* and *failed* is emphasized through the concise form, and thus becomes almost sensually perceptible for the reader.

The change of text lines is also underlined by a changing narrative situation; the shift from free indirect speech back to the narrator's discourse stresses notions of rupture and discontinuity in the text. It further affirms Kweku's powerlessness by formally shutting down his voice and by having someone else (the narrator) speak for and about him. The switch of focalizer and narrative mode throughout the novel not only adds to an unsettling reading experience but also further emphasizes the limitations of the agency of individual characters.

### **Guilty Subjects Make Normative Characters**

Apart from indented lines and disrupted reading flows, it is the dynamic between characters that emphasizes notions of unsettlement, disruption, failure, and shame. The character of Kweku imagines a cameraman to constantly film him: "that silent-invisible cameraman who stole away beside him ... Quietly filming his life. Or the life of the Man Who He Wishes to Be and Who He Left to Become" (Selasi 3–4). In my reading, the figure of Kweku's imagined cameraman functions as a heteronormative 'moral barometer,' providing gendered guidelines for an appropriate behavior that prevent him from experiencing shame and guilt.

In the following scene, we see in more detail how the cameraman, Kweku's performance of masculinity, and strong emotions are intertwined. Kweku's and Fola's fourth child is born as a premature baby. Fola assigns Kweku, as a doctor, with all responsibility to save the baby, regardless of the fact that he is a heart surgeon and has little experience in saving babies. The pressure to succeed, the threat to fail, and the perspective of feeling guilty and ashamed, frames Kweku's appearance in this scene:

He went to the waiting room.

Olu looked up. ...

"Watch your brother and sister. I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?"

"To check on the baby."

"Can I come with you?" ...

"Come on then."

They walked down the hospital hallway in silence. His cameraman walked backward in front of them. In this scene: a Well-Respected Doctor goes striding down the hallway to save his unsavable daughter. A Western. He wished he had a weapon Little six-shooter, silver. Two. Something with more shine than a Hopkins M.D. [...]

Presently, Olu. "What is it?"

End scene.

“Nothing.” Kweku chuckled. “Just tired, that’s all.” (Selasi 14)

The scene represents the simultaneity of Kweku’s experiences of this situation, showing the beginning and the end of the imagined shooting scene while walking down the hall with Olu. Changes in the mode of narration offer another interesting reading: The passage consists of direct speech, in the form of dialogue between Kweku and Olu. Selasi only rarely includes passages of direct speech or dialogue in her novel. The above scene suggests a sense of closeness between the two, since Kweku directly engages with his son verbally. The form of the dialogue also allows for the reader to witness the characters’ engagement with one another. It is the form of the dialogue, rather than the content of the conversation, which creates an intimate moment between father and son. However, this moment is interrupted by a scene in which Kweku imagines being filmed by the cameraman. The narrative in that situation changes into free indirect discourse, displaying Kweku’s perception and processing of the imagined shooting scene. This formal shift breaks with the intimacy or closeness that the dialogue has established. The lines read like stage directions, including a note regarding the end of the scene, which highlights the performative frame of this scene. The narrative underlines Kweku’s inability to endure closeness. In order to uphold some kind of self-defense, he leaves the direct contact and migrates into his interior world, which is represented by the free indirect speech. It leaves the impression of Kweku not being in control of himself, implying, rather, that as soon as circumstances become too overbearing for him, he transposes authority over his agency to the cameraman.

As indicated above, I read the figure of the cameraman as representative of the Butlerian “compulsory regime” of heteronormativity (Butler 313), that is, as a regulator that puts a gendered lens on Kweku’s actions and on his behavior. In the scene quoted above, Kweku’s performance aims to display the cowboy — the “iconic image of US masculinity” (Arosteguy 117). Kweku performs the role according to the myth “of the great, strong, powerful man” (119) that aligns to “fantastical constructions of masculinity” (118)<sup>5</sup>. With this performance

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<sup>5</sup> In her article “‘It was all a hard, fast ride that ended in the mud’: Deconstructing the Myth of the Cowboy in Annie Proulx’s *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*,” Katie Arosteguy analyses the construction of the figure of the cowboy. According to her, the “mythic American cowboy” (118) is constructed as *white* and masculine, feeding into the creation of an American national identity. In my reading here, the notion

he stages himself in a gendered role, which is socially verified and grants him characteristics that will spare him from failing and, consequently, from feelings of guilt and shame. Notions of visibility and concealment are, of course, central for any performance, and they are also connected to shame, since, as Sara Ahmed reminds us “[it] feels like an exposure ... but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn away from the other and towards itself” (Ahmed 2004, 103). The presence of the cameraman causes and at the same time enables Kweku to perform identity roles that allow him to be *seen* as somebody who does not need to fear the consequence of shame.

As Christopher Forth points out, “the performance of gender is also prone to failures, lapses and refusals” (Forth 2). He thus follows Judith Butler’s arguments with respect to heterosexuality being “always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmatic idealization of itself — *and failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself” (Butler 313, original emphasis). Hence, according to Butler’s idea, Kweku, by aiming at performing cohesive, essential identity roles, can only fail. I see Butler’s ‘promise’ as a hovering threat for Kweku’s performance to be exposed as a fail and a mere “copy” (Butler 313).

In my reading, Kweku’s escape into identity roles that correspond to heteropatriarchal understandings of gender make him a static and heteronormative character. He thereby stands in contrast to his youngest son, Kehinde, whom I read as queer due to his socially non-conforming behavior in the family and his resistance to perpetuating the rigid framework of shame and guilt.

### **Generative Queerness**

In the text, Kehinde is not represented as a homosexual character; in fact, the text provides little information about his sexual desires or sexual identity. But his relation and positioning towards his family members, especially within the matrix of heteronormative power

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of *whiteness* falls short. Since aspects of race, Blackness and national identity are relevant for an encompassing reading of the character of Kweku, it will be part of a more elaborate analysis in my larger project.

structures, allow for a queer reading of his character. As Heather Love states: “Queerness is structured by this central turn: it is both abject and exalted, a ‘mixture of delicious and freak.’ ... This contradiction is lived out on the level of individual subjectivity” (3). Although the realm of same-sex experiences should not be neglected or be swept under the rug, I am particularly interested in this idea of individual subjectivity that, regardless of sexual preferences and activities, can be considered as queer.

According to Lee Edelman, society follows a governing logic that aims at perpetuating ‘cultural survival’ in order to maintain the established power structures of a community (2011, 148; 2007, 470, 471). In Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*, Kehinde is presented as a character that challenges established power relations most prominently with regard to his father and older brother, by not complying with normative understandings of masculinity. Time and again his gender performance leaves Kweku and Olu in a state of irritation: “So often he’d [Kweku] confided in Fola at night that he just didn’t ‘get’ this slim good-looking boy; unlike Olu who reminded him so much of himself, Kehinde was a veritable black hole” (Selasi 83). In Kweku’s utterance, the text draws a connection between Kweku and Olu while Selasi’s choice of words regarding Kehinde as a ‘black hole’ resonates with Edelman’s elaborations on queerness as being “the void” and embodying the “death drive” (Edelman 2007, 474). Olu’s thoughts on his brother emphasize the impossibility to identify Kehinde according to heteronormative expectations of masculinity: “He’d never seen his brother interact with a woman and had always kind of vaguely thought Kehinde was gay, less so interested in men than uninterested in women, almost womanly himself, like a dancer, the hair” (Selasi 218). In comparison to his older brother Olu, who conforms to the heteronormative matrix in the family, Kehinde appears to be gender fluid and queer: “[Olu] wasn’t pretty like Kehinde — who looked like a girl: an impossible, impossible beautiful girl ... Boy Scouts, the one year he tried, age eleven, before abandoning the pretense of boyness in favor of painting and working with the beads” (Selasi 294). Kehinde attempts to align his activities with those associated with heteronormative boyhood, such as the Boy Scouts, but fails. Olu’s thoughts on his brother’s sexual desires and gender appearance demonstrate Kehinde’s queer potential, since he eludes any normative categorization (hetero- and homosexual) regarding his sexuality and gender identity. The character of Kehinde resonates with Halberstam’s definition of queer as “new ways of understanding the nonnormative behaviors that have

clear but not essential relations to gay and lesbian subjects” (6) and as referring to the “potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family [and] inheritance” (2). The aspect of Kehinde not being recognizable *as*, or being seen *as* somebody or something, is emphasized through the narrative structure of the novel: While Kehinde in the first part of the book appears in scenes in which the focalizer is either Kweku, Fola, Sadie, or Taiwo, he only enters the narrative again in the sixth chapter of the second part of the novel. Due to this long withholding and due to the fact that the narrative introduces him as part of Taiwo’s and Sadie’s search for him, the reader experiences the encounter with Kehinde with the same apprehension and curiosity as the characters in the story. To ‘meet’ him as an adult character in his contemporary setting feels like a significant moment in which the ‘lost one’ finally reappears.

Kehinde’s general refusal as a child to fulfill the expected male role in his family clearly contrasts him to his older brother Olu, who, as I discuss elsewhere, strives to live up to his father’s expectations by imitating him. In the following scene, which focuses again on the moment of Kweku’s attempt to save the baby child, he reflects on the difference between the two brothers’ (un)willingness to perpetuate the family system:

“Can they save it?”

“Not likely.”

“Can you?”

Kweku laughed aloud, a sudden sound in the quiet. ... His elder son’s approval of his abilities as a doctor never ceased to amaze or delight him. Or appease him. His *other* son couldn’t have cared less what he did, irrespective of the fact that they lived off his doing it. He didn’t take this personally. At least he didn’t think he did. At least he didn’t show it when his cameraman was around. He was an Intelligent Parent, too rational to pick favorites. A Man’s Man, above petty insecurities. And a Well-Respected Doctor, one of the best in his field, *goddamit!*, whether Kehinde cared or didn’t. Besides. The boy was un-impressable. (Selasi 15, original emphasis)

This scene takes place very early on in the novel and Kweku’s reflections on his two sons and their attitudes towards him as father and provider demonstrate the tensions between the three male family members: Olu preserves Kweku’s patriarchal system by striving to become like him, by granting Kweku the gratitude he expects and, in turn, gaining his father’s approval. This scene of free indirect speech sheds light on Kweku’s reaction towards Kehinde’s non-compliance and Kweku’s urge to keep the pose of the controlled father as ‘Intelligent Parent.’ In fact, Kehinde’s queer behavior, which challenges Kweku’s affirmation

as a successful doctor and father, causes a strong negative reaction in Kweku (*'goddamit!'*), and indicates that he is very much affected by his youngest son's behavior and attitudes.

In comparison to Olu, who absorbs his parents' moods and emotions and makes himself part of their sphere, Kweku describes Kehinde as "un-impressable" (Selasi 15), as immune to the moods and affection of others. Kweku's emotional reaction proves that he takes Kehinde's behavior as an affront, which in turn needs to be punished: "*Kehinde doesn't care about anything*, Kweku told them" (Selasi 15, original emphasis). Kehinde's alleged anti-social behavior is publicly denounced, as the mentioning of an external entity — 'them'— indicates. Kweku's reaction resonates with Edelman's observation concerning a heteronormative society's need to "conduce to the enforcement of normativity" (Edelman 471). Kweku experiences Kehinde's behavior, which resembles a threat to "coherence, and so [to] identity" (Edelman 471), as a violation of gendered normativity (to praise the father's ability, to approve of him in his role and thereby affirm power structures), which consequently has to be punished and to be marked *as* antisocial. While Olu functions as maintainer of the heteronormative matrix that his father wants perpetuated, Kehinde resists these 'communal imperatives' and embodies what Edelman calls the "antisocial" (470): the queer. As mentioned earlier, Edelman's conceptualization of queer and queerness aligns with notions of the death drive. By following his idea that the death drive bears generative potential, I want to show how affect and queerness not only have capacities to dismantle and disrupt, but always also allow for *reconstruction*, as delineated by Ihab Hassan: "to discover new relations between selves and others, margins and centers, fragments and wholes — indeed, new relations between selves and selves, margins and margins, centers and centers" (6). Hassan's 'new relations' correspond with Ellis's aforementioned quest for new forms. To my understanding, these relations and forms will not exist permanently and unaltered. Rather, they hint at a temporal coherence, which always remains open for change and alterations.

Even though there are striking similarities between Kweku and Kehinde (both experience feelings of guilt and shame after being perpetrator and victim at the same time, and both, as a consequence, leave the family), Kehinde's character reveals a higher agential capacity, due to the fact that he takes action concerning his insecurities. Instead of transferring authority



to an imagined cameraman who then directs his behavior, Kehinde consciously faces the hardships of his past. I argue that in the course of this process, he gains a greater sense of autonomy — which is again supported by the narrative itself. The text depicts Kehinde seeking guidance, help, and assistance by staying in a psychiatric clinic for a while and engaging in conversations with a therapist in which he openly addresses his self-harm as well as a suicide attempt:

“Can you stop it? Can you fix me? I’m a coward, I’m a punk. I stand in the chamber behind the glass walls, I can see all the people there passing me by, but I can’t *get* to them, can’t speak to them, can’t tell them I’m in *here*; I can’t break the glass ... .

“Protection,” said the doctor.

“Protection from what?”

“From your fear, from your hurt, from your anguish, your rage.”

“I’m not angry,” said Kehinde.

“You are, and you should be. Allow it, your anger. Permit it to be.” (Selasi 174)

Even though Kehinde still is in some state of denial (‘I’m not angry’), he engages in a conversation, in which he articulates and negotiates his feelings. His questions and denial show that he goes through a phase in which he experiences an “instability and openness” (Alsop 231) of his self. However, this phase does not cause him feelings of shame or guilt. Instead, by exposing himself in all his instability to someone else, he queers normative frameworks of affect and enables new, even empowering emotional constituents. Kehinde is depicted here in a moment of “autonomy and reflexivity” in which he undergoes “processes of refashioning” (McNay 5, 17). Further, the form of the dialogue which Selasi employs here emphasizes the immediacy both between the two characters *and* between the characters and the reader. Thereby, it enables Kehinde to determine “the silence and ideologies” (Ferguson 5) that create oppressive hegemonic structures and to disidentified with them, respectively. By speaking out Kehinde breaks the silences that his father used to fill with hegemonic representations of masculinity.

As mentioned previously, I do not read the mode of generative queerness as a potential aiming at dismantling and undoing for the sake of establishing eternal, enclosed, essential states of being or feeling. On the contrary, I think about generative queerness as describing moments of temporary coherence, but never of fixation. Queerness can only disrupt and dismantle as long as there are (temporal) categories and, perhaps, moments of what Gayatri Spivak once called (and then denounced) as strategic ‘essentialisms’ that can then be

challenged, altered, accommodated again in the course of an everlasting “longing that propels us onward” (Muñoz 1) towards a queer futurity as Muñoz envisions it in his work *Cruising Utopia* (2009).

By focusing on the emotional and gendered constitution of the two male characters of Kweku and Kehinde Sai, I hope to have shown how Taiye Selasi uses narrative strategies such as (queer) temporality and character formation, in order to make visible and comment on the performative, unstable, and constructed conditions of identities. As I have argued by focusing on the aspect of temporality, instability and queerness are incorporated in her overall writing. I read Selasi’s literary work as a valuable contribution to a more general discussion about ‘global citizenship.’ Her writing delineates new forms of belonging and agency which resonate with social progressions envisioned within a queer of color critique, and artistically portrays the complexities of globally raced, gendered, and queered subjectivities.

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