

Haunted Lineages and African Historical Continuum in the New World: Memory, Diaspora and Postcolonial Resistance/Identity in Alex Haley's *Roots*

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Abstract

The paper discusses Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* from the perspective of memory studies, diasporic studies and postcolonial theory. It indicates that *Roots* can be read as a personal and collective archive of African American memory resisting hegemonic historical narratives and reclaiming Black diasporic identity. The novel foregrounds the politics of remembering and forgetting in postcolonial contexts through its representation of ancestral memory across centuries of displacement, enslavement and resistance. *Roots* stages a transgenerational act of cultural remembrance through the projects of post memory and genealogical recovery, that is not only retrospective but also centrally concerned with the continuity of Black American culture. This paper considers how Haley's narrative is a counter-historical project in that it denies the erasure of African origins and reclaims the agency of the enslaved through remembered lineage. The study contextualizes *Roots* within postcolonial and diasporic discourse to demonstrate how memory can be a powerful tool for rebuilding identity and achieving historical justice.

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Introduction

The history of the dispersal of African peoples across the world is inextricably connected to the pain of being uprooted, the upheaval, the efforts to wipe out their culture and the brutal rule that went with the transatlantic slave trade and its consequences for generations to come. This violent history of millions of Africans forcibly removed from their homes did not simply shift people, it violently tore apart their culture, family structures and spoken traditions. African languages, beliefs and forms of transmission of history were systematically destroyed during the Middle Passage, on the plantations and under colonial rule. This often-left black people in the Americas with nothing tangible that tied them to where they came from. Memory is more than thought, it is a vital act of re-voice-ing, re-identity-ing, re-historicising self. It is what we remember as individuals and what groups remember. It is a form of cultural resistance, a way of survival, a way of telling their story differently against the powerful forces that try to erase it. All this helps the readers of Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, published in 1976. *Roots* is a genuinely original contribution to literature and culture. What is special about it are the elements of personal storytelling, spoken history and family trees. This book tells the story of Kunta Kinte, a young Mandinka man from the Gambia. In the mid-1700s he was captured by slave traders and sold into slavery in colonial America. Then Haley follows the family of Kunta Kinte for seven generations, taking readers along with them to the author's birth and his search for his ancestors. In this way *Roots* connects the past and the present, individual lives and the larger community, personal memory and larger history.

Roots is not just a story; it is a quest for truth. Haley's work is a record that challenges the traditional narratives of history, particularly those that excluded the stories of Black Americans. Haley follows in the footsteps of his family, recovering their history and situating it within larger historical contexts, emphasizing African and Black American angles. Such a recovery challenges the dominant Western narratives that had for too long marginalized or erased Black experience from the history books. In many ways, *Roots* is literature's way of honouring oral traditions, family histories, and Black historical documents as legitimate and honest sources of information. Haley's project also reflects a deeper longing on the part of the dispersed African peoples. They were displaced, longing for their roots, their identity, a sense of total culture. For many in the African diaspora, the disconnection from their ancestors left a great void in their hearts and minds. Many were written by the colonizers and slave owners, and today's history books cannot fill the gap. In *Roots*, Haley attempts to bridge this gap by tracing his lineage back to Africa, providing an uplifting approach for dispersed African populations to rediscover their identity. It is not just names and dates. It is about re-voicing the silenced, re-dignifying the enslaved, re-placing through time and space. Thus, *Roots* is a story of homecoming, of symbolic homecoming, of linking today's Black Americans with their African past. There is another structure inside *Roots* that shows its key ideas. The novel follows the course of Black American history from Kunta Kinte's childhood in Africa, through slavery, emancipation, and reconstruction, to modern America. Each new chapter adds more layers and it is clear how the cultural memory is passed down, changes and remains alive despite different historical times. Over and over again comes up the theme of Kunta Kinte's strength of will to keep his name and African identity even as others tried spitefully to obliterate them. It is a testament to the power of memory and cultural legacy. His spirit of defiance lives on through his descendants in things like naming their children, telling stories, and fighting unjust systems. At its core, *Roots* is a story of people overcoming great hardship. Slavery was about dehumanizing people, about splitting them up. Haley's is a story of strong family ties, cultural traditions and a deep pride in one's heritage. This connects to what cultural theorist Paul Gilroy called the "Black Atlantic" – a space between nations and cultures where dispersed Black identities are

constantly being remade, redefined and celebrated. Thus, Haley's work on his family tree is a message to a collective consciousness of dispersed African peoples who understand the pain and triumphs of Black history. *Roots* must be read in this way, not only as a family saga, but as a serious reflection on the interpretation of history, the political mobilization of memory and the construction of identities in a post-colonial world. *Roots* also became a hugely important cultural symbol and book. The 1976 debut and the 1977 television adaptation sparked a national conversation about race, heritage and the lasting effects of slavery in America. For many black Americans the story resonated because it seemed to offer a way of tracing their own family histories and their own identities as scattered Africans. Genealogy, once seen as a Eurocentric endeavour, evolved into a powerful way for Black Americans to find their place and reclaim their history. *Roots* became more than just a story of fiction. It became an interactive historical project that inspired many people to interact with Black memory and identity in this way. But in order to fully understand the impact of *Roots* it has to be understood in conjunction with other larger ideas of the twentieth century such as the rise of memory studies, postcolonial theory and African diaspora studies. Writers such as Pierre Nora, Marianne Hirsch and Michel-Rolph Trouillot have examined the role of power, ideas and emotions in memory, both individual and collective. Much of that deep thinking is already built into Haley's work, particularly in his exploration of who gets to remember, whose memories are considered authentic, and how the past is constructed. *Roots* addresses the historical amnesia that so often buried the legacy of slavery and its lasting impact, centering the voices of the enslaved and their descendants.

This paper will examine *Roots* from a variety of perspectives, including memory studies, the African diaspora and postcolonial theory. It will discuss the treatment of historical trauma, cultural memory and the reclamation of identity by the scattered African people in the novel. These three perspectives are central to understanding *Roots* as at its core the story is about belonging, identity and being displaced and reclaiming history. Through storytelling and symbols, Haley's project seeks to heal a historical wound of dehumanization, uprooting, and erasure that has endured for centuries. In retracing his family tree in Africa, Haley is not just reconstructing his own family history, but symbolically restoring dignity and humanity to the countless Black Americans whose family histories had been obscured or obliterated by the cruelty of slavery and rampant racism. In memory studies, *Roots* can be understood as a set of rediscovered and reimagined memories. As scholars like Pierre Nora and Marianne Hirsch have shown, memory is not simply a matter of remembering the past, but is an active process shaped by culture, society and politics. Haley's use of oral history and stories passed down through generations demonstrates how memory is performed and formed. By interweaving family stories, folk traditions and African practices, Haley resists the historical amnesia that has muted/marginalized Black voices within hegemonic historiography. Thus, *Roots* becomes an act of "postmemory" – a term developed by Hirsch to describe the transmission of memory across generations in the wake of traumatic events. Haley never met Kunta Kinte, but he manages to situate him in a continuum by imagining Kunta's life through oral accounts and cultural research, and in doing so *Roots* reconstructs Kunta Kinte's personal identity in a larger cultural and historical flow. Memory in *Roots* is never still. It is always in motion. It stretches over generations and changes and grows as slavery, segregation and modern times change. But it begins also with an act of primal naming and defiance: Kunta Kinte's rejection of the slave's name "Toby." This lasting dedication to recall and cling to one's name becomes a recurring theme in the novel, representing the fight to preserve cultural identity in the face of concerted attempts to erase it. Haley sees memory at once as a political and personal act of resistance and as a way of asserting the veracity of stories from dispersed African peoples.

Theoretical Framework: Memory as Resistance

This analysis of Alex Haley's book, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, is informed by ideas of memory, history and trauma from other disciplines. This study is engaging with theories such as cultural memory, postmemory (Marianne Hirsch), collective memory (Maurice Halbwachs), lieux de mémoire (Pierre Nora), and Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work on what is left out of history. That is why *Roots* is a way of preserving and passing memories, even memories that people tried to erase. It does so by collecting pieces of lost or buried histories and into a strong cultural narrative that pushes back and enables African Americans to reclaim their family and cultural heritage. Another important concept is "postmemory," a term coined by Marianne Hirsch. Postmemory is the relationship that a generation growing up under the dominance of the narratives of the generation before them develops toward experiences they themselves did not directly live through. "Memories of things traumatic descendants did not see themselves can be so powerful they feel almost like their own memories because they are linked through stories, pictures and culture," (Hirsch, 2012). This idea is at work in Haley's *Roots*. Even if Haley himself did not experience slavery, he would have heard these painful stories through his family's oral histories, especially from his grandmother and older relatives. *Roots* is built on these memories passed down through the generations and made into a book that contextualizes and personalizes the story of slavery and resistance. Hirsch explains that "postmemory" is not merely an inheritance of the past in a passive way, but an active engagement with it. One can see that in Haley's deep research, his trip to The Gambia, to find his family's old village and the story of Kunta Kinte. This pushes Haley's memory forward. He combined family stories with a historical narrative, so that the pain, strength and actions of his ancestors would not be lost to the silence of history. The novel is therefore not only a site of postmemory, but also a permanent record. It connects generations, remembers lost histories, and speaks of ancestral experiences too awful to speak of. *Roots* also deals with the concept of collective memory as proposed by Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs believed that memory is not only individual but also constructed, maintained and transmitted by groups such as families, religious groups and cultural organizations. Memory is very much to do with who they are and what a group thinks of him. This is seen in *Roots* where the story of ancestors' experiences – enslavement, resistance, freedom, migration – is transmitted through traditions, naming and oral stories. It is a great example of collective memory when they tried to make Kunta Kinte conform and he wouldn't give up his name. His name acquired mythical dimensions, a symbol of African personality and resistance, handed down through the generations – a legacy in itself. In *Roots*, the past is not static: Each generation adds and protects pieces of it as society and history change. *Roots* is a manifestation of Halbwachs's idea of the present as the centre of collective memory through the illustration of how Haley's present-day persona is influenced by historical forces that preceded his life. The book itself is a collective memory that slavery, systemic racism and official neglect tried to erase. It creates a family history where there is no history and creates a narrative for African Americans to understand their collective past.

Roots can also be viewed in terms of memory passed down through generations (postmemory) and shared by groups (collective memory) and Pierre Nora's "lieux de mémoire" or "sites of memory." Nora uses this term to refer to symbolic objects (monuments, books, rituals) that represent collective memory, especially when the actual sites of memory are disappearing. These sites of memory serve as surrogate or as guide to a collective memory of a group after slavery when living memory was often severed or destroyed. *Roots* is a monument, a story-monument to a people whose history was not written down but lived on in spoken traditions, spiritual beliefs and scattered memories. Haley turned all of these pieces into a digestible story, creating a symbolic place where black identity could come together. The novel gives voice to

the voiceless, and to more. It shows us the marginalised, puts the forgotten bits of history in perspective. It is a piece of literature, a mnemonic device, a place of memory where people have gathered and returned for generations.

Michel-Rolph Trouillot's ideas are partly the result of his research into the unsaid of history, a theme that he explored in his classic book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Trouillot explored how history is produced through the absences, omissions, and silences in the dominant stories people tell. These silent spaces occur at different times: when facts are made (the creation of sources), when sources are saved (the collection of facts), when stories are constructed (the selection of facts), and when past events are made meaningful (the subsequent assignment of significance). These silences are especially potent around slavery. For example, enslaved people, who were often not allowed to read or write (or even have a voice) and who mostly appear as footnotes in official records and history books. *Roots* fills those gaps with a different sort of history, one based on the memories and experiences of those with no power. This is what the unspeakable is, and this is what Haley is writing down when he imagines the life of Kunta Kinte: what wasn't written, what filled the silences of the archives. *Roots* is a living counter-history that speaks African voices where official history is silent, that validates oral tradition, and that emphasizes resistance not victimhood. Haley's work, therefore, responds to Trouillot's call for a more nuanced and expansive history that takes account of the uses of memory in struggles over power and the unequal distribution of historical power. *Roots* is therefore a form of cultural reclamation, thinking of memory as resistance. It is not just to tell a family story, but to actively challenge the intellectual damage of slavery and colonial modes of historiography. Drawing on Hirsch, Halbwachs, Nora and Trouillot, the paper shows how *Roots* uses memory as a tool of resistance, animating the past not for nostalgia, but for the forging of identity, the attainment of justice, and the construction of common dignity.

Politics of Memory and Trauma of Slavery

Roots: The Saga of an American Family represents slavery not just as a historical institution but as a disturbing legacy that continues to haunt the collective consciousness of contemporary African American communities. *Roots* is the story of capture, enslavement, brutalization and the handing down of pain from one generation to the next. It is about the lasting psychological, cultural and political effects of slavery. It is not just about what had happened, but also about the work of recognition, of commemoration, of healing in the historical realm. It does so by engaging with the work of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe and Cathy Caruth who explore the ways in which trauma and memory shape the identities and experiences of descendants of enslaved people. Haley exposes the savage and complex face of slavery. *Roots* depicts slavery as an institution designed to annihilate the identity, freedom and human dignity of African people, from the capture of Kunta Kinte in West Africa, through his agonizing passage on the Middle Passage, to the savage enforcement of submission on southern plantations. The novel paints a stark picture of the physical pain of slavery – whips, chains, hard work – and the mental anguish: names being wiped out, African languages and traditions outlawed, families torn apart. But *Roots* is more than a documentation of this violence; it is a reviving of it, a reinsertion of the voices of the enslaved into a historical narrative from which they have been erased.

In its own way, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* is a celebration of the inner lives and acts of resistance of the enslaved, through what Saidiya Hartman calls "critical fabulation," a method that inserts imaginative reconstructions into the gaps of the historical record. Hartman writes in her powerful book, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*,

“The colonial archives do not easily yield the stories of enslaved people, only their status as property or marginal notes” (Hartman, 2007). But, argues, to recover these stories through storytelling, imagination and memory is radical in itself (Hartman, 2007). And this is where the story of Alex Haley, fact or fiction, comes in. Haley does not re-invent the daily lives, the inner thoughts, fears and hopes of Kunta Kinte and his descendants in order to re-write history; he brings back its emotional richness and moral complexity.

Roots is based on the premise that trauma is not a one-off. Kunta Kinte’s legacy as a slave is not a legacy for his generation alone, it is a legacy that continues to reverberate in the choices, relationships and identities of his descendants. Finally, Cathy Caruth’s theory of trauma transmission between generations is that traumatic events are not fully processed when they occur but it returns in a delayed or symbolic form later (Caruth 4). Caruth also argues that trauma is not the experience of violence, but the inability to fully understand the violence as it happens (Caruth, 1996). In *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, trauma is a cycle. It is a constant fear of separation, a constant practice of naming as resistance, and a constant struggle for dignity in a dehumanizing society. As Haley demonstrates, emancipation does not heal the scars of slavery, but rather, these scars are transmitted through generations and continue to shape how descendants perceive themselves and their position within American society. Often seen as a burden, this trauma passed down from generation to generation is also a source of resistance and strength. Haley’s characters draw pride, resilience and identity from memories of past suffering. Memory turns to empowerment, a resistance to cultural extinction, a reclaiming of power. One important moment of resistance comes when Kunta Kinte insists that his name is Kunta, not Toby. He has to bow to the system’s rules in the end but his refusal to give up his identity is a quiet but potent act of resistance. A name that has been passed down through generations is a living monument to survival. It is a personal act of defiance and a cultural inheritance that links the descendants to their ancestral identity. Thus, traumatic memory is both burden and strength, revealing the complexities of remembering slavery in the African diaspora. Christina Sharpe’s *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) examines the legacy of slavery and its ongoing ramifications for Black life, from kinship to state violence. Sharpe argues that “Black people live in the wake of slavery” and are always negotiating its afterlives (Sharpe, 2016). “Mourning, memory, and resistance are ethical ways of engaging the past,” she also offers (Sharpe, 2016). The project of *Roots* is not simply to recover history, but to find ways of living with and through history. The novel proposes that the legacy of slavery can be contested without being obliterated by it, and that memory can be a foundation of identity instead of a chain of suffering. *Roots* is also a meditation on the politics of memory: who is allowed to remember, what they remember, and how those memories are valued or erased within dominant historical narratives. Enslaved people are often overlooked in traditional historical accounts, as passive victims or simply omitted. Haley’s narrative seeks to offset this absence by focusing on the experiences, choices, and resistances of the enslaved. In doing so, it confirms Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s critique of “silencing in historical production,” in which some voices disappear not for lack of evidence but because power structures determine what counts as history (Trouillot, 1995). *Roots* provides a voice for the historically voiceless, bringing the experiences of the enslaved from the margins into the centre of historical consciousness. First published in 1976 and adapted as the television miniseries *Roots* in 1977, it transformed public discourse about slavery in the United States. It forced the traumatic memory of slavery into the national consciousness and required audiences to face a history that is often minimized or excluded from public discussion. The novel and miniseries also inspired many African American families to undertake genealogical research and cultural reconnection, making remembrance a political and personal act. In the end, *Roots* is a powerful form of politicized memory work. The text draws on the theories of Hartman, Caruth, Sharpe, and

Trouillot to argue that remembering trauma is complicated, not always redemptive, but necessary for justice, healing, and the creation of diasporic identities built on endurance, not erasure.

Conclusion: Justice and Counter-History in Historical Writing

In that respect *Roots* is a fine example of counter-history. It is not just a matter of inserting African American elements into the canonical story of the American history. It changes the whole story. It begins in Africa and goes through the ages exploring the Black experience. Unlike sanitized versions of slavery often found in textbooks or public history, the novel powerfully depicts the violence, disruption, and psychological pain of the transatlantic slave trade and plantation slavery. It also celebrates the resilience, ingenuity and continuity of black people in the face of systemic oppression. Haley pushes back against the colonial idea that the African history of Black Americans is unknowable, irrelevant or lost forever by tracing his ancestor Kunta Kinte from The Gambia to his life in 20th-century America. It shows that African Americans are not rootless, but are rooted in a historical continuum that starts in Africa, passes through the Middle Passage, and extends across generations of resistance and struggle. This retrieval of Black ancestry is a radical act of historical justice, a story of atonement. Haley also animates anonymous figures by naming and narrating the stories of his ancestors—Kunta Kinte, Bell, Kizzy, Chicken George, Tom, and others—thereby rendering them historical subjects with voices, desires, and agency. This is all the more important because the historical record systematically erased the individual identity of enslaved persons. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues in *Silencing the Past*, the making of history is marked by archival and narrative silences, the silences of the enslaved particularly. Haley's *Roots* silences these silences to provide a history from the lived experience of those who have been historically silenced, not the voices of the powerful. The novel also interrogates the myth of American exceptionalism, the myth that American history is a story of liberty, progress and democracy. *Roots* contrasts the ideals of liberty and justice with the brutality of slavery, exposing the contradictions and hypocrisies that are a part of the nation's founding. Kunta Kinte and his descendants' story is an accounting of the primal violence on which the country was built, a meditation on the human costs of America's rise.

Roots thus enters the lexicon of what is being called historical redress literature – literature that aims to repair the intellectual and cultural damage wrought by centuries of racial exclusion. In its storytelling, *Roots* is part of an ongoing project of truth-telling and reconciliation, not only for African Americans, but for the larger American society which has often been reluctant to confront its past. The healing function has had real-world consequences: the 1977 television adaptation of the novel was watched by over 130 million people, and it sparked public conversations about race, family lineage and historical justice that were previously unimaginable in mainstream American media. Haley's work has also shaped ongoing movements and academic discourse on the significance of African American genealogical recovery, ancestral memory, and historical redress. In many respects, *Roots* anticipated later discussions of critical race theory, debates over reparations, and public history projects that sought to foreground the experiences of the enslaved and their descendants. *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* by Alex Haley is not just a family tree, not even a fictionalized personal saga; it is an important event in our culture and in the way we understand history. Marianne Hirsch's theory of "postmemory," Michel-Rolph Trouillot's "silencing," Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic" and Homi Bhabha's "hybridity" all imply that *Roots* is more than a book, it is a site of resistance for culture. Haley's story is like reclaiming what was lost through colonialism. It helps build an identity for scattered peoples around the world. It's a way of doing what Michel

Foucault called “counter-memory” – remembering things other than the official story. The familiar stories tend to sideline people of African descent. The book shows how Instead it tells a different story, a story of memory, pain and just survival. *Roots* is also a “postmemory” project, and that is one of the most important things it does. Haley himself was not a slave, but his story echoes the pain of past generations. The memories African Americans have from that time. So, *Roots* is a record that bridges generations, linking the present with a past that was deliberately hidden. Hirsch’s concept of postmemory accounts for the powerful emotional and cultural connection that Haley and his readers are able to establish with a traumatic past prior to their own lives. Remembering is a conscious decision. It’s a political and moral commitment to the past, a request for continuity when things are supposed to be broken.

Roots also shifts our understanding of the diaspora. It’s not just about losing things, but a place where people change, adapt and survive. The book really shows how adaptable people in the diaspora are and how they keep the culture alive. African cultural practices such as language, names, spiritual beliefs, music and oral stories have survived across time and space. They were taken from Africa to America, brutalized, their feelings less than human. They still had their family relations and background. Instead, it created a blend and mix of cultures that is still a powerful component of African American identity today. The work of memory in *Roots* is also connected to the broader project of historical justice. Haley is engaged in what one might call “reparative history” — writing history from the perspective of the oppressed. He is trying to give dignity and a voice to people who have been excluded from official stories for too long. By naming his ancestors and telling their stories, Haley is symbolically putting things right. He knows their suffering. He praises their strength. He makes sure they are human. It’s an act that still echoes in a society wrestling with the legacy of slavery, racial inequality and how we remember our culture. The novel demonstrates how storytelling can be a powerful act of resistance. Haley’s story is about African oral traditions of feelings, family lines, and memory. Western historians do not usually, formally, write that way. This type of storytelling is a familiar technique in post-colonial writing, which gives those on the margins a voice and a hearing. *Roots* is not a story of victims, it is a story of people who fight back against oppression with their own will, their own creativity and resilience. It creates a lineage that is hard to erase, a nucleus for a shared identity. And people gets to know the enormous cultural impact of *Roots*. When the book came out — and especially when it was turned into a groundbreaking TV miniseries — it sparked public conversations about race, slavery and family history in a way that nothing had before. The *Roots* encouraged many African-Americans to search out their own family trees, to be proud of their culture and to delve deeper into history. It brought enslaved people’s stories into millions of homes, forcing America to face uncomfortable truths about its past. It is a work of literature, but it is also a work of public history, connecting individual stories with the consciousness of the nation. But for all its virtues, *Roots* has its flaws. It raises important questions about its blending of fact and fiction, its dependence on oral history, and the controversies surrounding plagiarism and its accuracy. But these difficulties also point to larger issues for memory studies and postcolonial writing: the difficulty of returning and telling stories from histories that have been systematically erased. The debates do not mean that the novel is not important. Instead, they emphasize the importance of stories for making sense of the world and for acting ethically. *Roots* is ultimately a powerful reminder of the way stories can endure, inform history, identity and memory. It connects the personal to the collective, the hurt to the healing, the forgotten to the remembered. Haley’s work redefines what it means to write history from the perspective of ordinary people and demonstrates that literature can be a powerful tool in the fight for recognition, justice and knowing one’s self. *Roots* is more than just a family tree. By tracing a lineage broken by slavery and colonialism, *Roots* reconstructs the humanity, the heritage and the hope of an entire people. *Roots* is a

cultural piece that still has a great impact on academic, social, and political discussions. It is a literary milestone and an enduring testament to history and culture. It is a reminder that to remember, to remember what people would have us forget, is an act of resistance. And it is that resistance that gives us the possibility of change, of healing and of freedom.

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