African Homecoming

Pan-African Ideology
and Contested Heritage

Katharina Schramm

AFRICAN HOMECOMING

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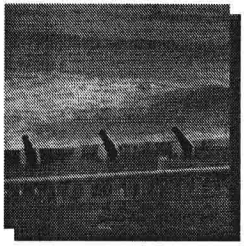

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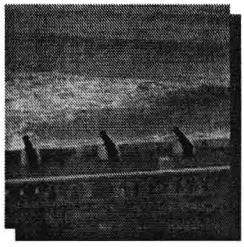

Series Editor's Foreword

The aim of this Critical Cultural Heritage Series is to define a new area of research and to produce a set of volumes that make a radical break with routinised accounts and definitions of cultural heritage and with the existing, or "established," canon of cultural heritage texts. In a fundamental shift of perspective, the French intellectual Jacques Derrida's rallying call to "restore heritage to dignity" is to be taken as an alternative guiding metaphor by which this series critically revisits the core question of what constitutes cultural heritage and engages with the concerns (notably the moral-ethical issues) that shape and define the possible futures of cultural heritage studies. A key objective is that this series be of transformative value in the sense of outlining and creating new and future agendas within cultural heritage discourse using individual texts as building blocks.

Schramm's *African Homecoming* is just such a contribution. This publication is central to the alignment of cultural heritage research with a wider scholarship committed to disrupting the Eurocentrism that continues to underpin cultural heritage theory/practice and also with a contemporary politics of recognition that is bound up in articulating new, alternative or parallel characterisations of heritage value. Schramm uses the motif of the tear employed by the African-American author Richard Wright to investigate the experience of his particular journey "back home" to Africa and also to raise questions about the politics of heritage and homecoming in Ghana. In particular,

Schramm is interested in the relationship between the growing number of African Americans and other members of the African diaspora who have followed in Wright's footsteps and who continue to travel "back home," either as short-term visitors, students, or repatriates and their Ghanaian hosts. She similarly pursues the relationship of these journeys to the various interpretations of the painful past that goes along with them. Schramm highlights the ongoing significance of the slave sites as testimonies of an experience of loss (as well as the implied hope for healing) and illustrates the emotional depth that is inherent in the encounter between Ghanaians and diasporans on the slave route. Schramm's book shows that the homecoming-drive and the associated memory work require detailed analysis if the nuances, complexities, and conflictual nature of such a context are to be properly researched and understood.

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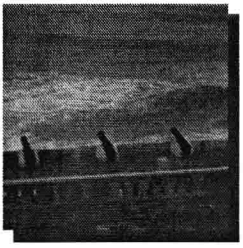

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Katharina Schramm
Berlin
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PROLOGUE

CONFRONTING THE PAST

Shortly before the Gold Coast's full independence and proud resurrection as Ghana, ancient kingdom and Africa's future Black shining star, Richard Wright, the well-known African-American writer, traveled through the country. In his travel account *Black Power* (Wright 1954), he describes the thoughts that ran through his mind when Dorothy Padmore, wife of George Padmore, who was one of the leading Pan-Africanists of the time, suggested that he visit the Gold Coast. What was he to expect? The trip was a venture away from his (by now familiar) European exile—into the unknown. He writes on his conflicting emotions as he was touching "a dark and dank wall" deep inside of him, constantly circling around the question, "*But am I African?*" (*ibid.*: 4; emphasis in original). Was there anything like a common heritage that would bind him to the Africans whom he was about to meet? If so, what did it consist of? Would it emerge as a familiar way of talking, dancing, or thinking? In what ways was he part of it? How would the people receive him? Would they regard him as a lost and now returned brother? Did he feel like a brother to them? Or would he accuse the descendants of those who stayed behind for selling his ancestors into slavery? What was going to happen when he could see and touch "the crumbling slave castles where my ancestors had lain panting in hot despair?" (*ibid.*: 6).

The problematic question of the meaning of an African identity retains its sense of urgency throughout the book. His first-hand experience brought Wright closer to an answer that nevertheless remains vague. One fact,

however, seemed clear to him—there was no such thing as a commonality based on "race" as the sole denominator. Aside from the "strangeness of a completely different order of life" (*ibid.*: 37) that he encountered and that made him aware of his own "Westernness," it was the historical experience of slavery that *set him apart* from the people whom he met on his trip. At the same time it was that very experience which *connected him* to them. The difficulties entailed in that positioning stand out clearly in his description of the slave forts of Osu (Accra), Cape Coast, and Elmina. Those were the places where the painful journey of the African diaspora had begun, and it was here that Wright completed his voyage. Standing in front of Christiansborg Castle in Accra, he tried to imagine what had happened there behind "incredibly thick" (*ibid.*: 339) stone walls, so many years ago. The confrontation with a history that had left its bitter mark on his own body and soul made him almost speechless. The images that forced themselves on him were painful and hard to bear. He writes:

> The dramas that once took place in that castle were forever lost. The slaves sickened and despaired, and the white men died of yellow fever and malaria . . . : I tried to picture in my mind a chief, decked out in cowrie shells, leopard skin, golden bracelets, leading a string of black prisoners of war to the castle to be sold. . . . My mind refused to function. (*ibid.*: 340)

His "mind refused to function" in the face of those walls that had once swallowed the whispers of their human captives and the shouting of the bargaining merchants. Here, history was cast in stone, as tangible evidence. But the buildings remained silent. Clad in elegant whiteness their grimness was hidden behind the finesse of their architectural layout. And yet their presence triggered a whole flow of kaleidoscopic images in Wright. If his intellect failed, this refers only to his rejection of an attitude of detachment in thinking about the past. The history of the diaspora that was being represented here could not be grasped by relying on facts and figures. It could not be objectified. If at all, Wright seems to suggest, it could be captured only in personalized memories. Once these memories take hold of the person confronting the castles, they may begin to reveal their stories. In the last section of his book Wright tells us the beginning of one such story—of a circle not yet completed:

> If there is any treasure hidden in these vast walls, I'm sure that it has a sheen that outshines gold—a tiny, pear-shaped tear that formed on the

> cheek of some black woman torn away from her children, a tear that gleams here still, caught in the feeble rays of the dungeon's light—a shy tear that vanishes at the sound of approaching footsteps but reappears when all is quiet, a tear that was hastily brushed off when her arm was grabbed and she was led toward those narrow, dark steps that guided her to the tunnel that directed her feet to the waiting ship that would bear her across the heaving, mist-shrouded Atlantic. . . . (*ibid.*: 341–342)

This metaphoric tear forms a lens through which I want to take a look at the politics of heritage and homecoming in Ghana. Since the early 1990s there has been a growing number of African Americans and other members of the African diaspora who have followed the footsteps of Richard Wright and have made the journey "back home," as short-term visitors, students, or repatriates. Even more than fifty years after the publication of *Black Power*, the questions that have been posed by Richard Wright with regard to his identity as an African, and in relation to a possible interpretation of the painful past that goes along with it, have not lost their urgency. Yet there are many different ways of posing them, as well as many different answers given, by this new generation of homecomers and their Ghanaian hosts.

The image of the tear by which Richard Wright seeks to grasp the ongoing significance of the slave sites as testimonies of an experience of loss (as well as the implied hope for healing) aptly illustrates the emotional depth that is inherent in the encounter between Ghanaians and diasporans[1] on the slave route. It was the conflictive nature of this encounter, which seemed to contradict the rhetoric of kinship and commonality that first got me interested in the subject of "homecoming."

The more I learned and the more I thought about it, I came to realize that what I was confronting was by no means a structure of clear-cut positions that only needed to be uncovered by the anthropologist. Rather, it was a diffuse conglomeration of views and opinions that were floating around diverse discursive lines and that had different practical and political implications. Sometimes these views clashed or were contradictory, at other times they overlapped and were even at peace with one another. The aim of this book is to point out these various trajectories and to attempt an interpretation.

Yes, I maintain, the slave sites may speak to the visitor. But what she actually hears and how it affects her depends on many factors, including her own social and personal background. On that matrix she may form an interpretation of the past, so that it makes sense to her present.