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NEGOTIATING GRIEF, FAITH, AND SCIENTIFIC RATIONALITY: A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF IDENTITY FRAGMENTATION IN YAA GYASI'S TRANSCENDENT KINGDOM

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Abstract

Yaa Gyasi's Transcendent Kingdom (2020) presents a narrator, Gifty, whose life is organized around a central paradox: she is a neuroscientist studying reward-seeking behavior in mice, yet she cannot explain—or emotionally resolve—the addiction that killed her brother and the depression that immobilized her mother. This paper argues that Gifty's identity fragmentation is not merely a thematic effect of familial loss but a psychoanalytic condition produced by the collision of unresolved melancholia with two inadequate symbolic systems: Pentecostal Christianity and neuroscientific rationality. Drawing on Freudian and post-Freudian theories of mourning and melancholia, alongside scholarship on the novel's treatment of affect, race, and transnational identity, the paper examines how Gifty's scientific practice functions simultaneously as intellectualization, sublimation, and repetition compulsion. It further analyzes the novel's fragmented narrative form as a formal enactment of the melancholic subject's inability to achieve closure. Neither faith nor science succeeds in "making meaning" of Nana's death and the Black Mamba's depression; instead, the novel stages a continuous, incomplete working-through that reconstitutes identity as perpetually negotiated rather than resolved. The "transcendent kingdom" of the title is thus neither heaven nor the laboratory but the fragile psychic space of a self that refuses to resolve.

1. INTRODUCTION

Yaa Gyasi's *Transcendent Kingdom* (2020) departs significantly from her debut novel, *Homegoing* (2016), which traces a family's legacy of slavery across centuries and continents. *Transcendent Kingdom* contracts its focus to a single Ghanaian immigrant family in Huntsville, Alabama, and to the interior life of one narrator: Gifty, a sixth-year PhD candidate in neuroscience at Stanford. The novel unfolds through a fragmented chronology that oscillates between Gifty's childhood in the American South, her summer in Ghana following her brother's death, her graduate work in California, and the period during which her mother—referred to in

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Gifty's childhood journals as "the Black Mamba"—lies catatonic in Gifty's bed. The novel's central tension is explicit: Gifty has "traded the Pentecostalism of [her] childhood for this new religion, this new quest" of neuroscience (Gyasi, 2020, p. 21). She studies the neural circuits of reward-seeking behavior, training mice to press levers for Ensure and then introducing random foot-shocks to test whether they can restrain themselves. The experiment is transparently a displaced inquiry into her brother Nana's addiction—and, more broadly, into whether the self can be trained to stop seeking what destroys it. Yet the novel is equally clear that science fails as a meaning-making system. As Gifty eventually concedes, both religion and science "have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 198).

Existing scholarship on *Transcendent Kingdom* has productively examined its engagement with affect and race, its transnational and diasporic dimensions, and its treatment of the science-religion binary as a false opposition. However, a sustained psychoanalytic reading of Gifty's grief remains underdeveloped. This paper addresses that gap by asking: what kind of psychic work is Gifty performing, and what does its failure tell us about the novel's construction of identity? Drawing on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, the paper argues that Gifty's identity fragmentation is produced by unresolved object-loss that cannot be consciously named—the loss of Nana, certainly, but also the loss of a coherent mother, a present father, and the religious framework that once made the world intelligible. Neither Pentecostalism nor neuroscience can metabolize this layered loss. Instead, the novel's fragmented form and its refusal of closure formally enact the condition of the melancholic subject, who cannot finish the work of grief because the lost object has never been clearly identified or relinquished. The paper proceeds in six parts. The second section establishes the psychoanalytic framework, distinguishing mourning from melancholia and situating Gifty's scientific practice within the repertoire of defense mechanisms. The third provides a review of existing scholarship on the novel, identifying the gap this paper fills. The fourth examines Nana's death and the Black Mamba's depression as twin manifestations of a loss that exceeds representation, with attention to the racial and diasporic dimensions of this unspeakability. The fifth analyzes neuroscience as both defense against and symptom of grief, attending to the novel's repeated insistence on science's explanatory limits. The sixth turns to narrative form, arguing that the novel's non-linear structure and its unresolved ending are not aesthetic choices but psychoanalytic necessities. The conclusion considers what the novel suggests about the possibility of "transcendence" when both available symbolic systems fail.

2. Theoretical Framework: Mourning, Melancholia, and the Defensive Self

Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" remains the foundational psychoanalytic account of grief and its pathologies. Mourning, Freud argues, is a normal response to the loss of a loved object: the mourner gradually withdraws libidinal attachment from what has been lost, a process that is painful but finite and conscious. Melancholia, by contrast, is characterized by an unconscious loss: the melancholic cannot identify what has been lost, and the lost object is not relinquished but incorporated into the ego itself. The self-reproaches that the melancholic directs at herself are, in Freud's formulation, really reproaches directed at the lost object, now lodged within the psyche as an internalized presence. The melancholic, Freud writes, "displays a particularly insistent communicativeness which finds satisfaction in self-exposure," yet this communicativeness does not produce relief because the reproaches are not directed at their true target (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 247). Gifty's condition in *Transcendent Kingdom* maps onto the melancholic structure with unusual precision. The losses she has suffered are multiple and layered: the departure of her father (the Chin Chin Man) when she was four; the death of Nana from heroin overdose when she was ten; the "loss" of her mother to depression, both in childhood and again during her graduate years. Crucially, none of these losses

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can be openly mourned within the symbolic frameworks available to her. Nana's death is shrouded in shame—addiction is "catching, shameful," as Bethany's mother's prohibition makes brutally clear (Gyasi, 2020, p. 127). The Black Mamba's depression is denied by the mother herself, who insists that mental illness is "an invention of the West" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 33). The father's abandonment is spoken of only in euphemism. Each loss is thus rendered unspeakable within the family's moral economy, forcing Gifty to internalize rather than articulate her grief.

The novel's most direct articulation of melancholic self-reproach comes in Gifty's confession that she wished for Nana's death: "Dear God, I wish Nana would just die already. Please, just let this be over" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 137). She tears the page out and flushes it, "hoping God would forget" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 138). This moment establishes the structure of a guilt that cannot be confessed because the addressee—God—has already been rendered unreliable. The wish for the brother's death, followed by the brother's actual death, produces a guilt that is both real and impossible to atone for within either the religious framework (which offers confession and forgiveness) or the scientific one (which offers only mechanism, not absolution). The second key concept is defense. Gifty's choice of neuroscience is presented in the novel not as a calling but as a symptom. She explicitly denies the "wholesome, made-for-TED Talk" narrative that she pursued science out of a desire to help people like her brother. Instead, she says: "this science was a way for me to challenge myself, to do something truly hard, and in so doing to work through all of my misunderstandings about his addiction and all of my shame" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 127). The phrase "work through" is telling: it invokes the psychoanalytic concept of *Durcharbeitung*, the labor of working through resistances. Yet Gifty's work is not working through in the clinical sense; it is intellectualization, a defense mechanism in which affect is displaced onto abstract cognition. She studies reward and restraint in mice because she cannot bear to study it in herself.

A third concept, repetition compulsion, illuminates the novel's structure. Gifty repeats the scene of addiction in her laboratory: mice press levers, receive shocks, and either stop or continue. The experiment is a controlled repetition of Nana's helplessness, but it is also a repetition of Gifty's own position as witness—the child who watched her brother nod off on the couch, who heard him call her a "nosy cunt," who stood by while her mother washed him in the bathtub. In the lab, she occupies the position of the scientist who controls the shocks, a reversal that grants her the mastery she lacked as a child. Yet the repetition does not produce catharsis; it produces data. The compulsion to repeat is satisfied, but the underlying conflict remains unconscious. A fourth concept, drawn from post-Freudian and race-critical psychoanalysis, is racial melancholia. Anne Anlin Cheng's work on the subject argues that racialized subjects in America are compelled to internalize and "forget" the losses of migration, slavery, and ongoing discrimination, producing a melancholic structure in which grief cannot be fully acknowledged because the losses are not socially legible as losses (Cheng, 2001). David Eng and Shinhee Han extend this framework to argue that racial melancholia names "the estrangement and alienation that is a condition of possibility for the racialized subject in America" (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 28). Gifty's family is subject to this structure: the Chin Chin Man's departure is a loss produced by American racism (he is repeatedly accused of stealing, followed in stores, unable to find work), but it cannot be mourned as such because the family lacks a vocabulary for racial trauma. The mother's depression is similarly racialized—she is a Black immigrant woman working menial jobs for white employers, enduring daily slights—but she refuses the diagnosis, insisting that depression is a Western invention. Gifty inherits this double bind: she is melancholic not only because she has lost her brother but because the conditions of her family's life in America have made certain losses unspeakable.

The novel's engagement with depression as a psychoanalytic concept is also significant. Gifty's mother suffers from what Gifty later learns to call anhedonia—"the inability to derive pleasure from things that are normally

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pleasurable" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 171). Anhedonia is the "feeling of 'nothing'" that keeps the mother in bed. But the novel is careful to distinguish between the clinical description of the mother's condition and the psychoanalytic meaning of her withdrawal. The mother's depression is not simply a neurochemical event; it is a response to loss, a refusal of a world that has taken her son and left her with a daughter she did not want. As Gifty reflects, "I only wanted Nana, too, but I only had my mother" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 154). The mother's anhedonia is a form of melancholic protest, a withdrawal of cathexis from a world that has proven intolerable. Gifty's own relationship to her mother is mediated by the "Still Face Experiment," which she describes in detail: the mother's face turns completely still, and the baby tries all of the same moves that had elicited a response only moments before, but to no effect. Gifty reflects that she and her mother "reenacted the Still Face Experiment, now repurposed as the Turned Back Experiment," except that she was twenty-eight and her mother was weeks away from sixty-nine (Gyasi, 2020, p. 45). The passage is a precise description of the melancholic's relationship to the lost object: the mother is present but unavailable, and the child's repeated attempts to elicit a response are a form of repetition compulsion that can never succeed.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Affect, Race, and the Failure of Meaning

The most substantial scholarly engagement with *Transcendent Kingdom* to date comes from Lee's (2022) analysis of the novel's affective dimensions of race. Lee argues that Gifty's concession that neither science nor religion can "make meaning" of her family's suffering should be read not as a failure of the novel's resolution but as an "epitome of the affective dimensions of race" (Lee, 2022, p. 220). Drawing on Brian Massumi and Sara Ahmed, Lee contends that depression in the novel functions as "a cornerstone for subversion which repudiates societal standards of when and how they are supposed to be (made) happy in contemporary society" (Lee, 2022, p. 225). This reading is valuable for its insistence that the novel's refusal of closure is political as well as psychological. However, Lee's framework remains primarily affect-theoretical rather than psychoanalytic; it does not address the specific mechanisms of melancholic incorporation or the role of defense in Gifty's scientific practice. A related study by Costa (2024) analyzes the relationship between diaspora and depression in both *Homegoing* and *Transcendent Kingdom*, arguing that "the traumatic experience caused by racism can lead the immigrant to develop mental illnesses, among them depression" (Costa, 2024, p. 45). Costa draws on Freud and Cathy Caruth to theorize trauma, but the analysis remains at the level of thematic correspondence rather than close psychoanalytic reading.

3.2 Diaspora, Trauma, and Depression

A second strand of scholarship situates the novel within diaspora studies. Nzusyo's (2021) MA thesis examines "strategies of navigating loss, grief and despair" in the novel, arguing that the family's losses are produced by the transnational space they inhabit (Nzusyo, 2021, p. iv). Nzusyo reads the Chin Chin Man's departure, Nana's addiction, and the Black Mamba's depression as responses to "the magnitude of loss brought about by the reality of being physically dislocated from his home country" (Nzusyo, 2021, p. 23). The thesis is particularly useful for its documentation of the novel's racial dimensions: the Chin Chin Man is accused of stealing three times in four months; the mother is called "that nigger" by her employer; Nana is called a "fucking coon" by a spectator at a basketball game (Nzusyo, 2021, p. 31). Nzusyo also notes the "betrayal by religion" as an emotional support system: the church is "littered with racist overtones," as when Mrs. Cline comments that "their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs" (Nzusyo, 2021, p. 35). This scholarship

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establishes the racial and diasporic context for Gifty's grief but does not develop a psychoanalytic account of how that grief is internalized.

3.3 Science, Religion, and the Postsecular

A third strand examines the novel's treatment of science and religion. Areqi (2024) reads the novel through a postcolonial lens, arguing that "immigration can awaken a person's potential for better or worse" and that Gifty eventually "realizes that believing in the power of God, faith, and science can change a person's life for the better" (Areqi, 2024, p. 590). This reading is somewhat optimistic relative to the novel's actual conclusion, in which Gifty lights candles in an Episcopal church but does not pray and does not claim belief. More nuanced is the review by Hester (2020), which examines "the dissonance between seeking solace in science versus the urge to find solace in religion" (Hester, 2020, para. 2). Hester's review is limited by its brevity, but it identifies the central tension that the present paper develops: Gifty is "a scientist at heart and Christian in spirit," and the novel refuses to resolve this duality (Hester, 2020, para. 3). Gyasi's own commentary on the novel is also relevant. In interviews, she has described Gifty as a character for whom "religion and science were ways of seeing" and has emphasized that both systems "have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning" (CBC Radio, 2020). Gyasi has also spoken about the racial politics of the opioid narrative, noting that she wanted to give a Black character with addiction "as much of that nuanced, careful, humanizing attention as I was seeing in the essays around white people who were suffering from opioid use disorder" (Penguin Random House, 2020). This commentary supports the paper's argument that the novel's refusal of resolution is deliberate and politically inflected. What remains underdeveloped in this scholarship is a sustained psychoanalytic account of Gifty's identity fragmentation. Lee's affect theory, Nzusyo's diaspora framework, and Areqi's postcolonial reading all illuminate important dimensions of the novel, but none provides a systematic analysis of the melancholic structure that organizes Gifty's relationship to loss. The present paper fills this gap by bringing Freud's mourning/melancholia distinction, the concept of racial melancholia, and the theory of defense mechanisms to bear on the novel's representation of grief, faith, and scientific rationality.

4. The Unmournable Dead: Nana and the Black Mamba

4.1 Nana as Lost Object

Nana occupies a structurally impossible position in the family: he is the miracle child, the answer to his mother's prayers, the "Isaac" born after years of barrenness (Gyasi, 2020, p. 18). His athletic brilliance—first in soccer, then in basketball—makes him the vehicle of the family's American dream, the proof that the sacrifice of migration was worthwhile. When he dies, he takes with him not only his own future but the narrative that made the family's suffering intelligible. Gifty's journal entries, addressed to a God she will eventually abandon, document the gradual transformation of Nana from hero ("Buzz ran after the ice cream truck today") to source of terror ("he picked up the TV and smashed it on the floor and punched a hole in the wall") (Gyasi, 2020, pp. 21–22). The code name "Buzz" persists even as the referent changes, suggesting Gifty's inability to revise her internal representation of her brother. She holds two Nanas in mind simultaneously: the boy who gave her a standing ovation after a church play, and the addict who called her a "nosy cunt." The failure to integrate these figures is the failure of mourning itself. The novel's most devastating articulation of this failure comes in Gifty's reflection on her journal: "I can never know the inside of my brother's mind, what it felt like to move through the world in his body, in his final days. My journal entries were me trying to find a way into a place that has no entrances, no exits" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 164). The metaphor of the mind as a sealed space—no entrances, no exits—describes both the impossibility of empathy and the

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structure of melancholia, in which the lost object is sealed within the ego, inaccessible to conscious articulation.

The racial dimension of Nana's death is essential to the novel's psychoanalytic architecture. Nana is not simply an addict; he is a Black addict in a state and a nation that have consistently criminalized Black drug use while sentimentalizing white addiction. Gyasi has spoken explicitly about this: she wanted to "give him as much of that nuanced, careful, humanizing attention as I was seeing in the essays around white people who were suffering from opioid use disorder" (Penguin Random House, 2020). Within the novel, the church's response to Nana's addiction is racialized: Mrs. Cline and Mrs. Morton gossip that "their kind does seem to have a taste for drugs," and Gifty overhears them from the Sunday school room, gripping her Bible so tightly that she leaves marks in the pages (Gyasi, 2020, p. 139). The loss of Nana is therefore doubly unmournable: it is the loss of a brother, and it is the loss of a Black boy whose death confirms the racist expectations of the community that was supposed to provide solace. Gifty cannot mourn Nana openly because to do so would be to acknowledge that the church's judgment was, in some sense, validated by his death—that the "rule" about "their kind" was not a rule at all, but Gifty had mistaken it for one. The novel's most explicit statement of this dynamic comes when Gifty reflects: "I wanted him to get better, be better, because I thought that being good was what it would take to prove everyone wrong. I walked around those places, pious child that I was, thinking that my goodness was proof negative. 'Look at me!' I wanted to shout. I wanted to be a living theorem, a Logos" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 141). The passage reveals that Gifty's grief is entangled with a racialized project of self-justification: she believes that if she is good enough, she can disprove the racist rule that governs her family's life. When Nana dies, this project collapses, and Gifty is left with the impossible task of mourning a brother whose death seems to confirm the very prejudice she has spent her childhood trying to refute.

4.2 The Mother's Depression as Secondary Loss

If Nana is the primary lost object, the Black Mamba's depression constitutes a second, more insidious loss: the loss of the mother as a reliable presence. Gifty's childhood is organized around her mother's absences—twelve-hour shifts at the homes of the elderly and dying—and then around her mother's collapse into bed. The first collapse occurs when Gifty is eleven, after Nana's death. The second occurs during Gifty's graduate years, prompting the novel's present-tense frame. The mother's depression is unspeakable within the family because she refuses the vocabulary of mental illness. "I don't believe in mental illness," she tells Gifty, claiming that it is "an invention of the West" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 33). This refusal is itself a defense: to name her condition would be to admit that she has been damaged by America, by the loss of her son, by the husband who abandoned her. Gifty's response is to internalize the mother's denial while simultaneously seeking a scientific vocabulary that can name what the mother will not. She learns the term "anhedonia" in college and recognizes it immediately: "Anhedonia was the feeling of 'nothing,' the thing that kept my mother in her bed" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 171). The recognition is intellectual, not emotional; Gifty can name the mother's condition in the language of psychiatry, but she cannot reach the mother through it.

The novel's most explicit engagement with psychoanalytic theory of the mother-child relation comes in Gifty's reference to Mahler's separation-individuation theory. She reflects that she knows her mother "only as she is defined against me, in her role as my mother," and that when she sees her mother as herself—holding a mouse, showing tenderness—there is "dissonance" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 180). The passage concludes: "I want her to get well because I want her to get well, and isn't that enough?" The question is rhetorical, but the answer the novel provides is no. The mother's subjectivity exceeds Gifty's need for her, and the failure to recognize this excess is part of what keeps Gifty trapped in the position of the child who waits for the mother to return. The

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mother's depression also carries a racial and diasporic charge that psychoanalytic theory must account for. The Black Mamba is a Ghanaian immigrant woman who has spent decades performing intimate labor for white families—washing Mr. Thomas's body, sitting with Mrs. Palmer as she died—while her own family disintegrated. Her depression is not simply an individual pathology; it is a response to the structural conditions of racialized gendered labor. As Costa (2024) argues, the novel presents "the relationship between diaspora and depression," suggesting that "the traumatic experience caused by racism can lead the immigrant to develop mental illnesses" (Costa, 2024, p. 45). The mother's refusal to name her depression as depression is thus also a refusal of the racialized scripts available to her: to be a "depressed Black woman" in America is to be legible in ways that she resists. Gifty's own account of her mother's depression is filtered through the "Still Face Experiment," which she describes in detail: the mother's face turns completely still, and the baby tries all of the same moves that had elicited a response only moments before, but to no effect. Gifty reflects that she and her mother "reenacted the Still Face Experiment, now repurposed as the Turned Back Experiment," except that she was twenty-eight and her mother was weeks away from sixty-nine (Gyasi, 2020, p. 45). The passage is a precise description of the melancholic's relationship to the lost object: the mother is present but unavailable, and the child's repeated attempts to elicit a response are a form of repetition compulsion that can never succeed. The novel's description of the mother's depression as a "funk" that is "sturdy, reliable like a piece of furniture" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 43) reinforces the sense that the mother's absence has become a permanent structure of Gifty's psychic life, as immovable as the bed in which the mother lies.

5. Neuroscience as Defense and Symptom

5.1 Intellectualization and the Laboratory as Sanctuary

Gifty's laboratory is described in explicitly religious terms. It is a "sanctuary, something divine," where "light is sweet and it pleases the eye to see the sun" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 195). The biblical allusion (Ecclesiastes 11:7) is not incidental: Gifty has not replaced religion with science but transferred the structure of religious feeling onto scientific practice. She baptizes her mice, prays over her experiments, and thinks of her relationship with them as "if not holy, then at least sacrosanct" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 75). The lab is a sacred space because it is a controlled space, a space where loss can be replicated without being felt. The mice die, but they die as data. This is intellectualization in the classic psychoanalytic sense: the substitution of thinking for feeling. Gifty admits that she chose neuroscience because "it seemed like the hardest thing you could do," and she wanted "to flay any mental weakness off my body like fascia from muscle" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 34). The language of self-surgery is telling: she imagines knowledge as a scalpel that can excise vulnerability. Yet the novel consistently undermines this fantasy. The mouse with the limp—the one that keeps pressing the lever despite shocks—becomes an object of identification. "I couldn't help feeling sorry for it every time it hobbled toward that lever, ready for punishment and pleasure" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 114). The scientific distance collapses; the mouse becomes Nana, and Gifty becomes the witness who cannot intervene.

The laboratory is also a space of racial and gendered negotiation. Gifty is one of only three Black PhD candidates in the entire medical school, and one of five women in a lab of twenty-eight (Gyasi, 2020, p. 22). Her scientific identity is shaped by the need to prove herself against the stereotypes that surround Black women in STEM. As Nzusyo (2021) observes, "the narrator's pursuit of neuroscience is fueled by the urge to overcome the stereotypes posed by the transnational space her family lives in" (Nzusyo, 2021, p. 28). The lab is thus not only a defense against grief but also a site of racial performance, a place where Gifty can demonstrate that she is "not like" the addicts and the depressed, that she has mastered the restraint that her brother lacked. The novel's description of the lab as a place where "every result had to be tested and then

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tested again" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 195) suggests that the lab is a space of compulsive repetition, a place where Gifty can rehearse the scene of addiction in a controlled environment. The laboratory is also a space of professional ambition. Gifty admits that she wanted "my own lab at an elite university," "a profile in The New Yorker," "invitations to speak at conferences, and money" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 195). The ambition is not separate from the grief; it is a way of managing the grief, a way of proving that she has transcended the limitations of her family's life. The novel's description of Gifty's work as "the hardest thing you could do" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 34) suggests that the difficulty of the work is itself a form of penance, a way of atoning for the guilt she feels about Nana's death.

5.2 The Limits of Mechanism: "Could It Get a Mother Out of Bed?"

The novel's most direct statement of science's insufficiency comes in the question Gifty poses to herself about her research: "Could it get a brother to set down a needle? Could it get a mother out of bed?" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 40). The questions are rhetorical, and the novel's answer is implicit throughout: no. Science can describe the neural circuits of reward and restraint; it can identify the mPFC→NAc pathway that, when stimulated optogenetically, suppresses reward-seeking. But it cannot tell Gifty why Nana kept pressing the lever, why her mother cannot rise, or why she herself cannot stop working long enough to grieve. Gyasi has spoken directly about this limitation in interviews. She describes Gifty's scientific practice as a way of asking what the brain can tell us about grief: "it can perhaps tell her the 'what or how or where' of grief, but it can't tell her why" (CBC Radio, 2020). The novel's philosophical sophistication lies in its refusal to treat this limitation as a failure of science *per se*. Science is not wrong; it is simply not enough. The same is true of religion: it is not false, but it cannot bear the weight Gifty places on it. As Gifty concludes, "I used to see the world through a God lens, and when that lens clouded, I turned to science. Both became, for me, valuable ways of seeing, but ultimately both have failed to fully satisfy in their aim: to make clear, to make meaning" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 198). The novel's treatment of the science-religion binary has been read by some critics as a resolution, a synthesis in which Gifty learns to hold both systems in productive tension. Areqi (2024), for instance, argues that Gifty "realizes that believing in the power of God, faith, and science can change a person's life for the better" (Areqi, 2024, p. 590). But this reading is too optimistic. The novel's final image is not synthesis but juxtaposition: Gifty lights two candles in an Episcopal church, one for Nana and one for her mother, and sits "in blessed silence" without praying (Gyasi, 2020, p. 214). The gesture is memorial, not theological or scientific. It acknowledges loss without explaining it. The "transcendent kingdom" is not a place where faith and science reconcile; it is the space between them, where Gifty can hold her losses without demanding that they make sense. The novel's description of the church as a place where Gifty "never bow[s] my head," "never pray[s]," and "never wait[s] to hear God's voice" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 214) suggests that Gifty has not resolved her relationship to religion; she has simply found a way to inhabit it without believing in it. The candles she lights are a ritual without a theology, a way of remembering without claiming to understand.

5.3 Science as Symptom: The Repetition Compulsion

If science functions as a defense, it also functions as a symptom—a compromise formation that simultaneously conceals and reveals the underlying conflict. The lever-press experiment is a repetition of Nana's addiction, but it is also a repetition of Gifty's helplessness. She cannot save Nana, but she can save the mouse. When the limping mouse finally stops pressing the lever after optogenetic stimulation, Gifty feels "a huge wave of relief" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 204). The relief is disproportionate to the event because it is displaced: she is not relieved that the mouse has been "cured"; she is relieved that the experiment has produced the outcome she

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could not produce in life. The mouse's restraint is a fantasy of Nana's restraint, a fantasy of the intervention that might have saved him. The novel is careful, however, to mark the limits of this fantasy. The optogenetic "cure" works on the mouse, but Nana is dead, and the Black Mamba's depression is not a lever-press problem. The scientific triumph is real—Gifty finishes her experiment, writes her paper, graduates—but it does not resolve her grief. The final chapter, set years later, finds Gifty married to Han, running a lab at Princeton, and occasionally attending an Episcopal church where she lights two candles. The gesture is ritual, not scientific; it is a way of remembering that does not claim to explain. The "transcendent kingdom" has become a small, local practice of memorialization, sustained by neither the church nor the laboratory but by the space between them.

The repetition compulsion also operates at the level of Gifty's intimate relationships. She repeats the loss of Nana in her relationship with Raymond, whom she pushes away when he tries to get close, and in her relationship with Anne, whom she abandons after Anne cries for her brother. In both cases, Gifty preemptively ends the relationship before she can be abandoned, a defense against the repetition of the original loss. The pattern is consistent with Freud's observation that the melancholic "has a keener eye for the truth than other people who are not melancholic" (Freud, 1917/1957, p. 246): Gifty knows that all relationships end in loss, and she acts on this knowledge by refusing to invest in them. The novel's ending, in which she is married to Han, is thus not a "cure" but a negotiated settlement—a willingness to risk attachment despite the certainty of loss. The novel's description of Gifty's relationship with Raymond as a "con" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 56) suggests that Gifty experiences love as a form of deception, a way of pretending that she is not the person her grief has made her. The novel's description of Gifty's relationship with Anne as "a friendship so intimate it felt romantic; it was romantic" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 188) suggests that Gifty's intimacy is always entangled with the fear of loss. When Anne cries for Nana, Gifty feels "my body stiffen, and I felt my heart harden, and I never spoke to her again" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 192). The passage is a precise description of the melancholic's defense against attachment: to love is to risk loss, and to risk loss is to relive the original trauma. Gifty's decision to marry Han is thus a significant development, but it is not a resolution; it is a choice to live with the risk of loss rather than to avoid it entirely.

6. Narrative Form as Psychoanalytic Structure

6.1 Fragmented Temporality and the Return of the Repressed

Transcendent Kingdom does not unfold chronologically. It opens with Gifty's memory of her mother in bed, then jumps to a phone call from Pastor John during her graduate years, then moves back to her childhood in Alabama, then forward to her life at Stanford, then back to her summer in Ghana. The effect is less a linear narrative than a psychic topology: past and present coexist, and the past repeatedly erupts into the present without warning. This structure has been read as a formal representation of grief's disorder, but it can be understood more precisely through the psychoanalytic concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action). Events in the past acquire their traumatic significance only retroactively, through later experiences. Gifty's childhood memories are not simply recalled; they are revised in light of Nana's death and the mother's depression. The novel's fragmented form enacts this retroactive revision: the reader, like Gifty, cannot know the meaning of an event until much later, and even then the meaning remains provisional. The novel's most striking formal feature is the presence of Gifty's childhood journal entries, addressed to "Dear God." These entries are interspersed throughout the narrative, often without transition, creating a juxtaposition between the child's voice and the adult narrator's retrospective analysis. The effect is to stage the persistence of the child's faith alongside the adult's skepticism, without resolving the tension between them. The journal entries are not

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framed as naïve errors to be corrected by science; they are presented as documents of a real and lost way of being in the world. Their inclusion suggests that the child who wrote them is not simply a former self but a constituent part of the adult narrator's fragmented identity.

Gyasi has commented on this structural choice, explaining that she wanted to make the novel's losses "feel like a kind of presence" (CBC Radio, 2020). "I knew that it was a book that was going to be filled with absence and loss and to counteract that I wanted to make those losses feel like a kind of presence" (CBC Radio, 2020). The non-linear timeline achieves this: Nana is dead, but he is present on every page, because Gifty's mind cannot stop returning to him. The form of the novel is the form of melancholia itself, in which the lost object is not absent but incorporated, not forgotten but endlessly revisited. The novel's use of the present tense in some sections and the past tense in others reinforces this effect: the present-tense sections, which describe Gifty's mother's depression and Gifty's research, feel immediate and unresolved, while the past-tense sections, which describe Gifty's childhood and Nana's addiction, feel distant and yet insistently present. The novel's structure is thus a formal enactment of the melancholic's experience of time: the past is never past, and the present is always haunted by what has been lost.

6.2 The Unresolved Ending

The novel's final chapter, set in New Jersey years after the main narrative, offers what might appear to be resolution: Gifty has a career, a marriage, a home, and a practice of occasional church attendance. Yet the resolution is deliberately incomplete. Gifty does not pray; she does not believe in the specific God of her childhood; she does not claim to have made meaning of Nana's death or her mother's suffering. She lights two candles and sits "in blessed silence" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 214). The gesture is memorial, not theological. It acknowledges loss without explaining it. This ending is consistent with the melancholic structure the novel has established. The work of mourning is never finished because the lost object was never clearly defined. Nana, the Black Mamba, the Chin Chin Man, the God of Gifty's childhood—each loss bleeds into the others. The "transcendent kingdom" of the title is not a place Gifty reaches but a space she inhabits: the space between belief and unbelief, between explanation and mystery, between the laboratory and the church. The novel's refusal of closure is not a failure of artistry but a fidelity to the psychic reality it describes.

Lee (2022) reads this refusal as politically significant, arguing that the novel's failure to "make meaning" is an "epitome of the affective dimensions of race" (Lee, 2022, p. 220). This reading is persuasive but incomplete. The refusal of closure is also psychoanalytically significant: it is the refusal of the melancholic to pretend that the work of mourning is done when the lost object remains incorporated. Gifty cannot "resolve" her grief because her grief is not a problem to be solved. It is a condition of her existence, as structural as the racism that shaped her family's life in Alabama. The novel's ending honors this condition by refusing to transcend it. The final image of Gifty lighting two candles in an Episcopal church is an image of a self that has learned to live with its fragmentation, not to overcome it. The candles are not a sign of faith; they are a sign of memory. Gifty does not believe in the God to whom she lights the candles, but she believes in the act of lighting them, the act of remembering Nana and her mother in a space that is neither the church of her childhood nor the laboratory of her adulthood. The novel's final sentence, "Always, I light two candles before I go" (Gyasi, 2020, p. 214), is a statement of ritual rather than belief, a way of holding the past without being held by it.

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7. Conclusion

This paper has argued that Gifty's identity fragmentation in *Transcendent Kingdom* is a psychoanalytic condition produced by unresolved melancholia and sustained by the inadequacy of the two symbolic systems available to her. Pentecostalism offers a framework for understanding suffering as meaningful, but it cannot accommodate the shame of addiction or the racialized judgment Gifty encounters in the church. Neuroscience offers a framework for understanding mechanism, but it cannot answer the question of meaning. Neither system can metabolize the layered losses—father, brother, mother, God—that constitute Gifty's psychic landscape. The novel's contribution to contemporary literature on grief lies in its refusal to resolve this impasse. Gifty does not choose between faith and science; she inhabits the space between them, lighting candles she does not pray before, running experiments she knows cannot save anyone. The "transcendent kingdom" is not a triumph over grief but a way of living with it—a negotiated, incomplete, ongoing settlement. In this sense, the novel offers a psychoanalytically sophisticated account of what it means to survive loss without mastering it. The self that emerges is not healed but held together, and that holding-together is, in its own way, a kind of miracle. The paper has also sought to demonstrate the value of psychoanalytic criticism for reading contemporary fiction about race, migration, and mental illness. The concept of racial melancholia, in particular, allows us to see how Gifty's grief is not simply an individual psychological event but a response to the structural conditions of Black life in America. The losses that Gifty cannot mourn—her father's departure, her brother's death, her mother's depression—are losses produced by racism, and the inability to mourn them is itself a symptom of the racial order that produced them. Psychoanalysis, in this reading, is not a depoliticizing discourse but a tool for understanding how political conditions become psychic structures.

Future research might extend this analysis in several directions. A comparative study of *Transcendent Kingdom* and other contemporary novels of Black grief—Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, for instance, or Tayari Jones's *An American Marriage*—would illuminate how melancholia operates across different configurations of race, gender, and region. A more sustained engagement with the novel's scientific content, particularly its treatment of optogenetics and the ethics of animal research, would also be valuable. Finally, a reception study of how readers respond to the novel's refusal of closure would test the paper's claim that this refusal is central to the novel's ethical and political force. The novel's final image—Gifty lighting two candles in a church she does not believe in—is an image of a self that has learned to live with its fragmentation, not to overcome it. It is an image of survival, not redemption, and it is all the more powerful for its refusal to promise more than it can deliver. The "transcendent kingdom" of the title is not a place Gifty reaches but a practice she sustains: the practice of remembering, of holding the past without being destroyed by it, of lighting candles in the dark.

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