

MEMORY AND THE NEO-SLAVE NOVEL IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* AND TA-NEHISI COATES' *THE WATER DANCER*

*Memória e o romance neo-escravo em The Underground Railroad
de Colson Whitehead e a Dança da Água de Ta-Nehisi Coates*

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ABSTRACT

This analysis investigates two recent African-American novels, namely, *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead and *The Water Dancer* (2019) by Ta-nehisi Coates from the configurations proposed by the literary genre known as neo-slave narratives. These narratives are postmodern fictional reinterpretations of 19th century slave narratives which had a fundamental role in the American process of abolition. First, I will provide a brief overview of neo-slave narratives, particularly with regards to the North American literary context, and proceed to investigate how the two novels can be classified as belonging to this genre. Second, I will focus on the role of memory in both novels as forgotten historical events and religious myths are revisited by the writers. As theoretical support, I will turn to authors such as Bernard Bell, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, Toni Morrison, Valerie Smith, among others, who investigated not only the reasons for the emergence of neo-slave narratives, but also reflected on the implications that these postmodern narratives have for the memory of slavery.

KEYWORDS: Neo-slave narrative; slavery; memory; racism.

RESUMO

Esta análise investiga dois romances afro-americanos recentes, a saber, *The Underground Railroad* (2016) de Colson Whitehead e *The Water Dancer* (2019) de Ta-nehisi Coates a partir das configurações propostas pelo gênero literário conhecido como narrativas neo-escravas. Essas narrativas são releituras ficcionais pós-modernas de narrativas escravas do século 19 as quais tiveram um papel fundamental no processo de abolição americano. Primeiramente, farei um breve panorama das narrativas neo-escravas, particularmente no que diz respeito ao contexto literário norte-americano, e procederei à investigação de como os dois romances podem ser classificados como pertencentes a esse gênero. Em segundo lugar, debruçarei sobre o papel da memória em ambos os romances, à medida que eventos históricos esquecidos e mitos religiosos são revisitados pelos escritores. Como suporte teórico, recorrerei a autores como Bernard Bell, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy, Toni Morrison, Valerie Smith, entre outros, que investigaram não apenas os motivos do surgimento das narrativas neo-escravas, mas também refletiram sobre as implicações que essas narrativas pós-modernas têm para a memória da escravidão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Narrativa neo-escrava; escravidão; memória; racismo.

EDITOR-CHEFE:

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EDITOR EXECUTIVO:

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SUBMETIDO: 30.12.2021

ACEITO: 04.03.2022

COMO CITAR:

FERREIRA, Roberto Junior. Memory and the neo-slave novel in Colson Whitehead's *The Undergrounds Railroad* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*. *Revista Brasileira de Literatura Comparada*, v. 24, n. 46, p. 41-57, jan./abr., 2022. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1590/2596-304x20222446rfj>

<http://www.scielo.br/rblc>
<https://revista.abralic.org.br>



THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AGAIN

In an interval of just two years Colson Whitehead and Ta-nehisi Coates published novels that reimagine the American antebellum slavery period and revisit the historic and legendary Underground Railroad. In addition, both authors created postmodern fictional texts that blend realistic descriptions of historical events with other elements akin to magical realism or fantastic fiction. For example, Whitehead's National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) reimagines the railroad in its literal sense, that is, as if there actually existed in the mid-1800s an underground railway line with stations, agents and conductors. Whitehead stated in an interview that it took him 16 years to finish the book and that it came about from a childhood idea that the Underground Railroad could have been "an actual railroad." (GROSS, 2016). In Coates' debut novel *The Water Dancer* (2019), the Underground Railroad is reimagined as a spiritual passage to freedom which can only be achieved via a combination of African religion and memory. Coates stated that when he was doing research for the story, he was constantly taken by the fact that "the world of the enslaved from the perspective of the enslaved was full of the supernatural and the fantastic... specifically the world of the Underground Railroad (PITTMAN, 2021)."

Because of their distinctive approach to history, I argue that the novels should be read as the latest examples of neo-slave narratives due to the autonomy that their writers have in recreating antebellum slavery. Despite the dangers of reimagining the past with such liberty, the various idiosyncratic elements present in both novels such as time travel, teleportation, spirits, ghosts and so forth, are used not to obscure the historical revisionism but to highlight specific themes usually related to the memory of slavery in contemporary American society. In other words, such a choice of narration is, more than anything, a political act for it advocates a revisioning of the past as it is filtered through the lens of the present. Writing about the use of ahistorical elements on her novels, Toni Morrison explained that rather than reconstructing the past based solely on facts she would look for "a kind of truth" because the crucial distinction for her was "not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth. Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot." (MORRISON, 1995, p. 92). Hence, Whitehead's and Coates's reassessments of nineteenth-century slavery share a remarkably similar approach to Morrison's because like *Beloved* ([1987] 2010), their novels are clearly personal constructions of historical truth rather than a reconstruction of historical facts. Thus, I want to investigate the implications that these two neo-slave narratives have for the memory of slavery in contemporary debates about race.

Memory plays an important role here be it as a manner to prevent historical amnesia as is the case of the former novel or to prevent religious amnesia as is the case of the latter. Thus, I will proceed in the following manner: first, I will situate the novels within the neo-slave narrative tradition by providing a brief genealogy of the genre; next, I will focus on the two distinct representations of the Underground Railroad and the significance of memory in neo-slave narratives as a form to prevent historical and religious amnesia. To pursue this objective and due to issues of brevity I will focus on the representation of South Carolina in *The Underground Railroad* as Whitehead revisits in this chapter forgotten historical episodes of medical racism which probably many Americans would not wish to remember. For the same reasons, I will focus on Hiram's power of spiritual conduction in *The Water Dancer* as it represents a locus of African religious mythology and memory. Finally, I expect

this investigation to contribute not only for the interpretation of *The Underground Railroad* and *The Water Dancer* but that it will also underscore the importance of recuperating the past to understand the present, even if the historical revisionism is not grounded on empirical reconstructions of historical facts but on personal views of it. As Toni Morrison stated: “fiction must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out.” (MORRISON, 1984, p. 388).

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND THE WATER DANCER AS NEO-SLAVE NOVELS

One regular feature of neo-slave narratives is to cross genre boundaries while providing a historical revisionism on nineteenth-century slavery from a contemporary perspective. This is the case of novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* ([1976] 2013), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* ([1979] 2019) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ([1987] 2018). All of these previous books have hybrid narratives which blend realistic descriptions of slavery with idiosyncratic elements which might pertain to the realm of magical realism or fantastic fiction. Neo-slave novels first appeared in the U.S. in the sixties and seventies later attracting the attention of scholars such as Bernard W. Bell (1987) and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), who debated over the use of the term neoslave/neo-slave narrative to denominate what appeared to them as a new literary genre. Bell was the first scholar to study these texts and responsible for coining the term which for him would not have the hyphen. The scholar characterized neo-slave narratives as postmodern (re)readings of former slave narratives that dialogued with and against Western literary tradition as a large number of African-American writers embraced postmodernism but due to the legacy left by institutional racism, sexism, and lack of social justice, which fostered ambivalence towards their own society, “most modern and postmodern Afro-American novelists, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, [were] not inclined to neglect moral and social issues in their narratives” (BELL, 1987, p. 284).

Bell (1987, p. 282) envisioned neo-slave novels as going against the grain of the “self-sufficient world” of postmodernism because fiction could not be disassociated “from the external world” otherwise it would lack meaning or would suggest that meaning could only exist “in the indeterminacy of its language”. As a consequence, African American writers created narratives that rediscovered and reaffirmed “the power and wisdom of their own folk tradition: African American ways of seeing, knowing and expressing reality, especially black speech, music and religion” (BELL, 1987, p. 284). In other words, African American writers were rediscovering their “distinctive voices” despite a high level of suspicion towards such notions as true voice, essence or meaning as formulated by postmodernism. Finally, Bell affirmed that Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* ([1966] 2016) and Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* ([1971] 2017) were respectively the first and second major neo-slave novels published in the U.S. by presenting a narrative which was “residually oral” (BELL, 1987, p. 289) and used elements of African folklore to describe African Americans' plight during their escape from bondage to freedom.

Rushdy published what has been so far from the major work on neo-slave novels and recognized the importance of Bell's definition, from whom he borrowed the term but added a hyphen to it. Accordingly, neo-slave novels should be understood not solely within a postmodern context but also within a specific sociopolitical milieu of the sixties of which issues about race, identity, representation, and so forth, were central in the political debate of the country hence providing a venue for a revisionism on the history

of slavery by African American writers. Thus, neo-slave novelists adopted what the scholar identified as “political intertextuality” (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 4), that is, an ideological text grounded in the political debate of the sixties which used the traditional format of nineteenth-century slave narratives to address contemporary issues. For Rushdy the sixties represented “the social logic” (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3) of the genre because the decade represented its birth and evolvment in the public sphere. Finally, neo-slave novels were contemporary texts “that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3).

On the other hand, more recently, Valerie Smith has expanded the understanding on the genre by including all sorts of novels written in the present that re-asses the institution of slavery. These novels are free to “embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes” (SMITH, 2007, p. 168) and despite their idiosyncrasies these texts provide a perspective to the memory of slavery that resonates in the politico-cultural present. Smith has also underlined the degree of autonomy that contemporary writers must create absolutely the kind of neo-slave narrative they desire; a freedom their predecessors, mostly runaway slaves, did not have in writing the first slave narratives. Finally, contemporary novelists write from a more informed standpoint as they are:

enriched by the study of slave narratives, the changing historiography of slavery, the complicated history of race and power relations in America and throughout the world during the twentieth century, and the rise of psychoanalysis and other theoretical frameworks. (SMITH, 2007, p. 169).

Therefore, *The Underground Railroad* and *The Water Dancer* represent the latest examples of neo-slave novels as both writers revisit antebellum slavery modeling their texts on nineteenth-century slave narratives as the plot describes the journey towards freedom of its main characters but this journey is narrated through a combination of diverse literary genres evidencing a high level of autonomy by these writers in approaching history and reconstructing antebellum slavery.

PREVENTING HISTORICAL AMNESIA IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

Whitehead’s neo-slave novel begins with Cora’s genealogy and in stark realism the narrative depicts how her grandmother, Ajarry, had been captured in Africa and brought to U.S. soil through the cruel journey on a slave ship. After being the property of several different owners, Ajarry was finally brought to James Randall’s plantation in Georgia, thus completing the notorious infamous episodes of the slave trade. There Ajarry gives birth to Mabel, the only slave who was known to have accomplished two unimaginable successes: Escape the plantation and the slavecatcher, Ridgeway. Cora is Mabel’s daughter and is repeatedly besieged by a young man named Caesar who gradually convinces her to escape together via the Underground Railroad. Caesar chooses Cora because he believes she could bring them good luck being Mabel’s daughter; although much later the narrative reveals that Mabel actually died during her escape, but nobody had found her body. Initially, Cora does not pay much attention to Caesar’s pledges but after being raped by four other slaves, flogged by the farm foreman, forced to live in a captivity room called “Hob” and, finally, losing her piece of land, she convinces herself that she should risk the impossible escape via the Underground Railroad to the free states.

At this point the historical realism which characterized most of this initial section is interrupted by the appearance of a literal underground train which reached the state and could remove them from bondage. As Cora wonders if “they really operate this deep in Georgia?” and “how would they alert the railroad in time?” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 26) the novel switches genres and moves from realism to historical fantasy as the presence of the train is just one of a series of anachronisms which will appear in the narrative. The idea of running away raises another concern for Cora: Caesar had told her that the escape plan included the help of a white man, Mr. Fletcher, who would take them to the embarkation point in case they managed to cover the 48 km distance between the plantation and Mr. Fletcher’s home. This concern was actually mutual as Mr. Fletcher was risking his own life in helping them and in fact, by the end of the novel, almost everyone who in some way helped Cora pays a heavy price. As Caesar warns: “[the] southern man was spat from the loins of the devil and there was no way to forecast his next evil act” and furthermore “abolitionists and sympathizers who came down to Georgia and Florida were run off, flogged, and abused by mobs, tarred and feathered ...The planters did not abide contagion (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 27).” Eventually the runaway couple manages to get to Mr. Fletcher’s home and there he takes them hidden in his cart to a barn that contains the railroad entrance. Cora and Caesar meet a second white man, Lumbly, who introduces himself as a station agent. Lumbly quickly opens a trapdoor, and the trio descends a ladder. As they were cautiously stepping down:

Cora appreciated the labor that had gone into its construction...Then they reached the tunnel, and appreciation became too mealy a word to contain what lay before her...The stairs led onto a small platform. The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light-colored stones in an alternating pattern. The sheer industry that made such a project possible. Cora and Caesar noticed the rails. Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel probably ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting towards a miraculous terminus. Someone had been thoughtful enough to arrange a small bench on the platform. Cora felt dizzy and sat down. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33)

The appreciation of the magnificent industry that resulted in the underground station strikes also Caesar who asks Lumbly who created such a marvel of engineering. Lumbly replies ironically: “Who builds anything in this country? (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33).” His ironic response reveals that despite the anachronism and the impossibility of the railroad, African American labor has been the hidden driving force behind the creation of industrial advancements such as the train station. In fact, Cora and Caesar could hardly comprehend that black bodies were able to produce such a “project” with its “sheer industry”. Matthew Dischinger points out that the railway is described as a kind of “national allegory” because “much like the promise of the US, it is inconceivable in its ambition, design and construction” (DISCHINGER, 2017, p. 89) and yet, the “black mouths” that opened the station on each side were, of course, constructed by black bodies.

Despite boasting with industry, the underground station has its caveats as Lumbly describes to the fugitive couple: due to its secrecy, the number of lines is reduced, and stations could be dismantled without previous warnings. Because of that, Lumbly could not tell the runaways where they would be heading to or, more interestingly, what both could expect once leaving the train as “Every state is different...each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33). Lumbly as well as other underground agents possess an optimistic mindset towards the

various possibilities of freedom which the Underground Railroad could provide. On the other hand, Whitehead purposely deconstructs this optimism as the train eventually demonstrates that no matter where the protagonists travel to they will have to confront different forms of racism. Ultimately, the Underground Railroad itself fails to provide freedom to Cora who remains on a journey for a better life throughout the novel. Finally, Lumbly ingeniously remarks using a sentence which could very well represent the purpose of the railway: “If you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 34).

Upon arriving in South Carolina, Cora and Caesar are introduced to the second station’s agent, Sam, a 25-year-old white man. Soon Sam informs them that their original identities will be erased during their stay because they “were runaways” and thus “they need to commit the names and the stories to the memory.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 44). Their names will now be Bessie Carpenter and Christian Markson, former slaves who had been bought by the government and were now free. Thus, the railroad has not only taken the couple out of Georgia but also out of their former identities which from now on should be a representation; especially for Cora who, ironically, finds employment at a museum as a living character of sanitized scenes from American history.

A peculiar difference between Georgia and South Carolina’s chapters is that whereas the former is depicted in stark realism the latter is portrayed in stark historical fantasy. All new arrivals go through a government program of resocialization which even includes education. The state wishes to be progressive as the new mayor tells his voters that he will continue with “the progress ticket” resembling then “his predecessor’s forward-looking initiatives.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 51). In addition, Cora “had savored this fact in a multitude of ways over the months, but the provision for colored education was among the most nourishing” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 46) so much so that Miss Handler, Cora’s school teacher, warns her black students that were they instead in North Carolina, what they were doing was considered a crime and she would probably have to pay a fine whereas the students would get thirty-nine lashes; “That’s from the law. Your master would likely have a more severe punishment.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 46). Thus, Sam believes earnestly that he had left the couple at a state that “has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancement than the rest of the south” and that “South Carolina is like nothing you’ve ever seen” as there “they get food, jobs, and housing. Come and go as they please, marry who they wish, raise children who will never be taken away. Good jobs, too, not slave work”. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 44). As in dystopian novels, the state looks too good to be true and there is probably danger lurking behind the supposedly progressive benefits.

THE HIDDEN RACIST FACE OF SOUTH CAROLINA

One requirement for all new runaways were mandatory check-ups in the hospital in order to prevent diseases and maintain good health. Cora goes to Dr. Stevens, her second doctor, and after a long examination, she is asked if she would consider having a surgery to stop bearing children. The doctor calmly talks about birth control, its positive effects and informs Cora that:

South Carolina was in the midst of a large public health program. . . to educate folks about a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby. The procedure was simple, permanent, and without risk. The new hospital was specially equipped, and he had studied under the man who pioneered the technique, which had been perfected on the colored inmates of a Boston asylum. Teaching the surgery to local doctors and offering its gift to the colored population was part of the reason he was hired. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52).

Cora replies that she is not interested in the doctor's "gift", however, in "his warm demeanor" the doctor adds that unfortunately "as of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state. Colored women who have already birthed more than two children, in the name of population control." (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52). Cora leaves the hospital briskly and gasping. She could not fathom the pressure and directness of the questions and the doctor's scientific and calm explanations. Moreover, there was the question of mandatory "which sounded as if the women. . . with different faces, had no say. Like they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased." (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52). She wonders if the doctor was offering the same surgery for her employers, the Andersons, after all Mrs. Anderson "suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit? No." (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52). In reality, Dr. Stevens was part of a government racist health program that required compulsory sterilization of African American women as a means to secretly decrease the number of individuals of African descent.

Furthermore, through Sam, the couple is informed of another perverse plan from the government: Whereas African American women were openly forced to halt childbirth, black men were fooled into believing they were receiving free medical care when instead they were guinea pigs for doctors conducting research on the advancement of syphilis. It was called the syphilis program and details of it were given to Sam by a recent hospital hire, Dr. Bertram, who tells Sam that:

'It's important research,' Bertram informed him. 'Discover how a disease spreads, the trajectory of infection, and we approach a cure. . . The syphilis program was one of many studies and experiments under way at the colored wing of the hospital. Did Sam know that the Igbo tribe of the African continent is predisposed to nervous disorders? Suicide and black moods? The doctor recounted the story of forty slaves, shackled together on a ship, who jumped overboard en masse rather than live in bondage. The kind of mind that could conceive of and execute such a fantastic course! What if we performed adjustments to the niggers' breeding patterns and removed those of melancholic tendency? Managed other attitudes, such as sexual aggression and violent natures? We could protect our women and daughters from their jungle urges, which Dr. Bertram understood to be a particular fear of southern white men. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55).

Dr. Bertram asks Sam if he had read the editorials of the newspapers over the years as they were proof of his anxieties concerning the topic. The doctor adds that:

America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization— first the women but both sexes in time—we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep. . . Controlled sterilization, research into communicable diseases, the perfection of new surgical techniques on the socially unfit—was it any wonder the best medical talents in the country were flocking to South Carolina? (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55).

The most shocking revelation of these passages is not only their racist content but, more significantly, their specific historical allusions to twentieth-century progressive eugenics and to a real syphilis program called the *Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment of Macon County*. According to Walter Nugent (2010, p. 1), progressivism was “a many-sided reform movement that emerged in the final years of the nineteenth century, flourished from about 1900 to 1920, and faded away by the early 1920s which attempted to resolve “problems that had festered and spread from the unregulated capitalist economy that developed after the Civil War ended in 1865.” (NUGET, 2010, p. 2) and, in this manner, “constituted one of the longest periods in American history when reform was generally welcome.” (NUGET, 2010, p. 2).

However, the appearance of progressivism coincides with the popularity of eugenics in early twentieth-century U.S. even though many Americans would hardly remember today that by 1920's and 30's there were several competitions for better babies or better families as well as books and films all of which addressing the positive features of eugenics. This popularity resulted in mandatory sterilizations supported by the Supreme Court and carried out by 29 states around the country, reaching by 1931 a number of over 64,000 individuals who had to undergo this procedure. In addition, Terry Bouche explains that the basic distinction between English and American eugenicists was that whereas English scientist Francis Galton's ideas advocated for a more positive selection of human traits prearranged by “judicious marriages during several consecutive generations” (BOUCHE; RIVARD, 2014), American eugenicists such as Charles Davenport, who was the founding director of the *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory* in 1904 and its *Eugenics Record Office* in 1910, focused on eliminating via sterilization undesirable traits found mostly “in poor, uneducated, and minority populations” as a means to curb their proliferation. The movement lost its popularity in the 1940's due to its association with Nazi-Germany specially after Hitler “proudly admitted to following the laws of several American states that allowed for the prevention of reproduction of the ‘unfit’ (BOUCHE; RIVARD, 2014).”

One of the most shameful racist medical procedures in American history was carried out in Macon County, AL, where four hundred black men, who had contracted syphilis, participated unbeknownst to them on medical research to investigate the evolution of the disease in its various stages. These individuals were poor sharecroppers who actually believed they were getting free medical care. According to Susan Reverby (2009, p. 2) “The study went on not for one year but for forty through the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, into the civil rights era as administrators, doctors, and nurses made it possible.” Although there is a vast body of academic articles about the experiment, the event has been hardly portrayed in the media and therefore forgotten by most Americans. By bringing back these forgotten episodes and placing them within a context of slavery, Whitehead shows that a long history of oppression and racism cannot be disassociated from the country's forgotten compliance with eugenics. In other words, the ideological principles that justified antebellum slavery were reproduced years after with pseudo-sciences such as eugenics. More importantly, the syphilis experiment represents a blatant proof on how these racist principles are again used to justify the exploitation of the black body this time via racist medical experiments rather than racist capitalist practices such as slavery.

The historical twist here is the way progressive eugenics is represented as if it were a government conspiracy against the black community that in turn could not fathom the danger lurking behind all the social benefits recently acquired. In reality, there existed a racist plan to wipe out the births of more African Americans. As Sam reports to Cora what Dr. Bertram had revealed to him Cora realizes that a

racist strategy was in place which intended to secretly eliminate the black race; a plan which involved “not only the doctors but everyone who ministered to the colored population. . . All those white hands working in concert, committing their facts and figures down on blue paper.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55). That is the reason why she remembers “the screaming woman” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 50) who was taken to the dormitories and disappeared from view after screaming on the streets: “My babies, they’re taking away my babies!” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 49). She also recollects a strange encounter with Miss Lucy, a local proctor, right after meeting Dr. Stevens because the lady was too interested to know if Cora had thought about “the hospital’s birth control program” and that “perhaps Cora could talk to some of the other girls about it, in words they could understand.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55). After all, Miss Lucy underscores she would be very pleased if Cora could help her on this cause and, moreover, “for people who had proven their worth”, such as Cora, “all sorts of new positions” and “opportunities” are regularly “opening up in town.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55). Caesar remembers the doctors asking him from what part of Africa his parents were because he “had the nose of a Beninese.” Sam’s sarcastic response sums it all: “nothing like flattery before they geld a fellow.” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55).

PROGRESSIVISM AND EUGENICS IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

It has been the subject of many scholars the degree of compliance between twentieth-century progressivism and eugenics as well as its likely reappearance in the US. According to Linda L. McCabe and Edward R. B. McCabe (2011, p. 193):

The early decades of the twentieth century, during which eugenics prospered in the United States, were turbulent socially, economically and politically. One response to this turbulence was Progressivism, which utilized a scientific approach to planning and management, engaging experts and managers to address rapid change and improve efficiency, initially in the industrial sector and eventually in government. These features had strong appeal to proponents of eugenics, who argued that science could be harnessed to improve genetic outcomes, and careful management of human breeding would be more efficient for society economically. (MCCABE; MCCABE, 2011, p. 193)

In addition, Herbert J. Hovenkamp (2017, p. 950) affirms that the possibility that many Progressives were racists is probably true as some of them “held strongly exclusionary views about immigration and supported the sterilization of perceived mental defectives.” All in all, Hovenkamp (2017, p. 950) adds that:

Progressives themselves were highly diverse on the question of race, ranging from the explicit racism of people like John R. Commons or Edward A. Ross, to the more egalitarian views held by the mainly white founders of the NAACP in 1909, including Jane Addams, John Dewey, Oswald Garrison Villard, and also Afro-Americans W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Ida B. Wells. (HOVENKAMP, 2017, P. 950)

One question that hovers over the novel’s direct allusion to progressive eugenics is the possibility that it could resurface today albeit with different names. In this regard, Garland Allen finds various similarities between the early twenty-first and early twentieth centuries and raises serious concerns on the actual presence of eugenicist mindsets in contemporary U.S. particularly as some individuals are regarded too expensive to maintain as health costs are taken into consideration:

As health care costs skyrocket, we are coming to accept a bottom-line, cost-benefit analysis of human life. This mindset has serious implications for reproductive decisions. If a health maintenance organization (HMO) requires in utero screening, and refuses to cover the birth or care of a purportedly “defective” child, how close is this to eugenics?... If eugenics means making reproductive decisions primarily on the basis of social cost, then we are well on the road. (ALLEN, 2001, p. 61).

Thus, the dystopian representation of South Carolina not only readdresses progressive eugenics but also engages readers to ponder if such racist past could be re-enacted today as genetic arguments are used to justify cutbacks in health costs, employment, insurance or all other sorts of benefits. Moreover, one should be constantly aware that specific groups might be targeted for genetic alterations particularly minorities. In other words, racism runs deeply within eugenicist practices. Finally, Whitehead eventually creates a neo-slave novel against historical amnesia as such forgotten past is revisited and placed within antebellum slavery period. It is this recuperation of a largely forgotten historical event that *The Underground Railroad* brings back to memory and places again under public scrutiny.

AFRICAN RELIGIOUS MYTHOLOGY IN *THE WATER DANCER*

Coates’ neo-slave novel might be considered as a spiritual companion to Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* due to its vast use of pre-colonial African religious elements as the protagonist, Hiram (Hi) Walker, recounts how he took pains to eventually master his power of conduction, a type of spiritual teleportation, and then teleport himself as well as other slaves to free states. The narrative is in flashback from an indeterminate point in the second half of the 1800s and revolves around Hiram’s power of conduction as well as his downright involvement with the Underground Railroad. The protagonist is the son of a slave, Rose, and her white master, Howell Walker, the owner of Lockless, a plantation in Virginia. From an early age Hiram realized that he had an exceptional ability with memory as he could memorize sentences before he was even able to read. The only flaw with his perfect memory is the visual remembrance of his mother who had to abandon him because she was sold to slavery by his father and never seen after. Early on, the novel tells readers that the more Hiram tries to remember his mother, the more powerful his ability for spiritual conduction becomes. As he ponders “my power was always memory, not judgment” (COATES, 2019, p. 92), the novel reveals that memory or, more specifically, the traumatic memory of his separation from Rose is one essential element for conduction and eventually freedom.

Yet, there are other elements that combined would enable the protagonist to fully master his conduction power and these are: the presence of water, the traumatic memories of slavery and, finally, the necklace of shells that belonged to his mother. Together these elements assert the deeply religious content of *The Water Dancer* as they relate to traditional African religious practices and ultimately illustrate Hiram’s spiritual journey towards freedom. Parallel to the process of controlling conduction, Hiram is recruited by Corrine Quinn to be part of the Underground Railroad and this provides him a strong purpose in life as he opens his heart to Raymond about the secret agency: “It was who I was and I had no idea what I would make of my life without it.” (COATES, 2019, p. 264).” Thus, Hiram’s personal spiritual journey becomes entangled with the narrative of the Underground as Corrine declares that:

This power—this ‘Conduction’—this is the railroad that might turn a week’s journey into an instant. Without it, we can’t menace our enemy. With it, distance is nothing to us and we might strike at them wherever. In short, we need you, Hiram—not just as Hiram the forger of letters and Hiram the running man, but as one who can return these people, our people, to the freedom given to all.” (COATES, 2019, p. 150).

Conduction works through a combination of traumatic memories, religious myths and objects, recuperating a dynamically cultural and spiritual history that originated in pre-colonial Africa but has spread to the Americas via European colonization. In so doing, the novel revisits diasporic African deities and mythic elements which then lead its heroic characters to escape slavery. As Coates acknowledged in an interview mentioned earlier:

When I went into the oral histories, there were all sorts of myths and ideas about powers that enslaved people could use. One of my favorites was that if you put graveyard dust in your shoes, the hounds wouldn’t be able to track you. Harriet Tubman, who very much depicted herself as a mystical figure—or a spiritual figure, someone touched by God, felt called by God, was revered and had the nickname Moses. The world of enslaved people, specifically the world of the Underground Railroad, is a world of heroics, epics, and sagas—and yes, the world is charged with the supernatural. It’s not often depicted that way. It wasn’t that much of a reach for me to put it in the book. (PITTMAN, 2021).

What Coates has not highlighted is the degree that the fantastic world of the enslaved is deeply rooted in traditional African religion in *The Water Dancer*. Besides, by recuperating such religion Coates confronts the idea that once taken from Africa and being victims of innumerable traumatic historical events such as slavery for example, the slaves had gradually forgotten their African ancestry as Western colonization and institutional racism wiped out the remaining residues of a religion which their predecessors worshipped. Such religious recuperation resembles Whitehead’s effort against historical amnesia as progressive eugenics is dug out of history in *The Underground Railroad* and placed for the readers to remember. In Coates’ case the target is religious amnesia as African deities are revisited and although these deities became quite popular in African diasporic countries such as Brazil, Haiti and Dominican Republic for example, the same cannot be said about the US. Thus, Coates puts into practice what Toni Morrison had commented about the role of the artist: “the artist is the true historian who does not need to make new myths but needs to re-discover the old ones.” (MORRISON, 1974, p. 89).

SANTI BESS, ROSE AND HARRIET TUBMAN AS MAMI WATA

Hiram’s power of conduction comes from a family heritage of a line of women that includes his grandmother, Santi Bess, and mother, Rose. The two have similar appearances in the novel as both belong to the realm of memory and spirituality. The former is acknowledged by the community of slaves, or the Tasks as they are called in the book, as being a mysterious figure who was able to escape along with forty-eight other Tasks to freedom by walking over the water, whereas the latter appears during Hiram’s various painful episodes of conduction and is represented as a mysterious water spirit. When Hiram demonstrates to Sophia, his girlfriend, how spiritual conduction works she explains that it all resembles dancing just like the legend of Santi Bess: “It’s like dancing.’ Ain’t that what you said? It’s what Santi Bess done. She ain’t walk into no water. She danced, and she passed that dance on to you.” (COATES, 2019, p. 329). Sophia connects Santi Bess to a precolonial African legend about a water goddess who saved an African King:

‘It’s a story,’ she said. ‘Was a big king who come over from Africa on the slave ship with his people. But when they got close to shore, him and his folk took over, killed all the white folks, threw ‘em overboard, and tried to sail back home. But the ship run aground, and when the king look out, he see that the white folks’ army is coming for him with they guns and all. So the chief told his people to walk out into the water, to sing and dance as they walked, that the water-goddess brought ‘em here, and the water goddess would take ‘em back home. It’s what Santi Bess done, ain’t it? She all I could think about when we came back up out of it last night. That king. The water dance. Santi Bess. You.’ (COATES, 2019, p. 329).

Sophia’s story resonates to *The Underground Railroad* as it resembles Dr. Bertram telling Sam about a group of forty African prisoners who preferred to jump into the ocean in shackles and die rather than becoming slaves. The doctor could not fathom a “kind of mind that could conceive of and execute such a fantastic course!” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55) in the same manner that Sophia could not imagine how Hiram could actually teleport himself to different places. In Coates’s version of the same story the fantastic element becomes forefront and connects Santi Bess’s spiritual achievement of water dancing to diasporic African legends related to the myth of *Mami Wata*. Such a power is not confined to Hiram’s grandmother and mother though but also to Harriet “Moses” Tubman who acts as an African shaman teleporting people out of slavery by walking over water.

Such references to water goddesses illustrate the connections that Santi Bess, Rose and Harriet Tubman have to African religion particularly to its diasporic reach as they could be fictional representations of *Lasirèn* (Haiti), *Yemanjá* (Brazil) or *Santa Marta la Dominadora* (the Dominican Republic); African-based goddesses of rivers and oceans belonging to a pantheon of sea and river goddesses called *Mami Wata*, “a general name used for the hybridized river and sea goddesses popularized across Africa and the African diaspora in the nineteenth century.” (KRISHNAN, 2012, p. 19). The novel does not merely suggest a connection between these female characters to *Mami Wata* but makes a direct reference to this African deity as by the end of the novel Hiram is able to fully remember his mother and states that:

For so long I could not see, could not remember, but I see it all now. Her bright joyous eyes, her smile, her dark-red skin. And I remember her stories of the world that was, stories brought across from water, stories she would share only at night, before bed, if I had been a good boy that day. I remember how the stories glowed in my mind, how they filled our nights with colors. . . And Mami Wata, who lived in that paradise under the sea, where we would all arrive, after our Task, and find our reward. (COATES, 2019, p. 343).

According to Henry John Drewal, *Mami Wata* is a highly complex myth as followers are drawn to her in search of many different gains such as financial improvement, success in procreation as well as pleasures in spiritual devotion. Moreover, *Mami Wata* provides especial improvements for female worshippers who eventually become powerful priestesses or healers and thus asserting “female agency in generally male-dominated societies.” (DREWAL, 2008, p. 62). Yet, Drewal highlights that *Mami Wata* can also represent danger because a liaison with this African deity may require a substantial sacrifice “such as the life of a family member or celibacy in the realm of mortals.” (DREWAL, 2008, p. 62).

Such dangerous liaison can be seen right at the start of the novel as Hiram is driving his white brother Maynard Walker and a prostitute, who Maynard had hired for the night, to their secret place. As the chaise nears the river Goose, Hiram sees Rose’s spirit revolved in a mysterious blue light and dancing on the bridge that crosses the river:

And she was patting juba on the bridge, an earthen jar on her head, a great mist rising from the river below nipping at her bare heels, which pounded the cobblestones, causing her necklace of shells to shake. The earthen jar did not move; it seemed almost a part of her, so that no matter her high knees, no matter her dips and bends, her splaying arms, the jar stayed fixed on her head like a crown. And seeing this incredible feat, I knew that the woman patting juba, wreathed in ghostly blue, was my mother. (COATES, 2019, p. 6).

Hiram has always avoided this bridge due to the traumatic memories of family members gone “Natchez-way”: An expression recurrently used by Coates which stands for slavery or death. He is sure that neither Maynard nor the prostitute had seen the apparition “on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost.” (COATES, 2019, p. 5). During the drive, Hiram reveals his personal plight for being the slave of his own ludicrous white brother who he describes as “Maynard the Goof, Maynard the Lame, Maynard the Fool, the rotten apple who’d fallen many miles from the tree.” (COATES, 2019, p. 5). As rain starts to pour down soaking the three travelers, the chaise is abruptly shoved out of the dusty road and into the river as if someone had deliberately pushed it. Hiram recollects this event as something that “shook forever [his] sense of a cosmic order” (COATES, 2019, p. 7) as it represents just the beginning of a series of other fantastic events which will occur in his life exposing “the ends of our knowledge and how much more lies beyond it.” (COATES, 2019, p. 7). As all occupants are thrown into the river, Hiram realizes that both his brother and he are being carried away from the bridge through a violent current. He sees Maynard resurfacing and calling for help and thinks that “he had never before recalled him speaking in a manner that reflected the true nature of [their] positions” (COATES, 2019, p. 9), that is, during the drowning Hiram becomes the master and Maynard the servant, reversing the pitiful chain of slavery to which he was bonded.

Yet, at the moment both brothers are thrown into the river their fate is sealed by Rose who magically saves Hiram and lets Maynard to drown. In the novel spirituality is intrinsically related to memory as Hiram’s memories of lost friends and relatives get focused on only one apparition, his mother, he experiences the first fantastic event of spiritual conduction. As he drowns, he sees Rose stopping dancing and kneeling before him in order to place the necklace of shells around his neck. He has a vision of the traumatic episode of being separated from Rose and sees himself as a young crying boy turning to old Hiram and offering the necklace of shells. Much later in the day he is spotted by Raymond lying unconsciously at the river banks and is taken back to Lockless amid the dismay of everyone else who is now mourning Maynard’s death. Thus, the woman on the bridge kills Maynard as an act of revenge for the revolting situation Hiram is bonded to, for her going Natchez-way due to the man who is both her owner and Hiram’s father and, finally, for colonization and slavery which represent a dishonorable past in American history.

Besides, the woman on the bridge creates thus a disturbing effect as Rose can be a fantasy born out of traumatic memories or a water spirit which helps Hiram survive other horrific events in his life. Whichever the case, in *The Water Dancer* female spiritual power is associated with nature as much as it is associated with magic and memory as Santi Bess, Rose and Harriet Tubman appear as a nexus of reality and spirituality. Furthermore, the dependence on water reinforces the connection to African based diasporic religions since water is considered a sacred place; a place where magic can happen and goddesses such as *Yemanjá* and *Lasirèn* live in. The three female characters might also represent the

powerful priestesses or healers described by Drewal linking the narrative to precolonial belief systems rooted in black Africa. Finally, these three women are fictional renditions of the African deities of rivers and oceans comprised in the myth of *Mami Wata*; a deity that has become a popular religious icon in postcolonial African diasporic communities.

THE NECKLACE OF SHELLS AS A SPIRITUAL AND MNEMONIC DEVICE

Heading towards the end of the novel Hiram realizes that he needed something more powerful to acquire total control of conduction and be able to teleport more people with him out of Lockless. He understands that previous conductions happened without his control as they were all involuntary but that gradually he was able to master them. He tells Sophia that he needed “a deeper memory” and “an object tied to that memory to be [his] guide” (COATES, 2019, p. 330) because that would enhance his power. Sophia mentions a coin that his white father had given him, and that Hiram would carry everywhere but he replies that the coin does not have any power whatsoever. One day as Hiram is perusing through his father’s study, he is caught by an ornate rosewood box which was kept in the bottom drawer of a mahogany highboy. As he opens the box he sees the necklace of shells and, in an instant, he is sure that it was the same necklace he had seen in his vision during the drowning “shaking from the neck of the dancer, shaking from the neck of my mother.” (COATES, 2019, p. 336). He places the necklace around his neck and realizes that:

when the hook-and-eye clasp locked into place like a lost jigsaw, a wave rippled out through my fingers, through my wrists and arms, into the deepest part of me, so that I stumbled back. When I regained myself, I knew that the wave, which was only then subsiding, was the force of memory. The memory of my mother. (COATES, 2019, p. 336).

The stone is a type of spiritual and mnemonic device that helps Hiram reconnects with the traumatic memories of his mother putting into place all the fragments he “had known as the words of others.” (COATES, 2019, p. 336). It also reveals how Rose’s end was as well as who was responsible for that. He feels the urge to get a spade and fork and kill his father but realizes that this traumatic memory was essential for spiritual conduction and that his beloved close friends depended on such power.

Interestingly, shells form a crucial aspect of worship in diasporic African religions. According to Mari Silva (2021, p. 128) “shells serve as the third eye to gain access into the realm of divinities and our ancestors” as well as access “into all ages; the past, present, and future” in Yoruba tradition. They act as the Orishas’ voice and “speak uniquely”. To make them work they are kindly thrown onto a divining platform and “depending on how they fall and the pattern they create, the diviner then reads their interpretation based on sacred knowledge about the cowrie shells’ patterns (p. 128).” Ultimately, shells hold vital energy called *ashé*, and are the locus of the power of the deities associated with them. In his investigation of *Santería*, Miguel de La Torre notes that shells and stones, known as *otanes*, are thought to be infused with the presence of the ancestral Yoruba gods who are recreated in diasporic African religions. Torre explains that:

According to legend, when the orishas left their community of Ilé- Ifé, what remained were stones resonating with their *ashé*. Today these stones can be found scattered among ordinary rocks, and by “listening” carefully the devotee of *Santería* can discern which stones are alive with an orisha’s presence

... Wherever they are found, they will fill believers with the sudden urge to pick them up and take them home. Indeed, keeping their otanes safe and with them was so important that when the Yoruba were deported to Cuba as slaves, they would swallow them in order to ensure the orishas' presence at their new destination. (TORRE, 2004, p. 135).

The necklace of shells is the material object that connects Hiram to precolonial Africa; consequently, it is still a powerful fragment of a larger history and a touchstone of memory and spirituality. Hiram may not know why the shells were important in African religious rituals but definitely the object acquires a new meaning for him, one that is just as spiritually powerful and visionary. Besides being a fragment of the past, the shells concentrate an enormous spiritual and mnemonic energy allowing Hiram to recover erased histories and make plans about the future.

WHY WRITE NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES

Morrison noted that the writers of the original slave narratives “were silent about many things, and they ‘forgot’ many other things” (MORRISON, 1995, p.110), so that her task as a novelist was to become some sort of archeologist who would reconstruct historical events and perform what she termed as “literary archeology (MORRISON, 1995, p. 111).” In other words, African America writers of neo-slave novels attempt to reimagine the experiences lived by enslaved Americans and, at the same time, produce a reconsideration and re-evaluation of slavery particularly worrying about its legacy to our historical present. *The Underground Railroad* and *The Water Dancer* thus revisit the former slave narratives expanding the genre and adapting it to a contemporary perspective. In Whitehead’s book the Underground Railroad is represented as if it was a synchronic moving camera cataloguing the diverse forms of racism as Cora embarks on a journey across state lines. In so doing, Whitehead revisits forgotten historical episodes such as medical racism disguised as progressive eugenics and warns readers on the possibility that similar medical decisions might be in practice today. In Coates’s novel the same railroad is represented as a spiritual passage for freedom as Hiram teleports himself and others to free states. The interesting aspect in Coates’s vision of the Underground Railroad is its combination of precolonial African religion mythology and memory evidencing the importance of establishing a narrative memory with the colonial past in order to demonstrate a dynamism of precolonial African religious myths that, though irrevocably altered by the passage of time and the imposition of diasporic forces, remains retrievable and itself fertile. Eventually, Coates creates a type of spiritual fiction that re-appropriates *Mami Wata* as a means to reclaim African religious mythology and place it along with the history of the Underground Railroad.

I also tried to highlight how significant a role memory plays in both novels as forgotten historical events and religious legends are revisited and thus placed again for public scrutiny. Medical eugenics and precolonial African religion are brought to surface and as a consequence become integrated into the memory of slavery. Both novels then present a link between historical time and contemporary understanding of slavery and its legacy. As Smith (2007, p. 168-169) comments about neo-slave narratives:

[T]hese texts illustrate the centrality of the history and the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural, and national identities. Further, they provide a perspective on a host of issues that resonate in contemporary cultural, historical, critical, and literary discourses, among them: the challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities)

for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion; the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom. (SMITH, 2007, 168-169).

Thus, *The Underground Railroad* and *The Water Dancer* explore the power of narrative to recover historical and religious events eventually asserting the importance of writing neo-slave narratives today as a form to reclaim and review dominant historical discourses by focusing on forgotten events. In so doing, both writers create texts that contribute to the memory of slavery and, as a result, to debates about race within an American socio-political context.

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