

Unveiling the subversive potential: Challenging dominant ideological discourses in selected literary texts

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DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2024.16.2.1

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Hegemonic discourse. Faultline. Residual elements. Yaa Gyasi. Colson Whitehead.

The unconscious of the text utilizes residual elements from the past as strategic faultlines, purposefully disrupting the articulation of the dominant hegemonic discourse. These residual elements function as floating signifiers within the discursivity field, calling attention to their presence on the surface. As a result, the convergence of crisis and oppression forces the reader to question the validity and authority of the dominant discourse. In this study, a comprehensive strategy is proposed aiming to question the entrenched ideological discourses prevalent in specific literary texts: *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead and *Homegoing* (2017) by Yaa Gyasi. This strategy will be outlined in detail and subsequently applied to select literary works to demonstrate its efficacy and practical application. Moreover, it also emphasizes the strategic utilization of culture. It highlights the promotion of dynamic approach rather than passive agreement, and creation of a platform for collective resistance rather than a mere survival space. The strategy recognizes the value of culture in achieving specific goals, harnessing cultural resources to encourage active engagement against oppressive forces. Additionally, the strategy aims to establish a collaborative space where individuals unite to challenge prevailing norms and systems, acknowledging the importance of collective action and solidarity in effective resistance.

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Look outside as you speed through,
and you'll see the true face of America.

Colson Whitehead (2016, 69)

Literature has long been recognized as a powerful vehicle for challenging prevailing ideologies and questioning dominant discourses. By utilizing a democratic genre like the novel, writers have the ability to engage readers in critical reflection and offer alternative perspectives that challenge the status quo. In this regard, thinkers like Pierre Macherey, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Raymond Williams, and Allan Sinfield emphasize the role of ideology and the social context in the production of meaning. Macherey argues that the unconscious of the text reveals the hidden workings of ideology (Rivkin and Ryan 2008, 703), while Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory examines how discursive practices construct social and political identities within specific ideological frameworks (2001, 109). Williams' framework invites critical analysis of texts, considering their relationship to the dominant ideology, their engagement with residual elements, and their potential to contribute to emergent cultural and social change (1976, 97). Sinfield argues that texts contain elements that expose the faultlines of power and ideology within society (1992, 108). These are points of conflict and contradiction that disrupt the smooth surface of the text, revealing hidden power relations and ideological struggles.

Within the realm of literary texts, the unconscious of the text emerges as a mechanism that harnesses the power of residual elements from the past to create faultlines within the text's structure. The unconscious elements may stem from the author's own unconscious, societal norms and values, or collective cultural influences.

It [the unconscious] refers to that ideological horizon which conceals only because it is interminable, because there is always something more, but it refers also to that abyss over which ideology is built. Like a planet revolving round an absent sun, an ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of. (Macherey 1978, 132)

Notably, faultlines serve as deliberate disruptions, injecting crisis into the overall narrative, and ultimately challenging the articulation of the dominant hegemonic discourse. In this sense, as Quan Zhou states, "The communicative memory of each character in *A Mercy* serves to shape his or her individual identity. More importantly, through his or her own efforts, the individual manages to transform the communicative memory into the collective cultural memory" (2019, 3). Residual elements, in this context, can be understood as fragments from previous historical periods or marginalized perspectives that have not been fully absorbed into the dominant cultural fabric. These fragments can function as floating signifiers, reemerging from the depths of the text unconscious to disrupt and destabilize the coherence of the dominant discourse: "By means of the text it becomes possible to escape from the domain of spontaneous ideology, to escape from the false consciousness of self, of history, and of time" (Macherey 1978, 132). Texts car-

ry the traces of alternative traditions, counter-narratives, and suppressed voices – aiming to explore the complex interplay of diverse voices, languages, and discourses within a text or discourse (Bakhtin 1981, 76). Accordingly, readers enter the world of coexistence and interaction of multiple voices, each representing distinct social, cultural, and ideological positions.

The reemergence of these residual elements and the consequent crisis create a moment of tension and confrontation within the text. The crisis serves as a catalyst for questioning the validity and authority of the dominant discourse, exposing its limitations, biases, and power imbalances. It prompts readers to challenge the imposed closures of the dominant ideology and invites them to reassess their understanding of the social, political, and cultural frameworks that shape their lives.

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2017) challenge and disrupt the existing power structures by shedding light on the intertwined processes of nation-building and storytelling. In doing so, they expose the underlying mechanisms that shape a nation's history and identity. The novels explore how storytelling plays a pivotal role in the construction and preservation of a nation's narrative. In this sense, it is worth mentioning that the stories we tell ourselves and others shape our collective understanding of the past and present. By highlighting the experiences of enslaved individuals and their resistance, the novels bring forth marginalized voices that have been historically silenced.

This study aims to propose a comprehensive strategy for interrogating the ideological discourses at work in the selected literary texts. By outlining this strategy, we offer readers a framework through which they can engage with texts as sites of resistance and transformation. The proposed strategy will encompass a range of approaches, including deconstruction, counter-narratives, intertextuality, and the exploration of alternative perspectives. By unraveling the faultlines and exposing the residual elements within these texts, we hope to inspire readers and scholars to engage with literature as a site of contestation, resistance, and the reimagining of alternative possibilities.

Within late capitalist culture, hegemonic domination operates through multifaceted mechanisms that extend beyond straightforward oppression. As Paulo Freire states, "One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness" (2000, 51). Moreover, its effectiveness lies in its ability to imbue those under its control with a sense of what can be perceived as "liberation". This complex form of domination functions in diverse ways to shape subjectivities that do not perceive themselves as oppressed, except in relation to their own perceived personal shortcomings. Additionally, it produces subjectivities that are oblivious to their participation in systemic oppression inflicted upon others. This intricate web of power relations ensures the maintenance of the status quo by producing subjectivities that are complicit in their own subordination and the subjugation of marginalized groups. Understanding these complex mechanisms is crucial for critical analysis and resistance, as it allows for the identification and interrogation of the strategies employed by hegemonic forces to perpetuate their dominance.

The main objective of this essay is to broaden perspectives and conversations regarding Black issues and Black life. Its aim is not only to reposition the importance of Black cultural ontologies but also to revitalize their crucial significance in the political consciousness and imagination. This will be achieved through comparative exploration of the ‘politics’ of blackness.

Joel Pfister states that “the affirmative capacity of culture is to help produce incentives, energies, and ideas that promote progressive social change” (2000, 610). Active engagement harnesses the positive potential inherent in cultural practices, beliefs, and expressions, enabling the creation of incentives, energies, and ideas that propel progressive social change. By actively participating in cultural endeavors, individuals and communities can tap into the transformative power of culture to generate motivations, ignite passions, and cultivate innovative concepts that drive societal advancements. This affirmative capacity of culture serves as a catalyst for positive transformations, encouraging individuals to actively shape and challenge existing norms, systems, and structures.

In Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*, there is a clear intention to acknowledge and revive the rich accomplishments and dynamics of slave culture, predominantly manifested through oral traditions. This encompassed various expressive forms, including spirituals, adaptations of African religious customs merged with Christianity, secular songs, work songs, tales, dances, the development of creative language, jokes, rituals of insult, and innovative narrative techniques (2007, 220). Levine challenges the views of certain historians who dismiss these cultural expressions as mere “therapeutic” remedies that served as substitutes for true emancipation. Rejecting this reductionist perspective, Levine argues that these expressive arts and sacred beliefs held much deeper significance. They served as vital instruments for sustaining life, preserving sanity, promoting physical and mental well-being, and fostering self-respect among the enslaved population. According to Levine, slave music, religion, and folk beliefs constituted an entire sacred realm that provided essential distance and separation between the slaves and their owners (168), effectively preventing the transformation of legal slavery into spiritual subjugation.

The analyzed novels aimed to portray the complexity and adaptability of “Negro life” and “folk” culture. Colson and Gyasi have depicted this expansive life and culture in relation to, but not solely defined by, racial and economic oppression. In her introductory chiasmus, Zora Neale Hurston assigns feminine attributes to the positive and flexible aspects of culture, memory, and forgetfulness. She states, “women forget all those things they don’t want to remember and remember everything they don’t want to forget” (2021, 1). The male and female Black workers introduced by Hurston in the opening paragraphs form a community that employs social interaction, storytelling, gossip, and humor to both mentally “forget” the hardships endured in their work and to regain a sense of adaptability, agency, empowerment, and wholeness.

REIMAGINING HISTORY: DISCOURSE CONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead is a groundbreaking novel that reimagines the historical Underground Railroad, a secret network of safe escape routes for slaves in the antebellum American South, as a physical network of secret tunnels and trains. It serves as a prime example of a literary work that utilizes residual elements (Williams 1976, 97) from the past as strategic faultlines (Sinfield 1992, 108) within its structure, purposefully disrupting the articulation of the dominant hegemonic discourse. Whitehead's novel employs historical residual elements and delves into the unconscious of the text as powerful tools to challenge and subvert entrenched ideological discourses prevalent in society.

The actual accounts of violence, based on race, can go beyond the time of emancipation and continue to exist in the present day. Narratives of oppression disclose what has been repressed for decades and buried in the unconscious of the people, such accounts come to the surface using residual elements of the past. What the protagonist Cora states here opens up a gap in the text, regarding the fact that slavery exists but only the chains are different:

If they had been sensible and kept running, she and [fellow runaway] Caesar would be in the Free States. Why had they believed that two lowly slaves deserved the bounty of South Carolina that a new life existed so close, just over the state line? It was still the south, and the devil had long nimble fingers. And then, after all the world had taught them, not to recognize chains when they were snapped to their wrists and ankles. The South Carolina chains were of new manufacture – the keys and tumblers marked by regional design – but accomplished the purpose of chains. They had not traveled very far at all. (Whitehead 2016, 145)

The above quotation emphasizes that even though the chains in South Carolina may have appeared different, they were still chains of slavery. The mention of “regional design” suggests that oppression and control may take on different forms depending on the context, but the impact remains the same. Herein, the repressed come to the surface – constructing faultlines – and generate crisis within the dominant discourse. The image of a chain which takes different forms but is still the same haunts readers' minds, prompting them to ask questions about the validity of standardized discourse.

Despite the potential risks associated with freely reimagining the past, the novel *The Underground Railroad* skillfully incorporates an array of idiosyncratic elements, including time travel, teleportation, spirits, and ghosts. Rather than obscuring historical revisionism, these elements serve a purposeful role in accentuating particular themes, often intertwined with the collective memory of slavery within contemporary American society. In essence, this narrative approach becomes more than a mere storytelling technique; it emerges as a political act, advocating for a reevaluation of the past through the nuanced lens of the present.

The inclusion of time travel and supernatural elements creates a rich tapestry of narratives that serve as vehicles for addressing pressing sociopolitical issues surrounding race, power, and systemic oppression. Through this deliberate fusion

of history and fiction, the novel challenges conventional notions of linear time and historical truth. It interrogates the ways in which cultural memory and the retelling of history are intertwined, recognizing that our understanding of the past is inevitably filtered through the lens of the present. In doing so, it unearths the cultural dynamics and complexities that shape our perception of the past: “And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes – believes with all its heart – that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn’t exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are” (Whitehead 2016, 242).

In this political act of revisiting history, the novel serves as a catalyst for critical engagement and collective introspection. It calls for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the past, inviting readers to confront the uncomfortable realities and lingering effects of slavery in contemporary American society. By embracing the interplay between reality and fiction, the narrative sparks meaningful conversations and fosters a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of cultural memory and the ongoing quest for justice and equality.

Rather than aiming for a faithful reproduction of historical facts, the narrative incorporates residual elements of memory, emotion, and cultural perspectives, interweaving them to create a rich tapestry that reflects the multifaceted nature of truth and the complexities of human experience. This deliberate approach embraces the cultural and contextual nuances embedded within historical events, highlighting the inseparable relationship between history and culture. By engaging with the personal constructions of historical truth, the novel invites readers to critically examine their own understanding of the past and to recognize the diverse perspectives that shape our collective understanding of history and culture. In this regard, as stated by Toni Morrison, “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” (1984, 388).

Hence, the mentioned authors embraced what Ashraf Rushdy referred to as “political intertextuality” (1999, 4), a narrative approach that draws upon ideological texts rooted in the political discourse of the 1960s. By employing the conventional structure of 19th-century slave narratives, Whitehead skillfully engages with contemporary concerns, forging a powerful connection between past and present: “‘I have black skin, but I don’t have a tail. As far as I know – I never thought to look,’ Cora said. ‘Slavery is a curse, though, that much is true.’ Slavery is a sin when whites were put to the yoke, but not the African. All men are created equal, unless we decide you are not a man” (2016, 157). Whitehead weaves together diverse textual threads to create a cohesive narrative fabric that transcends time and space. He deftly navigates the faultline between historical contexts and modern sensibilities, using the inherited framework of slave narratives as a means to tackle urgent political and social issues:

Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood. With the surgeries that Dr. Stevens described, Cora thought, the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that’s

what you do when you take away someone's babies – steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better. (104)

The deep-seated wounds and complexities embedded within the collective memory, urging readers to confront the difficult conversations surrounding race, identity, and societal transformation. In this regard, “trying to protect threatened and vulnerable truths and denouncing abuse of power and oppression becomes a courageous, potentially dangerous act of resistance” (Pesso-Miquel 2007, 149). Moreover, considering residual and emergent elements (Williams 1976, 97), the novel engages with the ever-evolving dynamics of the politico-cultural landscape, amplifying marginalized voices and challenges us to consider the ways in which the memory of slavery shapes the social fabric and influences the pursuit of social change. Accordingly, our view is “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, 169).

Despite the anachronistic nature and seemingly impossible existence of an actual underground railroad, it serves as a metaphorical representation of the contributions made by African American labor throughout history. Through his response, the station agent Lumbly reveals the hidden driving force behind industrial advancements and societal progress – a force that has often been overlooked or marginalized within mainstream narratives. Lumbly's thought-provoking inquiry raises a momentous question, effectively creating a faultline within the dominant discourse. He challenges the prevailing narrative by asking, “Who builds anything in this country?” (Whitehead 2016, 63) This rhetorical question serves as a catalyst for deconstructing deeply ingrained assumptions and exploring the hidden truths beneath the surface:

Cora read the accounts of slaves who had been born in chains and learned their letters. Of Africans who had been stolen, torn from their homes and families, and described the miseries of their bondage and then their hair-raising escapes. She recognized their stories as her own. They were the stories of all the colored people she had ever known, the stories of black people yet to be born, the foundations of their triumphs. (233)

In this paragraph, Cora's engagement with slave narratives reflects how cultural residual elements form a faultline where the stories of the past intersect with her own experiences. By delving into these historical accounts, Cora finds herself connected to a larger collective memory, where the stories of those born in chains become a powerful narrative thread within her own cultural identity. Both Lumbly's inquiry and Cora's “rememory” (Morrison 1987, 135) serve as a rallying cry for acknowledging and celebrating African American culture and identity, disrupting the narrative of exclusion and emphasizing the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of history and culture.

As the protagonists traverse various locations, they are compelled to confront the pervasive presence of racism in different forms. This conscious deconstruction challenges the notion that the railroad offers a straightforward path to freedom, as Cora's journey for a better life persists throughout the entirety of the novel. Lumbly's

astute remark encapsulates the essence of the railway, serving as a symbolic representation of its purpose: “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, 65). This statement encapsulates the idea that the railway functions as a lens through which the realities of America’s socio-cultural landscape are revealed.

Through discourse construction, Whitehead exposes the gap between the idealized perception of the nation and its harsher realities. The faultline created by this deconstruction forces readers to confront the uncomfortable truths that lie beneath the surface. It encourages critical reflection on the unconscious biases and structural inequalities that shape America’s identity and cultural landscape. For example, when a white woman uses the phrase “We’re optimistic”, the narrator observes that “Cora didn’t know what optimistic meant. She asked the other girls that night if they were familiar with the word. None of them had heard it before. She decided that it meant trying” (96).

Embedded within this commentary is an exploration of the cultural undercurrents that define America. By riding the rails alongside the characters, readers are confronted with a raw and unfiltered view of the nation, providing an opportunity to confront the inherent contradictions and complexities that permeate its history and present: “The whites came to this land for a fresh start and to escape the tyranny of their masters, just as the freemen had fled theirs. But the ideals they held up for themselves, they denied others” (104). One of the prerequisites for all newly escaped individuals was compulsory hospital check-ups aimed at preventing diseases and ensuring their well-being. During one of Cora’s visits to Dr. Stevens, her second physician, an extensive examination takes place. At this juncture, the doctor broaches the subject of Cora considering a surgical procedure to prevent future pregnancies. Herein, when she goes to a doctor she faces something which makes the reader think about and question the present situation of the free Blacks as a new type of slavery:

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. (101)

Within the realm of mandatory procedures, Cora grapples with the disconcerting realization that her agency is compromised. The very notion of compulsion implies a lack of choice, reducing individuals, regardless of their diverse appearances, to mere possessions under the control and whims of doctors. As she reflects on the circumstances, Cora’s voice echoes with incredulity: “Like they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased” (101). These haunting words expose the dehumanizing system, where the unconscious of the text reveals the deep-seated inequalities and abuses perpetrated against marginalized individuals.

Contemplating the disparity in treatment, Cora's thoughts turn to her employers, the Andersons, and she wonders if the same surgical proposal would be extended to Mrs. Anderson. The resulted faultline becomes starkly apparent as she ponders the mental well-being of Mrs. Anderson, acknowledging that her occasional melancholy did not render her deemed unfit for reproduction. This stark contrast in standards forces Cora to confront the cultural biases ingrained within society (101–102). Unbeknownst to Cora, Dr. Stevens, the seemingly objective physician, is entangled in a government-sponsored, racist health program. This insidious initiative employs compulsory sterilization as a means to clandestinely diminish the population of individuals of African descent. The realization of the sinister agenda at play deepens the faultline within Cora's understanding, exposing the intersectionality of power, culture, and oppression in shaping the lives of African American women.

Regarding the dominant discourse, Whitehead masterfully illustrates the complex web of injustice and control that defines Cora's experience. Thus, he is able to take the first step in deconstructing the dominant discourse and articulating a new one. The faultlines that run through Cora's thoughts invite readers to confront the residual elements of systemic racism and the unconscious biases embedded within society. This evocative portrayal exposes the horrifying reality of a government-driven agenda that seeks to rob African American women of their reproductive autonomy, perpetuating the enduring legacy of oppression and discrimination which is often "understood as the perception of subjugation of one group by another, imposed by an asymmetric power and often reinforced by hostile conditions such as threats or actual violence" (Lobato et al. 2018, 2).

Moreover, the couple becomes privy to yet another disturbing revelation orchestrated by the government. While African American women were overtly coerced into halting childbirth, black men were deceitfully led to believe that they were receiving benevolent medical treatment, when in reality, they were unwitting subjects of heinous experiments exploring the progression of syphilis. Referred to as the syphilis program, this abhorrent undertaking is brought to Sam's attention by Dr. Bertram, a recent addition to the hospital staff. Dr. Bertram discloses to Sam the distressing details, stating:

"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, 108)

By resurfacing these forgotten chapters of history and situating them within the context of slavery, Whitehead illuminates the undeniable truth that a long lineage

of oppression and racism cannot be divorced from the nation's overlooked complicity in eugenics. In essence, the same ideological principles that once justified the institution of antebellum slavery resurfaced in later years through pseudoscientific practices such as eugenics (Roberts 1998, 59). This is unfolded by the gaps/faultlines in the novel: "Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach" (Whitehead 2016, 104).

The Underground Railroad confronts the dominant discourse surrounding race, power, and oppression. These residual elements (Williams 1976, 97), operating within the unconscious of the text, emerge as symbolic fragments that disrupt conventional narratives and challenge readers' preconceived notions: "In death the negro became a human being. Only then was he the white man's equal" (Whitehead 2016, 121). By excavating historical facts and employing imaginative storytelling, Whitehead brings forth the hidden, repressed aspects of history, allowing them to resurface and confront the dominant discourse. The forgotten episodes of medical exploitation, intricately intertwined with the legacy of slavery, serve as a powerful reminder that the past continues to reverberate through time:

Cora had heard Michael recite the Declaration of Independence... She didn't understand the words... The white men who wrote it didn't understand it either, if all men did not truly mean all men. Not if they snatched away what belonged to other people, whether it was something you could hold in your hand, like dirt, or something you could not, like freedom. (104)

By drawing these connections, the author challenges the notion of progress as a linear trajectory and prompts a critical examination of the deeply ingrained cultural and systemic biases that persist in society: "On nights when Tom Bird felt separate from his life's design, he shared stories of the Great Spirit. The Great Spirit lived in all things – the earth, the sky, the animals and forests – flowing through and connecting them in a divine thread" (67).

The Underground Railroad acts as a cultural catalyst, prompting a collective remembrance and reevaluation of the residual elements from the past (Williams 1976, 97). It urges society to confront the historical/mythological entities in the form of stories that have been conveniently forgotten, exposing the profound impact of systemic oppression and allowing for a deeper understanding of the present. Through this process, the novel encourages constructing a counter discourse that exposes the faultlines in society, fostering awareness, empathy, and the dismantling of racist ideologies. As Whitehead states in an interview with Linda Selzer "every -ism has its weakness. Ideology, philosophy can transform and transport us. I think I was trying to explore what various systems can't do, as opposed to what they can do" (Selzer 2008, 399). "Cora thought back to the night she and Caesar decided to stay, the screaming woman who wandered into the green when the social came to an end. 'They're taking away my babies.' The woman wasn't lamenting an old plantation injustice but a crime perpetrated here in South Carolina. The doctors were stealing her babies from her, not her former masters" (Whitehead 2016, 109). One of the gravest obstacles to achieving liberation is the absorption of individuals by oppressive reality, which acts to submerge human consciousness (Freire 2000, 51). Scientific discourse

serves as a tool within the prevailing power structure, manipulating and reinforcing the dominant discourse to suppress the liberation and agency of formerly enslaved individuals. Through the guise of objectivity and rationality, scientific narratives are utilized to perpetuate the subjugation and control of individuals who were deemed “free” following emancipation.

By wielding the authority of scientific language, the dominant discourse employs a regulatory mechanism that aims to undermine the autonomy and empowerment of formerly enslaved individuals. This manipulation is cunningly orchestrated to maintain the existing power dynamics and perpetuate the systemic oppression embedded within society.

To dismantle this oppressive paradigm, it is crucial to critically engage with and challenge the dominant discourse. By interrogating the assumptions and power dynamics inherent in scientific narratives, we can unveil the residual elements (Williams 1976, 97) of oppression and work towards constructing alternative discourses that foster inclusivity, justice, and genuine freedom. This requires a conscious effort to confront the unconscious text, exposing the hidden agendas and systemic biases that underpin scientific discourse and its role in perpetuating oppressive structures: “That is how the European tribes operate, she said, if they can’t control it, they destroy it” (Whitehead 2016, 237).

Overall, the recognition and dismantling of the regulatory power of scientific discourse is a vital step in empowering individuals and communities to challenge the dominant narratives that seek to control and marginalize them. In this sense, the novel clearly states that “the Negro’s story may have started in this country with degradation, but triumph and prosperity would be his one day” (Whitehead 2016, 237). By reclaiming their voices and reshaping the discourse, marginalized groups can challenge the oppressive systems that seek to deny their agency and work towards a more equitable and just society:

no act of dissent or resistance occurs on behalf of an essential subaltern subject entirely separate from the dominant discourse that provides the language and the conceptual categories with which the subaltern voice speaks. Clearly, the existence of post-colonial discourse itself is an example of such speaking, and in most cases the dominant language or mode of representation is appropriated so that the marginal voice can be heard. (Spivak, cited in Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 201)

The portrayal of South Carolina in a dystopian light serves as a powerful discourse construction that not only revisits the historical implications of progressive eugenics but also prompts readers to contemplate the potential reenactment of such racist ideologies in contemporary society:

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 and McCabe 2011, 193)

The novel raises thought-provoking questions about the present-day repercussions of genetic arguments that are used to justify cost-cutting measures in healthcare, employment decisions, insurance coverage, and various other forms of benefits. In essence, Whitehead's compelling narrative transcends the boundaries of mere fiction. It serves as a powerful instrument against historical amnesia, resurrecting forgotten events and forcing us to confront uncomfortable truths. By placing this forgotten past under the microscope of public scrutiny, *The Underground Railroad* challenges society to recognize the residual elements of racism that persist and to actively work towards a more equitable and inclusive future. In the novel, residual elements of the past operate as floating signifiers that call attention to their presence on the surface. These floating signifiers, intertwined with the unconscious of the text, serve as symbols and metaphors that engage readers in an active dialogue with the novel.

REMEMORY: OPENING THE DOORS ON CHANGE

Yaa Gyasi's novel *Homegoing* crafts a narrative that explores the legacy of slavery from a cultural perspective that deviates from the traditional portrayal of enslaved individuals forcibly brought to America. By centering the story on characters who voluntarily journeyed to America, Gyasi provides a different narrative vantage point that adds depth and complexity to the overall understanding of the profound impact of slavery. In doing so, *Homegoing* expands the neo-slave narrative genre by shedding light on the diverse experiences and perspectives within the larger historical context of slavery.

Yaa Gyasi's unique cross-cultural diasporic perspective is intricately woven throughout her novel, creating an intergenerational exploration of slavery within a single family. The narrative unfolds with one branch of the family actively participating in the African slave trade, while the other is forcibly brought to America in chains. Gyasi's richly imagined narrative not only confronts the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade but also delves into the complexities of family ties, cultural identity, and the enduring impact of historical repressed memories on subsequent generations. In terms of what Levine states regarding narrative technique (2007, 220), Gyasi offers a multilayered examination of the legacies of slavery, inviting readers to reflect on the interconnections between African and African American experiences of bondage, liberation, and the quest for self-discovery.

Herein, floating signifiers from the field of discursivity are constantly used in the form of personal and historical stories to construct a counter discourse. Gyasi's work invites readers to embark on a profound exploration of personal and collective histories, illuminating the threads that unite individuals across continents and generations. It highlights the significance of reclaiming and understanding one's roots, fostering a greater appreciation for the complexities of identity, heritage, and the enduring connections between Africa and its diaspora:

We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story. So when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture. (Gyasi 2017, 217)

Accordingly, the novel aims to underscore the transformative power embedded in the process of recalling and preserving collective memory. By piecing together fragments of familial history and reassembling the narrative, individuals and communities can embark on a profound journey of healing and reconciliation:

He would never truly know who his people were, and who their people were before them, and if there were stories to be heard about where he had come from, he would never hear them. When he felt this way, Ma Aku would hold him against her, and instead of stories about family she would tell him stories about nations. (129)

Throughout the text of the novel, readers encounter residual elements from the past and are invited to reconstruct it in the process of active “rememory” (Morrison 1987, 135). This process of remembrance not only honors the experiences of those who came before but also paves the way for a collective healing and the preservation of a vital cultural heritage: “We must rely upon the words of others. Those who were there in the olden days, they told stories to the children so that the children would know, so that the children could tell stories to their children. And so on, and so on” (Gyasi 2017, 217). Although concrete evidence and policy measures can be used to address social injustices and strive for a fairer society, there exists an intangible feeling of lingering bondage to the past that demands a distinct remedy – one that engages with emotions, mythology, and the art of storytelling.

Both Yaa Gyasi and Colson Whitehead explore the ancestral roots of their characters, tracing them back to Cape Coast, a region known for its significant role in the transatlantic slave trade. It is estimated that Cape Coast, between the years 1620 and 1866, served as the departure point for as many as 300,000 enslaved individuals who were forcibly transported to America. In both novels residual elements – which put the dominant discourse in crisis – come from Cape Coast that ties the characters to a shared history of enslavement and suffering. In discourse, the articulation cannot simply be practiced and confined to linguistic phenomena and involves various sources, which, according to Laclau and Mouffe, “pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discourse formation is structured” (2001, 109). Besides, it is in reference to this specific historical place that the texts of the novels generate faultlines which force the readers to ask questions regarding the validity of the dominant discourse:

The British were no longer selling slaves to America, but slavery had not ended, and his father did not seem to think that it would end. They would just trade one type of shackles for another, trade physical ones that wrapped around wrists and ankles for the invisible ones that wrapped around the mind. [...] The British had no intention of leaving Africa, even once the slave trade ended. They owned the Castle, and, though they had yet to speak it aloud, they intended to own the land as well. (Gyasi 2017, 95)

Gyasi's portrayal of the Akan people's matrilineal culture offers an insightful lens through which to explore the themes of lineage, identity, and resilience. By placing Maame and her daughters at the heart of the narrative, the novel embraces the significance of the maternal line and the transfer of ancestral heritage. As Valerie Barker says: "people construct group norms during their interactions with valued in-group members and they internalize and enact such norms as part of their social identity" (2018, 115). By structuring the plot around the contrasting experiences of the two sisters within the brutal slave economy, Gyasi introduces narrative elements that evoke a profound sense of the haunted nature of the slave dungeons. These spaces, suffused with the spirits of those who traversed those centuries ago, become vessels of collective memory and palpable echoes of the past:

White men get a choice. They get to choose they job, choose they house. They get to make black babies, then disappear into thin air, like they wasn't never there to begin with, like these black women they slept with or raped done laid on top of themselves and got pregnant. White men get to choose for black men too. Used to sell 'em; now they just send 'em to prison like they did my daddy, so that they can't be with they kids. (Gyasi 2017, 251)

Through her storytelling, Gyasi invites us to reckon with the profound weight of history, challenging us to bear witness to the spirits that haunt these spaces and to engage with the ongoing process of healing, understanding, and remembrance. By drawing upon her own lived experiences and understanding, Gyasi brings forth the nuances and complexities of the diasporic journey, grounding the narrative in a deeply personal and emotive history. In this regard, according to Stephen Best "the slave past provides a ready prism to apprehend the black political present" (2012, 453).

The novels offer a complementary perspective, supplementing the knowledge derived from traditional historical sources. By granting readers access to the emotional landscapes of the enslaved, *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* play a crucial role in enriching our comprehension of the complex and multifaceted nature of slavery, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of this significant chapter in history. Moreover, the narratives explored in this work highlight the systemic nature of oppression and its long-lasting impact on ethnic minorities. These groups face a complex dilemma: how to navigate their cultural identity within a discriminatory environment. In his article analyzing ethnic discrimination in Myanmar, David Thang Moe states that: "Living in such a discriminatory situation, what should ethnic minorities do? I must suggest that there are at least two directions in which ethnic group individuals should proceed – defending their ethnic identity and decolonizing Burmanization. One is defensive, and the other is prophetic" (2019, 80). Additionally, the narratives call attention to the lasting damage inflicted by the slave-trading mentality, compelling readers to reflect on the systemic nature of oppression and its long-lasting ramifications. By examining the enduring trauma and its intergenerational impact, Gyasi expands the narrative landscape to encompass the complex aftermath of the slave economy: "If we go to the white man for school, we will just learn the way the white man wants us to learn. We will come back and build the country the white man wants us to build. One that continues to serve

them. We will never be free” (2017, 214). Gyasi’s narrative confronts the painful reality that the slave economy inflicted not only on those captured and transported but also on the communities torn apart and scarred within Africa itself. Each harrowing event contributes to the characters’ disconnection from their cultural roots – residual past – and reinforces the painful reality of their existence in America. Michiko Kakutani states that

At its best, the novel makes us experience the horrors of slavery on an intimate, personal level; by its conclusion, the characters’ tales of loss and resilience have acquired an inexorable and cumulative emotional weight. [...] Family knowledge is passed down through stories, but later generations seem to have misplaced much of this oral tradition; one of Esi’s youngest descendants, Marcus — who is working for a doctorate in sociology at Stanford — must diligently piece together the past through research and study, and a trip to Ghana. (2016, n.p.)

Gyasi prompts readers to contemplate the profound complexities of healing from ancestral wounds, she states that “there’s more at stake here than just slavery, my brother. It’s a question of who will own the land, the people, the power?” (2017, 95) The narrative highlights the significance of acknowledging and confronting the intergenerational effects of slavery, emphasizing the deep-seated nature of trauma and the arduous process of finding solace and redemption.

CONCLUSION

In crafting their narratives, Whitehead and Gyasi compel us to confront the deep-rooted injustices and enduring legacies of the transatlantic slave trade. By illuminating the interconnectedness of individual experiences within a broader historical context, they invite readers to reflect on the complexity of human suffering, resilience, and the long-lasting repercussions of slavery on the lives of those caught in its grip. *The Underground Railroad* and *Homegoing* illustrate that the path to freedom and healing for the enslaved is an ongoing and complex process. While the initial scenes establish the grim reality of servitude, the novels shift focus to the resilience and determination of the characters as they navigate their tumultuous lives. They illuminate the complexities of the slave’s quest for freedom and healing, shedding light on the ongoing struggles faced by generations affected by the transatlantic slave trade. Generally, the faultlines in the texts compel the readers to stop reading, start thinking, and then question the nodal points of the dominant discourse.

The structural frameworks Gyasi and Whitehead employ in their narratives become a focal point for understanding the residual elements of this complex history. Designed to encompass a multitude of experiences, these frameworks strain and bend under the weight of the diverse stories they seek to represent, confronting the residual elements of slavery, racial oppression, resilience, and cultural identity. Through their masterful storytelling, these authors strive to rupture the silence that has enveloped the national discourse, fostering a collective remembrance and profound understanding of the unimaginable horrors endured by those who were enslaved. Through the novels, they expand the discourse surrounding race and iden-

tity, allowing readers to navigate the faultlines of racial understanding and explore the residual elements that have shaped the African American experience.

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