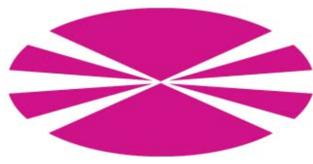

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"Property, and a Valuable Property": A Study of Disposability, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Slaves in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*

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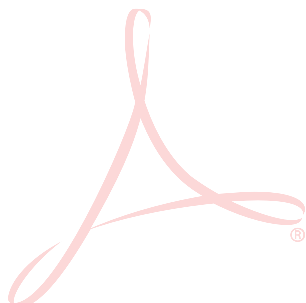

To those I love, I admire and who inspire me,

To those who contribute to and participate in my happiness and improvement,

To those who trust me,

Thank you.

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Abstract

The social, political and racial tensions that have been questioning the actual social equity in the United States of America lately, epitomized by the Black Lives Matter movement, seem to require an interpretation that may be non-spectacular. To understand the current situation, probably one of the best manners would be to analyze an artistic manifestation which may be aligned with the objectives of social equality and which also covers the root of such inequity in the United States: black slavery. Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*, a neoslave narrative published in 2019, focuses on the situation of African Americans in the Southern United States, set in the period prior to the 19th-century American Civil War. The book, apparently little researched yet by literary critics, offers some possible interesting threads to explore, among them the role of slaves as disposable commodified property as well as the ways in which they are related to their environment and subjected to what Rob Nixon defines as slow violence. From his ecocritical perspective of environmental justice, the intertwining of class, postcolonialism and the environment has consequences both for the society and for nature. One of the objectives of this work is to argue that the traditional, long-termed and obscured naturalization of this slow violence exerted on the African American slaves may explain the hierarchical discriminatory distinction based on race that some sociologists assert continues to exist in the United States. With this premise in mind, the methodology of this essay will consist in textual close readings hand in hand with Nixon's aforementioned theoretical background and some contextual, extra-literary pieces related to the representations in the novel.

Key words: African American slavery, Ta-Nehisi Coates, disposability, ecocriticism, the environmentalism of the slaves, magical realism, neoslave narratives, postcolonialism, Rob Nixon, slow violence, *The Water Dancer*.

Humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion
to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality
(Roh 17)

What is a world? . . . What happens when different kinds of worlds are
placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?
(McHale 10)

Introduction: In the Beginning Was the Lord

I have heard more than once the statement that the origin of African American identity is slavery. However, it seems to be commonsense that the existence of a slave is determined by the existence of a master. Therefore, to suggest that in the beginning of African American identity was the lord, rather than the slave, appears to be more adequate. Be it as it may, it seems there exists consensus among researchers that slavery and its different historical manifestations are placed at the core of the United States dynamics of power (Rushdy 12), and, more relevant for our purposes, at the "constructed" cornerstone of African American collective memory (Eyerman qtd. in Keizer 5).

With a specific emphasis on its slavery roots, African American identity seems to evolve and to be the object of constant revision from past to present and from within and "without" the community (Keizer 1; Murphy xi-xvii, 11, 16-7). Despite its significance, atrocity, temporal extension and consequences, slavery does not seem to gain as much general attention as others, remarks the notorious film director Steve MacQueen: "the Second World War lasted five years, but there are hundreds of films about World War II and the Holocaust, while slavery lasted 400 years and yet there are fewer than two dozen films attempting to represent it" (qtd in Anim-Addo and Lima 3). As a result, I deem it interesting to explore such an urgent issue through its African American representations. For that purpose, I will analyze Ta-Nehisi Coates' literary depiction of slavery in the antebellum South of the United States in his latest novel, the magical-realist neoslave narrative *The Water Dancer*, published in 2019.

A journalist by training, Ta-Nehisi Coates (1975-) has a relatively reduced literary production, the vast majority of which is composed by non-fiction, namely three publicly and critically acclaimed memoirs and collections of essays (Literature Online; Coates, "Biography"). With regard to his fictional production, in addition to his contribution to

comics,[1] Coates has published one single novel, *The Water Dancer*, in which the African American narrator Hiram Walker relates, in first person, his vicissitudes in the antebellum South. Born a slave, the protagonist Hiram soon becomes a fugitive free man with a supernatural ability. This extraordinary gift is known as “Conduction.”

This novel has been selected as the primary source of the corpus of study fundamentally for different reasons. First, because the topic of the novel is slavery, whose echoes, even though transformed, (Brown; Murphy 35), are still experienced as an everyday matter by many African Americans. Secondly, and probably related to the previous reason, because the neoslave narrative mode has proved a very fruitful genre in the last decades, a fact that should not be overlooked. Lastly, given the apparent scarcity of criticism directly linked to the “youth” of the novel, it may be a good opportunity to explore new ways to approach this text. To contribute to the existing scholarship on the novel, which focuses on its reception (Watson; Zunac), the present study aims to establish new conversations on this fiction.

As for the objectives and methodology of this Master’s thesis, I intend to approach the representation of African American slavery in Ta-Nehisi Coates’ novel through the study of the ideas of disposability, slow violence, and the environmentalism of the slaves,[2] founded on Rob Nixon’s theory, but adapted to the Afro-American[3] colonial context. I will focus on the social dimension of Nixon’s hypotheses, but without neglecting its interactions and intersections with the natural environment. Thus, the critical frameworks applied in this study comprise both postcolonialism and ecocriticism — namely, the interaction between the environment and humankind and vice versa. The methodological procedure will focus on both text and context, combining close reading and extra-literary socio-historical examination.

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[1] Coates’s non-fictional literature has been awarded the 2015 National Book Award. As for his comic-book production, he has authored the *Captain America* series since 2018, and *Black Panther* from 2016 until 2021 (T. Coates, “Biography”; Markus; Marvel).
[2] Please, v. section *1.2. Disposability, Slow Violence and Environmentalism* for the specific adaptation of Nixon’s analysis to the context of slaves employed in this Master’s thesis.
[3] Despite the different connotations of *African American* and *Afro-American*, here are used as synonyms.

To deploy all these elements, this thesis is divided into two fundamental blocks followed by a conclusion and an appendix with a summary of the plot. The first chapter contextualizes the theoretical analysis of Ta-Nehisi Coates' novel. It offers scientific definitions and overviews of the issues concerning *The Water Dancer*: the point of departure corresponds to the social and historical explanation of race, ethnicity, and slavery in relation to the African American community. This point leads to the study of the concepts of disposability, slow violence and the environmentalism of the slaves, an adaptation of Nixon's ideas. Finally, this section concludes with the fictional representations of African American slavery, namely slave narratives and magic realism.

The second chapter explores the fictional manifestations of the environmentalism of the slaves and the slow violence proposed by Nixon applied to the antebellum African American community, with the notion of disposability as a simultaneous combination of each. To do so, I employ a close reading of passages from Coates' narrative in conjunction with actual extra-literary examples of the period represented by *The Water Dancer*, essentially a lecture delivered in 1832 by the Afro-American abolitionist Maria Stewart. The first focus of this section is to define and examine the environmentalism of the slaves in the novel, and the subsequent theme explored is slow violence. Lastly, these two topics converge on a brief subsection about disposability that closes the literary analysis.

This second chapter attempts to provide enough evidence to demonstrate the fundamental arguments summarized in the conclusions: on the one hand, that the disposability and slow violence experienced by the black slaves is effective in the environment of the plantation, in the light of the anti-pastoralism represented in the African American literary tradition highlighted by Michael Bennett. On the other, that the natural environment also arises as a central means of Afro-American liberation in this narrative.

1. Contexts and Concepts

1.1. First Steps: Race, Ethnicity and Slavery

"Why Do So Few Blacks Study the Civil War?" is a 2011 essay authored by Ta-Nehisi Coates on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War. In that publication Coates aims to unveil the "demonstrable truth" that "professional historians" consider the whitewashing process of the conflict — the deliberate erasure "by American design" of African American people from the history of this 19th-century American contest and from American history in general, as Coates and others (e.g. Barney 1; Keizer 5) have declared. To develop this debate, which is directly or indirectly addressed in *The Water Dancer*, its roots should be introduced first. These African American roots lie in the notions of ethnoracial consciousness and of social hierarchies. In this respect, the latter is precisely derived from an ethnoracial distinction.

To begin with the concept of race, I combine the characterizations provided by Mikaila Lemonik, on the one hand, and of Pierre van der Berghe, on the other: the term "race" may be defined as the generally external imposition of "real or imagined" physical distinctions and biological descent — known as "phenotypes" — that stratify society into categories deemed to be "essential and permanent." Both Lemonik and Miri Song coincide in tracing the origins of this idea back to the "othering" required by capitalism to sustain the colonial discourse of Modernity-Enlightenment. Furthermore, stratification implies hierarchy, and the hierarchical conception of races conforms the myriad of "systems of stratification premised upon the belief that some racial groups are either superior or inferior to other racial groups" innately (Song). With all these parameters interwoven, the practice of enslaving non-white communities was legitimatized (R. Coates).

Secondly, scholars posit that race is not the same as ethnicity, at least originally and outside the popular belief (Brown). Although the two notions are cultural constructions and

social categorizations (Gold and Miller), the former differs from the latter primarily about its nature and its projection — ethnicity arises from shared cultural affinities and within individuals or communities, while race consists in physical characterizations over group or personal entities imposed by forces external to these entities (Jenkins; Lemonik). To be more specific, Clifford Geertz synthesizes ethnicity as the “personal identity collectively ratified and publicly expressed” (268), which is based on cultural — not biological — criteria of shared origins (Stone).

When both members and non-members of a racial and/or ethnic collective are aware of these identifications and distinctions, they determine their social interactions by creating solidarity with certain people, what is known as race and/or ethnic consciousness, depending on the case (Gold and Miller). To close this subsection of definitions, it should be mentioned that the connection among discrimination and the radical interpretation of ethnoracial consciousness leads to racism and ethnocentrism. These are human behaviors that some sociologists explain — please, notice this is not a synonym for *to support* — in scientific terms as a result of a two-folded protection of interests: on the one hand, biological, and, on the other, cultural (van der Berghe).

Ta-Nehisi Coates points at these themes in the beginning note when making reference to the real “problem” of black people, but they are all inscribed within the question of slavery. In accordance with the sociologist Rodney Coates, slavery is “the forced labor of one group by another,” a practice “in which the slave is considered merely a piece of animate property or chattel.” Its aim is the creation of “a hyperexploitative system benefiting the master class . . . because it rest[s] on exclusive control over and the capacity to exhaust the total labor capacity of slaves.” Dehumanization, commodification and suppression of identity due to racial(ized) difference are the central techniques employed to perpetrate, control and justify the enterprise of slavery in the imperialistic Modern Age (Bales 10).

1.2. Disposability, Slow Violence and Environmentalism

> [H]ave pity upon us, O ye who have hearts to feel for other's woes; for the hand of God has touched us. *Owing to the disadvantages under which we labor*, there are many flowers among us that are
> "*born to bloom unseen,*
> *And waste their fragrance* on the desert air."
> (Stewart 58, emphasis added)

I have considered it relevant to commence this new section with these words, extracted from the lecture that opens with the powerful sentence "Why Sit Ye Here and Die?" (55), pronounced by the African American female abolitionist Mary Stewart on September 21, 1832 before the audience of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in Boston. The reason why I have selected this primary source is because, "ancient" as it is, it matches unexpectedly well with the theoretical apparatus adopted in this Master's thesis: the examination of African American slavery from the point of view of waste or disposability, slow violence and the environmentalism of the slaves.

By adapting lines 55-6 from Thomas Gray's poem "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,"[4] Stewart is emphasizing here the unnoticed and wasted state of African Americans at that time, the result of the ethnoracial(ized) hierarchies of imperialistic domination said to have perpetrated such an enslavement. From my point of view, these features remind us of the contemporary critical questions which fit the definition of slavery offered previously. To begin with, one of the aspects of slavery that has been commented upon should be readdressed — that of human property. The dehumanizing commodification, or the "refusal to acknowledge the value of lives, materials, land and processes," is what some scholars understand as waste and disposability (Alexander and O'Hare 2). In this respect,

[4] "Full many a flow'r is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air" (Gray ll. 55-6).

some human beings become mere disposable and fungible products, objects or commodities (Simal, "Waste" 11), and I think these are parameters in which slavery may be inscribed. This disposability is considered by some scholars an effect of the Modernity-originated era known as "Capitalocene," the last stage of a "violent manipulation of nature's laws" and "interconnected exploitation of (and thus violence against) both human and non-human nature" on which capitalism is based upon (Barca 538). Obvious though it may seem, either the lack of knowledge or the conscious oblivion of the environmental and social aspects of waste are suggested as possible reasons for that refused acknowledgement (Alexander and O'Hare 11-2).

The formerly noted "cultivated ignorance" (12) becomes the mainstay of Rob Nixon's notion of slow violence, which he understands as the undermining, translocational and transtemporal instantiations of silent, belied, unspectacular and phased episodes of violence. Examples of these manifestations — from environmental climate change and deforestation to social domestic violence — are results of anthropogenic agency, Nixon explains (2-3, 5). The "temporal" category of place, particularly the land or the environment, emerges as central for his analysis. That space is subject to transformations caused by inputs internal and external to the community (18). Slow violence, Nixon adds, may produce temporal displacements, i.e. not simply physical, at least as far as resources and their control are concerned in the delineation of the place. As a consequence, the oxymoronic process of stationary displacements, or "displacement without moving" becomes possible (19).

Up to the moment, we have not discussed who the victims of slow violence are. According to Nixon, it is "the poor" that are the average sufferers of this kind of violence, a category defined by class — economic impoverishment — which applies transculturally and to our contemporary neoliberal times (4). Other theorists have coined different terms to tackle the essence of this idea: for instance, Kevin Bales employs the phrase "disposable people" in

his homonymous book and Mike Davis favors "global residuum" (*Planet* 28) or "social 'residuum'" ("Planet" 22). Finally, Zygmunt Bauman speaks of "wasted lives" to include the people perceived as inoperative by the capitalist logic and who are hence on the margins of society (qtd. in L. Bell 109). All these coinages appear to be subsumed by Gayatri Spivak's postcolonial Marxist concept of subalternity, since the exclusion from the "culture of imperialism" that distinguishes the subalterns seems to be present in the conception of the aforementioned terms (de Kock 46). Irrespective of these terminological controversies, the combination of fungibility and slow violence shall be centrally inscribed within the interaction between humans and non-human environment.[5] In this respect, slavery reappears here as the perfect illustration of this interwoven process of disposability, slow violence and the environmentalism of the slaves. Let us now move to the specific case of African American slavery.

1.3. The Representation of African American Slavery: Slave Narratives

1.3.1. **From Classic to Contemporary Slave Narratives**

> it [will] be vain for the advocates of freedom to spend their breath in our behalf, unless *with united hearts and souls* you make some mighty *efforts to raise* your sons, and daughters *from the horrible state of servitude and degradation in which they are placed*.
> (Stewart 58, emphasis added)

When one goes over the features of disposability discussed so far, it is easy to conclude that African American slavery fits into this framework of analysis: African American

[5] Although Nixon's framework of environmentalism applies to the contemporary notion of "the poor," I adapt this term to the concrete colonial context of the African American slaves. In Coates' novel, as will be explained later, these slaves are referred to as "the Tasked." Therefore, in this Master's thesis the environmentalism employed in Nixon's sense is "of the Tasked" or "of the slaves," rather than "of the poor."

slaves were the disposable properties resulting from a long, continuous and unnoticeable process of slow violence which dehumanized and hence marginalized them from the imperialistic culture of capitalism. Simultaneously, the commodification imposed upon these slaves — i.e. what Mary Stewart (58) mentions as the "horrible state of servitude and degradation in which they are placed" — is the very reason that turned them into the core element of the capitalist slave trade (Thomas 373).

The context of African American slavery, therefore, appears appropriate to analyze representations of disposability, slow violence, and the environmentalism of the slaves, and even more when bearing in mind its repercussions. Some of those effects are the possible obscurity of "actions that waste territories, bodies, and objects" (Alexander and O'Hare 2) given the general "inattention" to "slow and long lasting" catastrophic events (Nixon 6). In order to apprehend the scope and the significance that the institution of slavery has had in the development of the African American identity, an effective methodology would be to revise the history of representations of African American slavery. Because the question of authorship with respect to membership and representation of an ethnic group may be problematic for some scholars, I will focus on the slave narrative, one of the canonized genres of African American literature (Fisch 1).

To tackle the birth and development of the African American slave narrative, the event that initiates slavery in the geography of what is present-day United States takes place in Virginia, in 1619, when the English settlers acquire some slaves from Africa (Fisch xiii; Young 143). Consequently, slavery is inextricably bound to the American plantation economy, and the practice remains legal in the country until 1863-1865. The first date corresponds to the Emancipation Proclamation, which frees all the slaves from their condition of slavery. In the second one, the 13th Amendment of the United States Constitution condemns the institution of slavery, explicitly illegal anywhere under their jurisdiction (Campbell 171; Fisch

xviii). This legal achievement happens as a result of the American Civil War, a conflict that highlighted the internal division of the country with regard to slavery. The contest should not be simply addressed as a violent and spectacular outburst, but as the effect of some white people's impulse of fundamentally moral reformation. Slavery may have been abolished, but the long process of silencing and subjugating the African American community has survived, even though metamorphosed (Brown).

As previously stated, African American identity and slavery are directly connected with the Modern Age, the Atlantic Ocean and the United States' imperialistic agenda legitimized by its racial logic. Unfortunately, that tension has been resonating within the United States of America for centuries, and racial justice is a wound still struggling to heal today (Jeffries 499; Song), shortly after the fourth centennial of the forced arrival of the first African slaves into American soil and fifty years after the Civil Rights movement. Contemporary initiatives such as Black Lives Matter[6] denounce the lack of rights still suffered by the African American community, a perspective widely acknowledged by Americans from all the social spectrum. More than a century after the abolition of slavery in the United States in 1865 (Campbell 171; Fisch xviii), what can be inferred from what is happening today is that not only is African American identity being questioned, but also the issue of their human agency — that is, the possibility of free will.

To continue with this trend, but to bring it to the literary domain, I deem it obligatory to investigate how black American identity is represented in fiction produced in this context. According to a variety of literary critics (Anim-Addo and Lima 1; Fisch 2; Friedman; Keizer

[6] This "spontaneous" movement, whose beginning is widely ascribed to the assassination of the young black men Trayvon Martin in 2013 and Michael Brown in 2014 (Loury 14; Roediger 223, 228), appears as a new spectacular — in Nixon's sense, opposed to the unveiled slow violence — reaction against the long-term racial subjection suffered by the black American community, as is generally acknowledged. In this sense, domination appears to be the core difference between the agenda of current Black Lives Matter and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. The latter "was largely structured around a discourse of exclusion and inclusion," whereas the former revolves around "domination" and "non-domination" (Loury 20).

2; Murphy; Rushdy 3), the contemporary slave narrative or neoslave narrative is a mode which has been fruitful since the mid-1960s, with the publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*, and certainly in vogue in the last decades, with canonized works such as Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*. Not coincidentally, the beginning of this practice coincides with the emergence of the new social history in the same decade, a historiographic perspective interested in giving voice to the "bottom" groups traditionally marginalized from history, such as African Americans (Barney 1).

Originally coined by Bernard Bell, the "neoslave [*sic*] narrative" is the fictional "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (289). Ashraf Rushdy prefers the term "neo-slave narratives" to explain the myriad of "contemporary novels [authored by African American writers] that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Notwithstanding the diverse approaches to this literary phenomenon, what seems indisputable is that they are based on the revival of nineteenth-century classic genre of slave narratives, whose conventional characteristics are often adopted (and adapted) by contemporary authors. This means that the starting point for neoslave narratives should be found in the classic ones.

The origin of antebellum or classic slave narratives, as Philip Gould (11-5) and Helen Thomas (373-7) claim, goes back to the 1770s, when "transatlantic political and religious movements . . . shaped the genre's publication history, as well as its major themes and narrative designs" (Gould 11). Antebellum slave narratives are considered the earliest representations of the Black Atlantic in literature and described as "a slave's account of his/her life as a fugitive, escaped or freed slave" (Thomas 376). Popularly associated to the American abolitionists prior to the Civil War and whose theoretical aim is liberty, this literary trend transcends both place — it is diasporic and transatlantic — and time — the vast majority (some hundred narratives) were published in the antebellum United States, but also

after the war and in other Atlantic settings prior and following the abolition of slavery (Anim-Addo and Lima 1; Fisch 3; Keizer 4-5; Thomas 373-4).[7]

The core influences on classic African American slave narrative can be found in the genres of autobiography, religious writing, sentimentalism and (white) settlers' captivity narratives. The legacy of these traditions may be hinted in the adoption of first-person narrative voices. All these genres are equally purposed to affect the audience, yet with the difference that the speakers are black slaves relating their vicissitudes (11-3; Thomas 376-7). In neoslave narratives, one of the most important techniques to move the emotions of the readers consisted in illustrating human dislocation as the product of slave trade — e.g. the separation of families — and the moral incoherence of social norms (Gould 14; Thomas 377). Most importantly, they aimed to provide an authority, a free voice and an identity of their author's own through the depiction of external and internal journeys, physical and mental movements "from enslaved, to fugitive, to free, to legal 'alien,' and finally to citizen" (Thomas 377) — what I describe as legal rehumanization.

Once the contextualization of classic slave narratives has been completed, the subsequent stage should be the characterization of the neoslave narrative. I will start by explaining the problematic employment of an antebellum literary form in contemporary times, something that has intrigued several literary critics. In their introduction to the 2018 *Callaloo* special issue devoted to the neoslave narrative, Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima invite the reading public to wonder why African American contemporary authors are interested in rewriting today a genre which is apparently obsolete in terms of its original purpose, that of the abolition of slavery. They argue that this urge responds to "the will to re-affirm the historical value of the original slave narrative and to reclaim the humanity of the enslaved by (re)imagining their subjectivity" (1).

[7] The question of verisimilitude will be analyzed in the following subchapter.

As a matter of fact, in the 1990s, some years before Anim-Addo and Lima wondered about this, Rushdy had already stated that "neo-slave" narratives strove to develop the African American cultural agenda that emerged in the 1960s, but through the use of the original literary form "in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity." Rushdy concluded that the purpose of that decision was "to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject" and reflected upon that new black identity, as well as on the authority and limits of representation when dealing with a period of time not experienced by the authors (6-7).

In contrast to what Rushdy had argued and to what Anim-Addo and Lima would posit some years later, Arlene Keizer placed the issue of cultural memory preservation at the very core of the genesis of what she calls contemporary slave narratives rather than neoslave narratives (5-7). From her point of view, it is not a coincidence that the emergence of neoslave narratives coincides with the passing of the last African American witnesses of slavery. She underlines the question of memory and its authority after the last survivors of nineteenth-century slavery passed away, circa the 1950s, a fact that helps her explain the appearance of the neoslave narratives in the 1960s (Keizer 6). In this sense, present-day slave narratives represent "resistant" black subjects (9).

If these positions evidence the scholarly debate on the objectives of contemporary slave narratives, their reception is equally disputed. Their favorable reading is based, for example, on the fact that they emphasize the issues of marginality and cultural recuperation of black culture after their being appropriated by white authors during the sixties (Rushdy 3, 6). Another argument to reinforce this stance is the fact that these narratives represent at the same time the presence and absence of agency, as well as the elevation of individual experiences to communal ones (Murphy 199-201, 205-7) and the theorizing of black subjectivity (Keizer 12). However, not always are neoslave narratives received so positively: other scholars

consider that these fictions promote the domestication of black identity and the preservation of an "anti-Blackness . . . violent national infrastructure" (Friedman 117, 121). Others equally claim they are inscribed within underlying neoliberal agendas (Murphy 6, 19, 105-6).

Two of the most recent replies that I have encountered, Laura Murphy's 2019 book and Gabriella Friedman's 2021 article, may shed light on this controversy. On the one hand, the first scholar declares that contemporary slave narratives evoke the classic tradition to unfold and eradicate "slavery around the world today" (9). On the other, Friedman (120-1) states that neoslave narratives aim to raise awareness of the failure of nineteenth-century emancipation, since the project, instead of providing the actual liberation of African Americans, simply represented their transitional stage from "servitude" to "racial subjection." The mechanisms deployed to reach that goal are various, among them the persistence of "racial trauma" and the present-day everyday violence suffered by the black community through the dissolution of temporal boundaries (120-1).

At this point, from the perspective of literary criticism, the major features of the African American slave and neoslave narratives have been described. Nonetheless, the particularities of *The Water Dancer* as a neoslave narrative deserve to be analyzed in a section of its own.

1.3.2. **Contextualizing the Case-study: *The Water Dancer* and Magical Realism**

> In late twentieth-century Western culture, divided as we are by economic self-interest and competition, injustice among races and classes and nations, violence against women, to write universalizing fictions is a revolutionary act. As each of us risks becoming an embattled community of one, the archetypal strategies of magical realism and its confluent romance traditions may yet remind us of our shared humanity. Flannery O'Connor was right. Ghosts *can* be very fierce and instructive (Parkinson Zamora 544)

In a promotional interview, Ta-Nehisi Coates declares that *The Water Dancer* emerged with his personal urge to "understand the [American] Civil War and slavery" (Penguin ca. 00:45-00:50). This is why the author deems it significant to publish the novel in 2019, on the four-hundredth anniversary of the "arrival of black people" in the United States, a "historical point" (ca. 03:00) with "resonance within the African American community" (ca. 02:45). He identifies classic slave narratives as "*the* source material" (ca. 02:50, emphasis added) to recreate and deploy the theme of African American slavery. These causes and purposes are thus translated into the form and the content of the novel, in which a first-person African American narrative voice, Hiram Walker, relates retrospectively — from his present state as a free man — his past as a slave in antebellum Virginia, and how he came to be a fugitive black slave and eventually a free man.

Additionally, Coates underlines the idea of recreation, of re-presentation of the past behind the narrative: "[l]iterally, the way the book is written — by which I mean the actual voice, the things, the way [Hiram] talks... — is *pulled from the past* . . . I was trying to channel something much older" (01:10-01:40, emphasis added). In this respect, some readers familiar with this novel may ask how the author makes such a declaration when the narrator-protagonist of the novel and another character affirm being gifted with the supernatural power of "Conduction," i.e. what is broadly understood as teleportation.

To reply to that question, I will bring back the beginning of the definition of (neo)slave narratives given in the previous section: literary fictional representations characterized by a conventional autobiographical form and sentimentalism with an anti-slavery purpose. Firstly, it is clearly stated that they are a "representation," not an extra-literary treatise or piece of reality. In the second place, from a literary point of view, the presence of the supernatural inscribes this novel in another literary tradition that may provide possible explanations for that choice — that of magical realism.

Broadly speaking, the term magic(al) realism goes back to 1925 in Europe, when Franz Roh applied it to characterize certain Avant-garde paintings (Slemon 407; Spindler 75) and to Alejo Carpentier's 1949 *lo real maravilloso americano*, associated with the 1960s Latin-American literary Boom is inscribed (Faris 165; Slemon 407; Spindler 76). Scholars have defined magical realism as the aesthetic and literary category of fictional products which share the presence of realistic and fantastic elements that interact in a dialectic opposition with each other, yet usually in a continuous, harmonic coexistence (Faris 163; Linguanti 2; Slemon 409; Spindler 75). It emerges as an alternative framework to question the nature and comprehension of what is understood as real (Benito et al. 3). As regards the specific example of Coates' *The Water Dancer*, the definition of magical realism fits perfectly with its characteristics, since both ordinary and extraordinary events coexist, the magical dimension "grow[ing] organically out of the reality portrayed" (Faris 163).

Among the characteristics of magical realism described by literary critics (e.g. Faris 167-174; Linguanti 6-7; Parkinson Zamora 497-502; Simal, "Magic" 314-6; Simal, "Magical Nature" 202-5), *The Water Dancer* shares the presence of otherness, of the non-human, of the counterfactual, and a hybrid depiction of time and space, all condensed in the magical ability of "Conduction." The general tendency toward characters' collective attachment to groups and the thematic recurrence of routes, journeys, initiation, death, rebirth, mutation and metamorphosis that these scholars mention can also be found in Coates' novel. To start with, the autodiegetic narrator epitomizes those features, from his very surname (Walker) to his changes due to the physical and internal routes related to the Underground Railroad.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the question of the mimetic relation between art and extra-artistic reality in *The Water Dancer,* in connection with the presence of both magic and the ordinary. The conception of mimesis has varied throughout time, hand in hand with the "shifting status of the real" (Manzanas 13), wavering between the concepts of

"representation" and "imitation" (11). As Ana María Manzanas summarizes, the controversies around this term go back to the ancient world. In that period, mimesis alludes both to the "re-creation of existing objects, and also the creation of fictional worlds with no unmediated reference to reality" (13). In the beginning, before Aristotle, it is believed that mimesis appears associated with representation in the sense of embodiment of "a being that is not the self" (11). Later, however, the idea of reproduction of external reality emerges: the Aristotelian theory poses that art imitates reality, yet that imitation is not limited to facts because to imitate "does not imply a detached, objective perspective, but a personal outlook on reality" (13). Jumping to the nineteenth century, literary realism appears directly related to reality's mutable essence (27) and some literary critics acknowledge that realism does not reflect a preexisting extra-literary world; rather, it creates "with the materials of life, but absolves them from factuality through the imagination" (26).

These definitions of mimesis from the antiquity to 19th century realism seem to resonate in Coates' *The Water Dancer*, a novel that arguably fits both the world-reflecting and the world-creating mimetic modes, following Manzanas. According to her, in world-reflecting mimesis the extra-literary world constitutes the referent for the literary piece (22), something which indeed occurs in Coates' novel. This position can be reinforced since, from the point of view of the so-called ethnic authors, "inside their originating cultures, the magic introduces no ontological rupture: it is simply another element in the fictional representation of an immediate, intimate reality" (Benito et al. 112).

Such a stance seems to be adopted by the author of *The Water Dancer*, as he declares in his promotional interview: "Literally the way the book is written, by which I mean the actual voice, the things, the way the guy talks…, is pulled from the past. It's me writing, but it's not a story as I would tell it today . . . With *The Water Dancer* I felt like I was trying to channel something much older [not my actual voice]" (Penguin 01:10-01:40). Therefore, the

attempt for channeling that "something much older" which is "pulled from the past" could cogently point at a world-reflecting mimesis of the 19th-century African American ontology. This argument could be even supported by the fact that it was the classic African American slave narratives that inspired him: "I was really trying to understand the Civil War and slavery, but, once I got to the actual novel, what I quickly realized was that the source material for this . . . was actually so many of . . . the enslaved and freed black folks who had already written about the experience" (00:45-01:08).

Notwithstanding the reflections above, it may be even more likely to argue in favor of a rationalist explanation for that supernatural element, what Manzanas addresses as the world-creating reading of mimesis. Rooted in several scholarly positions that go back to the aforementioned Aristotelian perspective — namely, that the imitation of reality is indeed a subjective perception —, Manzanas poses that the mimetic tradition necessarily goes beyond mirroring the extra-literary reality as a source of truth: every fictional world, either plausible or implausible with respect to the physical reality, is "equally (un)true" due to their ontological different natures — one being linguistic and the other extra-linguistic (29-30). Thus, irrespective of whether magical realism has a physical extra-textual counterpart, magico-realist production necessarily has a room within some understanding of mimesis.

Should William Spindler's taxonomy be used, *The Water Dancer* could be considered an example of anthropological magical realism, whose distinctive feature lies in the attribution of magical elements to the collective ethnic background, i.e. the culture and the mythology of the peripheral community — especially "powerful" in former enslaved minorities. This fact challenges the central rationality of modernity (80-2). This blending of collective myth and modernity is usually intra-textually reflected via the double voice of the narrator — at times "rational" reporter, at times "believer in magic" — as well as the interest in the "uncanny" and in violence within oppressive environments (80-1).

In addition to Spindler and Manzanas' world-creating and anthropological explanation of magic realism, I would like to propose other possible roles of magical elements and extraordinary events in Coates' neoslave narrative from more coordinative to more disjunctive. To begin with, supernatural elements may be approached as a possible device to understand time in a transcendental, comprehensive, holistic, simultaneous, or Alephian (Borgesian) way — rather than a progressive, continuous, linear and sequential succession of individual events — that would enable the connection of past and present instead of its dissociation. For example, Lois Parkinson Zamora's analysis of the presence of "ghosts [that] carry the burden of tradition and collective memory" in magical realist texts can be read as an illustration of this trend (497). She posits that these elements, rooted in the literary tradition of the romance, precisely contribute to the universalization of the individual (498, 544).

Secondly, the past may equally become a different, enigmatic and exotic "otherness" to distance both the intra- and extra-literary present and past — or, in other words, the former times represented in the realm of the story versus those experienced by the human reader of such a story (Friedman 116; Maxwell 3). I contend that this last possibility points to some extent at the self-referentiality typical of the postmodern conception of literature: a reality in which magic is possible, accepted and operative might work as a reminder of the fictionality and artificiality of the literary work. In this way, its distance with regard to actual historical fact as well as to the fictional historical setting would be emphasized (Friedman 116).

In this first chapter we have covered the most substantial theoretical points in which this thesis lies. The majority of the attention has revolved around African American slavery, its racist justification, and its connections with the environment, particularly in the form of slow violence. Afterwards the focus turned to the general exploration of some literary expressions of this ethnic enslavement. It is time to narrow the scope and test the suitability of these premises in the next chapter, when applied to Coates' concrete piece of literature.

2. Disposability, Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Slaves in Ta-Nehisi Coates' *The Water Dancer*

> Most of the folks up here would take a boy like you and put him on the block. Fetch a fortune, you know. Nothing more valuable than a colored with some brains in him. But that is not me. I believe in Lockless. I believe in Elm County. I believe in Virginia. We have a duty to save our country: the country your greatgrandfather carved out of wilderness will not return to the wild.
>
> (T. Coates, *The Water Dancer* 37)

If the scholarly notions of environmentalism, slow violence and disposability of the slaves are explored in Coates' novel, I consider that the quotation that precedes these words is a fitting condensation of them, a referential starting point. Nonetheless, prior to the analysis proper, I need to note that, in this case, I will follow a deductive approach: I will move from what I consider the motivation to the symptom, from the general to the specific. Accordingly, the first step will be the analysis of the environmentalism, then of slow violence and, finally, of the disposability associated with the African American slaves.

2.1. The Environmentalism of the Slaves

To begin with the environmentalism of the subaltern black slaves, its substratum in *The Water Dancer* corresponds to the ethnoracial tensions between the subdued "colored" slaves—subalterns, to employ Spivak's terminology — and the empowered white masters. In this sense, thematically speaking, the superiority attached to this latter group in this quotation is said to be economic, resulting from the sale (to be "put on the block") of poor-as-commodified "colored" people such as the "you" to whom the speaker addresses. In this particular scene, the addressee is Hiram Walker, the autodiegetic protagonist of the story, who happens to be silent here, listening to what he is being told by his father, Howell Walker, the (white) master of Lockless plantation (T. Coates, *The Water Dancer* 23).

Hiram's subalternity not only lies in the economic reification of the black enslaved community, regarded by "[m]ost of the folks" — *folks* meaning only white people — as property that can "[f]etch a fortune" through slave trade. It is also signaled by the positions each interlocutor takes in this communicative situation: in the excerpt, Howell Walker expresses his voice while Hiram listens to him in silence. Lockless, Elm Country and Virginia function in this way, and these dynamics are translated into the disposition or distribution of land and landscape, as will be demonstrated in the next paragraphs.

As seen in the previous chapter, in her foundational 1832 speech, Maria Stewart denounced the silencing that African Americans were suffering at that time. In case that reference went unnoticed to some readers, I offer it again partially, only focusing on the section in which I am interested right now: "Owing to the disadvantages under which we labor, there are many flowers among us that are / 'born to bloom unseen, / And waste their fragrance on the desert air'" (58).

I would like to highlight the natural imagery that Stewart employed to compare in a poetic way the experience of the black American population with wasted flowers, "unseen," unperceived. However imperceptible those flowers were said to be, she was aware of such an invisibility, so by whom were they unseen? Perhaps Stewart was making reference to those people whose humanity, whose essence — at which the word "fragrance" might point —, was not lost among the fierce, harsh, "desert" air of life: the high-class whites who ruled the United States, who enjoyed the "luxury" of freedom and economic security.

Another possibility is a more literal reading of Stewart's words: she might be alluding to the different spaces destined to masters and slaves. Most of the subjugated black slaves were "tasking" in the Southern plantation fields,[8] which meant that their everyday

[8] According to Hiram, the Virginian society in which he lived included three social categories: the Quality, the Tasked and the Low. To begin with the Tasked, they were those who "belonged to someone," who "were property" of another person (56), such as the narrator Hiram Walker, who included himself in this group, although in past tense: "We who were Tasked" (56). These Tasked are directly related to the Quality, that is, the white people "who

environment was characterized by the presence of nature. From my point of view, this argument could sustain the flower identification since the relation of contiguity and continuity with nature would be stronger among laborers than among owners. The hard task under the burning Southern sun could also create a more than likely sensation of hot, “desert air” that suffocates both the slaves and the land, it becoming progressively a desert itself, a wasteland.

This Afro-American contiguity with nature reveals, as has probably been noted, a twofold relationship with the natural environment — one releasing, the other repressive. This pattern is indeed recurrent in the African American tradition, as has been identified by Michael Bennett in his ecocritical approach to Frederick Douglass’ now canonical narrative (1845). The literary critic (197) contrasts the idealistic representations of the wilderness of rural environments in the European-style nature writing with the “cruelty” that Douglass “encounters in rural nature” compared with the “relative safety of the urban environment.” In his interpretation of Douglass, Bennett claims (198) that Southern rural plantations were the “free reign” of slave owners due to their distance from the rest of society. This fact, I infer, would enable them to act without witnesses to condemn their conduct, because that did not occur in urban locations thanks to the “proximity of other eyes and ears” (198). Even though natural environments were “a space of terror and loneliness without the welcoming community waiting in the celestial city on the other side,” Bennett mentions this ambiguous relationship by admitting that “the wilderness could be a temporary place of spiritual reflection” for African Americans (196).

These interpretations, in fact, would be ratified by Coates’ fictional representation of Virginia in *The Water Dancer*, in a period approximately contemporary to Stewart’s and Douglass’. In the first place, Hiram himself expresses his sensation of true liberty only after

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held” them (57). Thirdly, “the Low” corresponds to the shortened version of “the low whites,” who “were tolerated publicly by the Quality, but spurned in private . . . They were a degraded and downtrodden nation enduring the boot of the Quality, solely for the right to put a boot of their own to the Tasked” (51-2).

having lived for a while in the urban space of Philadelphia, once he has escaped from the restricting paws of Virginia. When it is time for Hiram to come back to Lockless, he shares the anti-pastoralism described by Bennett with the readers:

> I would miss Philadelphia because . . . *I had been the truest version of myself*, unbent by the desires and rituals of others, so that now the change I felt overtaking . . . And when I stepped off the train, at that Clarksburg station [in Virginia], *I could feel the shackles clamping down on my wrist*, the vise tightening around my neck. Having lived as I had, *having tasted my own freedom*, having seen whole societies of colored but free, *I felt it as a weight beyond anything I had ever known*. (311, emphasis added)

In addition to this, it is worth noting that slaves and masters do not share the same spaces. As regards "the Tasked," Hiram acknowledges that they live down on "the Street, the common area between two long rows of gabled log cabins where those of us who tasked in the tobacco fields made our homes" (12). In other words, the dwellings that the slaves inhabit are attached to the fields they work, and that sense of union or attachment seems to be projected to the social sphere through the supposed commonality of the place and its inhabitants.

In contrast to the African American slaves, the white masters live far from the fields, at the top of the hill of Lockless (19). That situation highlights the distance between slaves and masters as well as the superior status of the former, for that hierarchical division of physical space — the top of the hill versus its bottom, and the flat fields controlled from/by the top — reflects, in terms of geography, the position of each social stratum. Actually, in Bennett's study of Douglass' slave narrative, the scholar attributes the anti-pastoralism of

African Americans precisely to this distribution of the landscape in which black slaves were included as property: “Slavery created a system whereby those of European descent controlled a pastoral landscape that included those of African descent as part of their property. Is it any wonder that this fact gave rise to an anti-pastoralism discourse that continues to the present day?” (205). In sum, the physical occupation of the land echoes the distinct social roles that explain and sustain the environmentalism of the “Tasked,” as Hiram himself seems to comprehend: “I was just then beginning to understand the great valley separating the Quality and the Tasked—that the Tasked, hunched low in the fields, carrying the tobacco from hillock to hogshead, led back breaking lives and that the Quality who lived in the house high above, the seat of Lockless, did not” (Coates, *The Water Dancer* 19).

Another element related to the environmentalism of African American slaves concerns the bond between nature and the supernatural “gift” of “Conduction.” There are at least three characters that have this “magical” power: Hiram’s “mother’s mother, Santi Bess” (92); equally, the narrator-protagonist, Hiram Walker — “‘What did you [Corrine] have to be sure of?’ I [Hiram] asked. ‘That you [Hiram] really did carry the power of Santi Bess, of Conduction,’ Corrine said. ‘And you do.’” (156) — and the character called Moses, a literary representation of the actual historical female abolitionist Harriet Tubman, indeed nicknamed Moses, and one of the members of the Underground Railroad (Dagbovie). In the novel, Tubman appears represented as follows:

> There was one who knew, one like me [Hiram], but unlike me she had mastery of this power. In her section of the country, she had become so beloved and famed for fantastic exploits that the coloreds of Boston, Philadelphia, and New York had given her the name Moses. The power she wielded had been dubbed “Conduction”—the same word Corrine used to describe my own power—for how it “conducted,”

> seemingly at will, the Tasked from the shackled fields of the South to the free lands of the North. But this Moses kept her own counsel and declined to give the Virginia Underground any notion of how she worked. (170)

In relation to these great deeds, the environment arises as one of the fundamental means for the success of Conduction, a fact that would be inscribed within the releasing side of nature for African Americans in this story. Hiram Walker seems to have discovered intuitively the "essential thing" of his ability — which is "to remember" —, although at the beginning he cannot boast about comprehending "the entirety of Conduction" (64). Following Coates' Harriet Tubman, the "jump [i.e. Conduction] is done by the power of the story [heard and felt]. It pulls from our particular histories, from all of our loves and all of our losses" (278); "You was standing at the ramp of the bridge . . . Conduction got to have water . . . [However, I c]an't jump to an end I ain't never seen. And even knowing beginning and end, I have to know something of who I'm conducting in order to bring 'em along" (282-3). To summarize, the coordinates that Conduction requires are memory, experience and water as bridges that allow teleportation.

Whereas the mechanism of Conduction has been explained by the text, there is still room to speculate about the intriguing centrality of water that the fiction apparently leaves unsolved. What are the reasons why this environmental element emerges as fundamental to complete that African American magical teleportation? The first suggestion that I advance is the common association of water and life and even freedom: from a biological point of view, it is a truth universally acknowledged that no ecosystem on Earth is able to survive without water. Human beings are no exception to this law, so the employment of water as a releasing element for people prevented from living freely, such as black slaves, could be a functional metaphor with those positive connotations.

Nevertheless, advancing a more specific argument, one should not forget that it is the African American community that is involved here, and between Africa and America there exists a mass of water, the Atlantic Ocean, which can be read from different positions: is it a wall that separates past and present, roots and routes? Or rather a bridge that connects routes and roots? If the former is embraced, it connotes the notion of enslavement; the latter, however, would carry the positive sense of liberation.

But there is at least another possibility, this being more attached to the fictional setting and plot: the importance of the River Goose waters that separate/connect the land of Virginia — the central place where the African American slaves of this story are born, raised or live a substantial proportion of the plot — from that to the way to Natchez, where the black subalterns from Lockless are sold, as Hiram describes in the incipit of the novel:

> though there were other bridges spanning the river Goose, they would have bound her [Hiram´s mother] and brought her across this one, because this was the bridge that fed into the turnpike that twisted its way through the green hills and down the valley before bending in one direction, and that direction was south. I had always avoided that bridge, for it was stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way. (3)

As I see it, the specific location of the bridge over the River Goose is a catalyst for the magical element because it combines at the same time Hiram's individual memories and the collective memory of the enslaved community, absorbed and maintained by the land or by elements derived from it. To begin with the African American collective heartbeat, it is perceived in this excerpt thanks to the reference to each land: "I know now," asserts Hiram, "that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost" opened by the "blue door" of memory (3-4).

Despite the appearance of what may be read as a ghost of the past (Parkinson Zamora 497) in the shape of the communal "remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way," what "stains" Hiram's bridge is the forced departure of his mother. He admits in the very opening lines of his relation how he would reconstruct her dancing on that same

> stone bridge, a dancer wreathed in ghostly blue, because that was the way they would have taken her back when I was young . . . 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. (3-4)

To interpret that scene, I think it is important to pay attention to the context, to the physical environment in which it is taking place. The mist that covered or "wreathed" her in "blue" might be explained as an extension of the water — that from the River Goose. To reinforce her natural connection to the liquid element, it is even said that she was wearing a "necklace of shells," and these are typically associated to the sea.

Nonetheless, she is not simply bound to water, but also to the earth, as indicated by the "earthen jar" so well integrated in her body that it "seemed almost a part of her"; therefore, in this sense, the connection between the land and this woman becomes literally physical. Another significant similarity is their "redness": in former times, when the natural resources were not so exploited, "Virginia earth was still red as brick and red with life" (3); similarly, Hiram describes his mother's skin as "dark red" (394). In case these arguments were not enough, the scene suggests a direct contact between the naked feet of the woman and the cobblestones over which she was dancing, a fact that balances the attachment just described: now it is the earth that has a part of the woman attached to it.

In conclusion, these mutual connections between land and people may explain the "ghostly" atmosphere and the magical Conduction that characters such as Hiram develop: they are manifestations of the ghosts of the past attached to the mental and physical landscapes and environments, those that Parkinson Zamora (498, 544) studied as universalizing experiences of the individual. These echoes pervade the environment and vice versa, as they continue resonating both in the individual and collective memory.

2.2. Slow Violence

To lead the essay toward the discussion of another point, that of slow violence, I will introduce a transitional fact that ties the environment with the central characters from Coates' story and, by extension, refers to the situation of the whole black enslaved community of Lockless. Soon after the beginning of the novel, Thena — an old widow said to be unpleasant and not very social, and whose personal story, in certain aspects, echoes Hiram's — reveals Hiram's mother's name to the audience: "I think of your aunt Emma. I think of your momma. I am remembered to them both — Rose and Emma" (18).

Although it might be a mere coincidence, Hiram's mother was called "Rose," a name that points at the natural world. Firstly, flowers share that connection with land and water that has been applied to Rose in the previous paragraphs. Secondly, I cannot help but bring back the wasted flower from Maria Stewart's speech, since the fragrance of Hiram's mother, after her sale, is equally lost amid the desert air of the South, because she could have ended anywhere, but with a destination unknown to their beloved ones. Likewise, it is lost amid the air of Lockless, amid the memory of one of those who knew her best — her own son, Hiram.

Lastly, as far as the outward appearance of the flower is concerned, I would make the generalization that the rose usually suggests an imagery of love and beauty because of its petals, yet also of pain due to its thorns. Are not these feelings provoked in Hiram when the

remembrances of her mother appear? As is unveiled several times in the story, Rose was a black slave who worked in Lockless and who gave birth to Hiram, master Walker's son. The master finally sells her and separates mother and son: Hiram says "My momma was left out of connection. Her father was sold off. Then she was sold off too" (280). Hiram misses her love and her notorious beauty: not only the physical one, alluded to by several characters,[9] but also the internal one translated into her behavior, as Thena acknowledges: "Rose. She was a beautiful woman, with the kindest heart. I liked her and I do not like many anymore" (19). That hurts him so deeply that the single gap in his prodigious memory is his mother.

Thena reminds Hiram that Rose and Emma "were a pair. Loved each other. Loved to dance. I am remembered to them, I say." She adds the following concession in an apparently warning tone: "though it hurt sometime, you cannot forget" (18), and she speaks as a matter of fact, because of her own experience. Thena is well aware of the open wound left by the sale of the beloved kin since, as her daughter Kessiah relates to Hiram when they bump into each other at the abolitionist convention close to the Canadian border, Thena "lost her children some years ago. All five of them sold on the racetrack of Starfall, sent off to God knows where" (246). I deem it possible that such a loss and displacement be echoed in Kessiah's employment of the third person to include herself: to me, her choice of phrase, "all five of them," reveals a distance that would be absent had she uttered "all five of *us*."

In this vein, I consider that Thena likely aims to caution Hiram with her warning because she has lived with that sensation; in addition, she may realize the depth of the wound that Hiram's mother's loss has produced in him, what the *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychopathology* regards as psychogenic amnesia or limited functional amnesia. Following this source, Hiram is facing this dysfunction: "a loss of personal memory that cannot be accounted for by ordinary forgetting, or by brain insult, injury, or disease" (Kihlstrom et al.).

[9] Hiram's mother is mentioned, for example, by Thena — "She was a beautiful woman" (19) — and Georgie Parks — "She was a beautiful girl, and there were so many beautiful girls down there in the Street" (59).

In functional terms, his mind is encouraged to erase or blur the mental image of her, to avoid the pain of her traumatic departure,[10] as hinted from the very outset of the novel:

> while all the twists and turns that marked my short life were clear before me, my mother appeared only as fog and smoke. I tried to recall her face, and when it did not come, I thought of her arms, her hands, but there was only smoke, and when I searched to remember her corrections, her affections, I found only smoke. She'd gone from that warm quilt of memory to the cold library of fact. (13-4)

The origins of Hiram's trauma are evoked at the very beginning of the narrative, and he associates them to a specific space of land, namely, the aforementioned stone bridge over the river Goose that led the slaves to Natchez, an important Southern center of slave trade: "only" across that "stone bridge" Hiram's mother would have been "bound" and "brought" (1). The memory of the ones lost amid the jaws of slave trade "stain[s]" that place, what urges Hiram to have "always avoided that bridge" (1). The last part of this quotation reveals how Hiram distances himself physically from that space, "for it was stained with" the pain and suffering of his traumatic separation from his mother. Eventually, nonetheless, Hiram is able to heal his own hurt and Rose's image comes vivid: "For so long I could not see, could not remember, but I see it all now. Her bright eyes, her smile, her dark red skin" (394).

This tension between the comfort and pain of remembrance, the simultaneous desire of memory and oblivion for the profound emotions of affirmation and negation, of acceptance and rejection, seem to be equally embodied by Thena. That is also revealed by her attitude when Hiram plans to bring this woman and one of her lost daughters, Kessiah, together. Kessiah is the youngest one, sold many years before and with whom no contact had been

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[10] This gap is striking, given Hiram's prodigious memory, previously hinted.

kept. At first, Thena reacts violently when Hiram announces his plans of a reunion because the encounter will unearth all the suffering provoked by the separation of her whole family, from all the losses that she has been trying to get over for so long: "What will I [Thena] say to her [Kessiah], Hi[ram]? What will I be? What will I do when I look at her and all I can see are my lost ones?" (391). However, she is finally Conducted by Hiram to Delaware, where Kessiah is waiting along with Harriet Tubman (398).

In my reading, all these examples are the observable and progressive manifestations of the invisible, long-operating and long-lasting consequences of Nixon's slow violence. As has been advanced in the theoretical section, the American scholar deploys the idea of "displacement without moving" to conjoin the environmentalism of the slaves, slow violence and a physical reflection of their effects. Rather than the traditional conception of dislocation as a "movement of people from their places of belonging," Nixon proposes that the environmental alteration of such a place of belonging equally displaces people (19). The victims of this phenomenon are communities that lose "the land and resources beneath them," and end up stranded in spaces "stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable" (19). The core characteristic of these stationary displacements is the concurrent "immobiliz[ation] and move[ment] out of one's living knowledge" at the same time that "one's place loses its life-sustaining features" (19).

These are the traces that relate the lives of the black community and the state of the landscape: all this human pain, progressive destruction and commodification go hand in hand with the gradual disposability, barrenness, and desertification or death that the Virginian land has undergone. One example is Hiram's reference to the "dusty ground" (12) of Lockless or his statement that "the whole place going down. The land is dead . . . [t]he soil done turned to sand" (61). Still, this state of the land has not always been that: at the beginning of the story the narrator declares that "when [he] was young, . . . Virginia earth was still red as brick and

red with life" (3). This is confirmed by testimonies from the eldest members of the Afro-American community familiar to Hiram, such as Hawkins, who even quotes his own father to make such references:

> The soil was the wealth, and the soil done gone to dust. My pappy used to tell *stories about the land, bout how red it was. But* [the Quality] *done stripped the place for all the tobacco they could*. It's a shame, I tell you. They got as much out of this county as they could and now, having gotten it, the whole heap of 'em headed west.' '*And the tasking hands with 'em*,' [Hiram] said . . . Hawkins said. . . . [']That's the whole game, you know? *Eat up the land, then keep going*. Someday they gonna run out of land, and I don't know what they'll do then.' (339-40, emphasis added)

Accordingly, such a barrenness is the environmental, physically visible manifestation of the stationary dislocation borrowed from Nixon's discourse. Hawkins is a character rooted in the Virginian plantation of Elm County, for neither he nor his father — who is mentioned in the quote —,have moved from the place. Both have witnessed how their environment has changed, owing to two fundamental factors related to the (super)exploitation of its resources: on the one hand, the exhaustion of the soil resulting from the excessive agricultural practices imposed by the owners; on the other, the forced removal of human hands that work the fields, ordered to leave with their white owners to more economically prosperous places in the States, if not sold in slave trade to intend to reduce the master's debt — as is the case of Howell Walker's management of Lockless.

The result of intertwining these tendencies is uncovered several times. One is, for example, when the narrator is describing Lockless' progressive death, partially quoted before: "I am watching people disappear, carried off Natchez-way, and I can see the whole place

going down. The land is dead, Georgie. The soil done turned to sand" (61). Another is Hiram's return to Lockless one year after his departure (323) to save Sophia and Thena. Hiram's homecoming is marked by the metamorphosis of a significant part of the environment formed by the land and the people from that land: "I turned off the West Road, into Lockless, . . . then I rode farther, past the fields, and saw that the regular team had shrunk in number, and looking out at them, I recognized no one" (322).

Those human losses seem to be what most defamiliarizes Lockless' landscape from Hiram's point of view: "Place so empty now" is the first comment he makes. Sophia agrees and emphasizes the dimension of the problem: "So many lost. So many gone. Natchez got 'em. Tuscaloosa. Cairo. Hauled 'em down into that big nothing. It get worse every day" (331). Even Hiram's father is completely aware of the irreversible metamorphosis that his plantation has been experiencing: "So much has changed round here since you [Hiram] have gone. The old place cannot be what it was" (324).

Another character associated with displacement is Thena. When she, Sophia and Hiram passed by a location in the county, "old memories began to spring forth for Thena," who said she had family there:

> "Uncles, aunts, cousins. Had to know who I could marry and who I could not. There was so many associations. The old folks kept the memory. Knew who was kin and who was not . . . [b]ut they all gone now," said Thena. "All the knowledged one is gone, and we are reduced to our surmising up on a nose or eyebrow or a particular demeanor. Don't matter much, I guess. So few of us left, and another year like this, Elm will be dust." (341)

The impending transformation of Elm into dust may indicate the direct, natural relation between these people and this land and vice versa, since the death or demise of this space seems linked to the progressive disappearance — be it death, relocation, sale, and so on — of the slaves that have been working there.

In addition to the agricultural soil of the fields, the environment alludes to elements surrounding, such as "the Street," that is, the area in which the African American slaves had been born, lived and been raised, Hiram himself among them. The description of these sights is not more hopeful than the rest and, as Hiram has "expected, the Street too had fallen into disrepair" (239). However, some aspects have apparently remained unchanged: the surviving remnants of that "vast Southern Empire" of Virginia (329) are the material possessions linked to the white people, the physical evidence of their symbolic power. In the first place, "the white palace of Lockless," its "main house" "seem[s] perfectly maintained" (322). Likewise, the trees near it do "not smell of fruit left to rot on the ground," and nor does the garden of late asters (322). But it only seems so: it is only an outward impression because, once Hiram descends to the bowels of the main house, the human emptiness reveals the inner degradation behind that façade:

> I was in the secret staircase that descended into the Warrens below. So many were now gone, and where there once had been life, I found an emptiness, a haunt, in all the abandoned quarters, with their doors left open, and various odds and ends—washbasins, marbles, spectacles—left behind. Walking in the Warrens, peering by the lantern-light, running my hand across the cobwebbed doorframes of the people I'd known, of Cassius, of Ella, of Pete, I felt a great rage, not simply because I knew that they had been taken but because I knew how they had been taken, how they had been parted from each other, how I was born and made by this great parting. Better than before, I understood the whole dimensions of this crime, the entirety of the theft, the

> small moments, the tenderness, the quarrels and corrections, all stolen, so that men such as my father might live as gods. (325)

His anger arises from the awareness of slow violence and its mechanisms. The reason is that the house is, paradoxically, a constructed device to echo and obscure at the same time the ideological working of slow violence — a monumental sign to boast the supremacy of the Quality masters, but which conceals the existence and necessity of the slaves that make it function. All this is suggested by Hiram's reference to the internal tunnel of the mansion: "The tunnel, where I first entered the house, was the only entrance that the Tasked were allowed to use, and this was not only for the masters' exaltation but to hide us, for the tunnel was but one of the many engineering marvels built into Lockless so as to make it appear powered by some imperceptible energy" (35).

All these facts are only some physical descriptions that sustain Nixon's slow violence, illustrated with Hiram's words: "the shackles clamping down on my wrist . . . a weight beyond anything I had ever known" (311). Despite the difficulties in perception, the readers are not prevented from noticing the effects of the immaterial shadow of slow violence that covers its victims. The norms and attitudes described by Hiram—"I did my best not to stare. I knew what happened to coloreds who were too curious about the world beyond Virginia" (23), "There were penalties for the Tasked who'd learned to read" (30), and "all those years of holding my words, of listening and not talking, still bore on me" (306)—point at that slow violence: the more or less direct restrictions inflicted on the black slaves are the cause of such a long-lasting repression of impulses, deeply rooted in the surrounding environment.

2.3. Disposability

The restraints analyzed in the previous section fictionalize the situation that many actual African American slaves were aware of in the period depicted. For instance, in 1832 Stewart denounces the extensive shortage of incentives that Afro-Americans suffer both to explain and counterargue at the same time the widespread accusations of idleness attributed to the collective: “generally as a people, we are neither lazy nor idle; and considering how little we have to excite or stimulate us, I am almost astonished that there are so many industrious and ambitious ones to be found” (56). In this respect, in *The Water Dancer*, Hiram explicitly blames slavery for making “men *wasteful* and profligate in sloth” (329, emphasis added), and therefore he recognizes the active role of another mechanism of slow violence: human disposability. The indoctrination of the African American population as disposable objects, without agency, seems to be a fundamental tenet of the enslaving ideology. In relation to slow violence, the ideological commodification of human beings arises as a pervasive and effective method to perpetuate white supremacy.[11]

The Water Dancer appears to point in this direction because many black characters from the Virginian plantation are completely aware of their disposable, reified status, and yet they do not fight lest their struggle fails, at least initially. Sophia seems to have internalized this attitude, for she declares that “we [black slaves] really ain’t nothing but jewelry to” their white masters (99), words uttered precisely on her way to her master’s mansion to fulfill his commands. More than jewelry or an “amusement” (207), African Americans are considered sheer property for economic transaction, as the narrator addresses the fictional addressee: “You have to remember what I was: not human but property, and a valuable property” (87).

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[11] It is a fact that some historical figures in the 19th century have attempted to challenge this situation that has traditionally subdued this ethnic group: e.g. Maria Stewart herself, since the very evocative incipit of her lecture “Why Sit Ye Here and Die?” (55), in which there is a literal interrogation (“why” and “?”) of the passive connotations of the verbs *to sit* and *to die* mentioned in the first words.

Hiram himself is perfectly aware of this condition due to what he terms "the peculiar religion of Virginia, . . . where a man would profess his love for you one moment and sell you off the next" (70). It is to that space that their disposability is attached, according to the protagonist: "the place has made us that way, by all we have seen" (364). That is why even the grounds of happiness are mutable, and hence disposable, for the Tasked, as Hiram declares when Sophia and he engage in a love relationship at Lockless: "It was a beautiful time, . . . but still it was built upon the shifting ground of the Task [*sic*], and we knew that sooner or later the ground must shift again" (359). Their internalized sense of disposability stands in sharp contrast to the axiomatic ownership of all Lockless resources that Hiram attributes to his father, Howell Walker: "nothing in this house, on this land, indeed on this earth, could be called the rightful property of Howell Walker. And yet, being Quality, being a pirate, this never stopped him from laying claim" (386).

While this takes place in Lockless, neither the environmentalism experienced in the plantation nor the slow violence exerted on slaves are threats to African Americans in Philadelphia, where Hiram witnesses, "for the first time, colored people in . . . true freedom" (207). Following the anti-pastoral pattern proposed by Bennett and discussed earlier, in the city Hiram "had been the truest version of [him]self, unbent by the desires and rituals of others" (311). Arguably, hence, both the environmentalism and the slow violence that the "Tasked" undergo operate in the plantation to maintain the black-people disposability, in contrast to what occurs in the urban space of Philadelphia.

To finish both this section and the literary analysis of *The Water Dancer*, I would like to focus on a particular excerpt that may also touch upon the ideas of disposability, slow violence and the environmentalism of the African American slaves. The reference is extracted from Hiram's speech during the preparations for his Conduction of Thena to bring her and her daughter Kessiah together. It belongs to the final pages of the novel:

> "'For my mother,' I said. 'For all the so many mothers taken over this bridge from which there can be no return.'
>
> And then I looked at Thena, and I saw now she was softly illuminated in blue light emanating from the necklace of shells.
>
> 'For all the mothers who have remained,' I said, with one hand clasping hers and the other on her cheek. 'Who carry on in the name of those who do not return.'" (393)

In the first place, from a linguistic perspective, both direct-speech utterances are parallelistic, at least with respect to the approximately anaphoric prepositional phrase[12] that appears repeatedly. Nevertheless, not only is the structure parallelistic syntactically speaking, but thematically, given the fronting and repetition in both sequences of the same noun *mother(s)*. The noun functions as the head of the nominal and reinforces the importance of this word thanks to its initial position. Such a displacement is not only positional, but also semantic, carried by the theme of "no return" within each relative clause, perhaps the topic reference of such clauses. Furthermore, even in the first sequence, in which there is an implicit reference to Hiram's experience, since the topic deals with the mothers forced to depart, there is a gap — the linguistic elision of the relative pronoun and the operator of the verb phrase: "For all the so many mothers [who are] taken over this bridge".

These linguistic parallelisms, from my point of view, correspond to the formal traces of the pivotal elements that precisely connect Hiram and Thena: family, departure, disposability, and stationary displacement in an environment defined by slow violence. They share a stationary displacement, although lived them from inverted positions — whereas Thena is the mother that has stayed, Hiram is the son that has. Thena seems to intuit this when Hiram, still a child, appears before her after his mother has been taken: "you know something

[12] I represent it as follows: $_4$[*For* $_3$[(PRE-)DETERMINER(s) $_2$[*mother(s)* $_1$[Relative clause/MODIFIER]$_1$]$_2$]$_3$]$_4$

is broken in old Thena, and . . . I had a feeling that same something was broken in you. And you had chosen me . . . I can't be your mother . . . But you have chosen me, I understand that. I want you to know that I understand" (18-9).

In this respect, they could be said to be disposing of each other's lost kin, although the nature of such a disposability would not be the economic kind that the Quality imposed on the Tasked. Nonetheless, Thena clearly states that she cannot be Hiram's mother, so, rather, it is possible that they aim to ease the hurt that their respective losses have produced in them: by developing a function, they do not necessarily aim to replace the original constituents, i.e. the displaced ones. As Thena had previously warned Hiram, the pain caused by the memories of the erstwhile ones is not enough to forget them (18).

These themes apparently sustain the parallel juxtaposition of each character exactly as happens in the syntactic relationship within and between each sentence: in terms of internal complementation patterns, there exists displacement in relation to the usual English kernel structure *Subject + Verb + Object* due to the thematic fronting of the prepositional phrase; as regards the linking of sentences, no grammatical nexus joins them, but a pause, a separation represented by a period. This notwithstanding, their relation transcends the syntactic realm and has to be found in the underlying lexico-semantic association of ideas. Both seem to be aware, to "understand" that they are bound by "something" abstract, beyond lineage, despite not being blood relations — their respective absences. However, in contrast to this lack of linguistic nexus — for example, a conjunction —, the connection between these two characters seems to be translated physically into the novel, as Hiram's narrative voice describes "clasping" Thena's hand(s) with one of his (393).

In conclusion, the stationary displacement resulting from the separation of Hiram's and Thena's family, i.e. a form of slow violence, seems to be echoed by the language employed in Hiram's declaration. The content from his speech establishes the verbal hints to

identify, to connect Thena and Hiram through means that transcend blood. The interrelation between Hiram and Thena may be read as a symptom of and/or resistance against the long-lasting disposability suffered by the Tasked. In short, the excerpt epitomizes the representation of the "displacement without moving" experienced by the Afro-American community within the space of plantations, an environmentalism conjured up by the reference to the bridge over the River Goose through which slaves were transported.

Conclusions: "I Saw All That Had Been Taken from Me"

This master's thesis has attempted to render visible the socio-environmental signs of African American slavery represented by Ta-Nehisi Coates' novel in the light of the racist hostility that has pervaded United States history. To reach this objective, first, it has been explained how the economic origins of Modern-Age colonialism legitimized slavery through ideological constructions of race imposed on different communities, in this case study, African American.

Secondly, Nixon's socio-environmental coordinates of slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor have been introduced as the magnifying glass under which the question of slavery would be examined. In accordance with this author, the space(s) connected to impoverished collectives reveal(s) traces of the covert processual violence suffered by humans and the non-human environment.

The notion of disposability suggested by different scholars complements Nixon's outlook, since the refusal to acknowledge human and land value seems to be an encapsulating proof of the environmentalism of the Tasked and slow violence. The adoption of these approaches has justified the study of the representation of the Afro-American enslavement both from a postcolonial and an ecocritical perspective. That is why the relations between human beings and the environment has become the focus of this analysis.

In this vein, the connection between a racialized group and their environment has been echoed by the relation between *The Water Dancer* and its literary context. Concerning its form (primarily), the novel deliberately resembles traditional slave narratives, the first literary genre linked to African American writing, the main reason why it is labeled a neoslave narrative. As regards its content, it is true that the theme of liberation typical of those slave representations is the backbone of the relation, but it is not the single one — likewise, the presence of magic supports the structural development of the story, therefore the magical-

realist nature of the text is also revealed. It has been suggested that this twofold constitution attempts to bind and distance (this) fiction and (its referential) external reality.

When moving to the examination of Nixon's concepts in *The Water Dancer*, a similar procedure has been followed: the close reading of excerpts from the novel has engaged in a productive dialogue with fragments from Maria Stewart's actual 19th-century speech. The aim of this conversation is precisely to establish a natural connection between the extra- and the intra-textual realities represented, and between an entity and its circumstances, however fictional the representation may be. Within this structural framework, the environmentalism of the slaves has been the first conception to analyze. The research of the precarious situation of the black American slaves has begun with the traces present in the landscapes, a relation of contiguity between humans and non-humans that both continues and contrasts with the anti-pastoralism of the Afro-American tradition.

For example, whereas in the city black citizens are presented as free, in the wilderness of the plantations both nature and the slaves live in the lowest spaces, subjugated by the white masters who inhabit the top of the physical (and ideological) land. On the one hand, the correspondence between the enslaved environment and its people has been reinforced by the economic demise of the plantation system, reflected by the progressive degradation of land in direct relation with the disappearance (because of displacement, sale, ageing, death and so on) of the black community. On the other, the necessity of water for the functioning of the supernatural power of Conduction and the physical attachments to the earth have been interpreted as the releasing side of nature that associates slaves and their environment though a sort of collective memory.

From this general scenario of the environmentalism of the "Tasked," the essay has led to the more specific issue of slow violence to bring to light some of its instantiations in Coates' text. To begin with, the process of hierarchical racialization would be manifest

through the interiorization of such hierarchies. However, another significant ramification of slow violence would be related to displacements, and notably to the stationary displacements: due to the transformations of the social and environmental spaces, both human and non-human entities lose their identity that had defined them, experiencing a sort of relocation, yet without having been moved. Throughout the novel there is a myriad of examples that demonstrate the degradation of the Virginian land in parallel to that of the conditions of those black slaves that "tasked" it. The debasement of the landscape due to overexploitation or the psychological and behavioral effects of the separation of families and loved ones are read as the interwoven repercussions of these displacements.

The disposability of the slaves of African descent has been the last focus of this Master's thesis. It has been argued that this quality is internalized by the black "Tasked" individual as a consequence of the long-lasting processes of slow violence framed by the space of the plantation, disposable as well, as the progressive withdrawal and sale of estates for economic reasons denote. Read both as a potential adoption of and resistance against disposability among the Tasked, this thesis concludes with the analysis of Hiram's speech to condense the ideas tackled throughout this study.

This reading of *The Water Dancer* intends to open new conversations, involving, for instance, the comparative analysis of the environmentalism and slow violence in other ethno-racial communities, or questions with regard to the role of ethnicity in the increasingly global(ized) society, among others. The focus on the past and the relation with the environment aim to raise awareness of the disputed issues in which both humans and non-humans are involved. With the prospect of a better future for everyone, we should become aware that there is only one planet to be shared, and there should be room for everyone/thing in respect. It seems about time that every flower in this world bloom ~~***un***~~***seen*** and ***do not waste*** their fragrance, because all lives matter.

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Appendix: A Summary of *The Water Dancer*

Hiram Walker is the enslaved black son of Rose, an African American black slave, and Howell Walker, the (white) master of the Virginian plantation in which she was forced to work, known as Lockless. Thena, a woman slave separated from all her family as a result of the slave trade, raises Hiram in that place since he is a child. Hiram's mother does not raise him because Howell Walker sells Rose in Hiram's youth. Howell, however, is not the single kin of Hiram that lives in Lockless: there lives Maynard, the legitimate (white) son and heir of Howell Walker. Although both receive an education, Hiram proves more capable than Maynard, the former is assigned to assist his half-brother and to help him direct the estate in the future. When Maynard and Hiram fall to a river, nevertheless, only the latter survives thanks to a supernatural ability of which he is not aware, known as Conduction, that consists in teleporting to a place in which one has been. This episode awakens his desire to escape in company of the slave Sophia, the woman he loves, but their attempt fails.

Separated from Sophia, Hiram is imprisoned and abused until the Conduction manifests again. Then he meets Corrine Quinn, a white Virginian landlady responsible for his captivity, a test to check whether Hiram has Conduction or not. Her interest in that ability is related to her involvement in the Underground Railroad, an abolitionist network devoted to the liberation of slaves. To develop Hiram's formation in the Underground, he is sent for a year to Philadelphia, where black people live without slavery. He participates in several liberations and attends abolitionist conventions, in one of which Hiram meets Kessiah, Thena's youngest daughter. Once Hiram is taught by Harriet Tubman — a woman addressed as Moses — how to master Conduction with water and memory, he goes back to Lockless. He is told that Sophia is there, so he plans to release her and to bring Thena and her daughter together, objectives that are fulfilled. After Howell Walker's decease, Corrine Quinn buys Lockless and transforms it into a center of the Underground overseen by Hiram.