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Magical Realism and Resistance in *The Water Dancer*

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ABSTRACT

Previous scholarship surrounding Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2019 novel *The Water Dancer* has mostly examined the novel through the lenses of trauma and memory. These studies suggest that the enslaved characters' memories of their ancestors are used as a form of resistance. My paper builds on this scholarship by focusing specifically on how magic is used as a form of rebellion in the text. Coates' novel follows an enslaved man named Hiram who discovers that he has supernatural powers. He accesses these magic abilities, known as Conduction, through his connection to his ancestors. Drawing from the collective memory, Hiram can use the trauma of his ancestors to magically transport enslaved people over waterways and help them on their journey towards freedom, building a bridge to the future in the process. In this essay, I examine how Hiram uses Conduction to gain freedom and reverse the power dynamics between the enslaved, who are known as the Tasked, and the enslavers, who are referred to as the Quality. By helping others escape and not letting their legacy be forgotten, Hiram's magical powers allow him to honor the memories of his ancestors and their suffering. In approaching *The Water Dancer*'s construction of magic, I consider how the novel draws from magical realism and Black spiritualist practices like conjure and voodoo. The term conjure "applies to an extensive area of magic, practices, and lore that includes healing, spells, and supernatural objects" (Chireau 226). Conjure is different from magical realism in that it is a spiritual practice in addition to its magic mainly being used for healing. Magical realism, on the other hand, has a broader focus on magic and is not considered a spiritual practice or having any religious associations. Unlike conjure, "at the core of Voodoo is the recognition that all things, events, and living beings in the entire cosmos are inextricably bound together" (Owusu 9). Similar to conjure, Voodoo is also a spiritual practice and recognizes magic in a wide variety of things. However, Voodoo does not place an emphasis on the healing aspects of magic, but rather it focuses on how everything in the world is connected. The story, I argue, makes connections between memory, magic, and resistance to show how the study of history plays a key role in changing the power dynamics in a society. By positioning *The Water Dancer* as a magical realist text, I suggest that resistance plays a significant part in Coates' novel by refusing dehumanization and allowing Hiram to regain control over his identity and future while also retaining ties to his community.

AUTHOR BIO



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Grace Anderson is an English major at the University of Missouri-Columbia. She has a strong interest in studying literature that focuses on marginalized groups, such as Black, LGBTQ+, or feminist literary texts. She conducted research on *The Water Dancer* while she was involved in the McNair Scholars Program during her junior year of college. She has presented this work at three conferences including: the National Undergraduate Literature Conference, Show Me Research Week, and the 37th Annual McNair Scholars Conference.

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I. Introduction

Magic can be used as a form of resistance in Black literary texts by allowing Black people the ability to imagine worlds where they have access to more resources that can help them in fighting against the racism they experience daily. The novel *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates follows an enslaved man named Hiram who learns about the Underground Railroad and his Conduction powers. Hiram uses his Conduction powers as a form of resistance against his enslavers by using them to gain more control over his life and assert independence. With these powers, he is also able to help others escape from their enslavement. The novel can be categorized as a magical realist text which is a genre of literature that uses fantastical elements in stories of realistic fiction. In magical realism, the magical elements of the story "are supernatural phenomena that cannot be explained by science, but they occur in everyday life and are perceived and accepted as ordinary events" (Özbay 1520). Whereas 'magic' is often understood as a fantastic phenomenon, magical realism portrays magic as a regular occurrence in an otherwise ordinary world. Magic in these kinds of stories is often considered as socially acceptable and is not deemed as a strange or bizarre force unlike other stories that utilize magic including fantasy stories and fairytales. Although magical realism has led to improvements in the ways that African Americans are depicted in literature, there are still ongoing issues with how mainstream media depicts magic and spiritual practices to degrade Black people. A common example of this is the "magical negro" trope which can be described as a Black "stock character whose supernatural gifts promote the success of a White protagonist" (Schaffer 51). This depiction is problematic because it makes the Black characters one-dimensional since their entire existence is shaped around the main white character who they are supposed to be guiding and assisting with their problems. Additionally, in almost all stories that utilize the trope "the Black character disappears from the plot after fixing the White character's problems, signaling their ancillary position as a plot device" (Hughey 757). Having a Black character's entire identity revolve around the white main character to help them become successful suggests that Black characters' entire purpose in literature is to further the plot of white characters. This implies to the people that are consuming these types of stories that people of color are lesser than white people and they do not have their own cultures. While the trope is often used in movies and TV shows, it is prominent in some literary texts as well such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*.

Unlike the "magical negro" trope which provides a negative depiction of Black characters, magical realism allows Black folks to reclaim magic as a means of providing new literary and spiritual resources to fight against oppression. Furthermore, magical realism places a greater focus on Black characters' identities, presenting them as complex individuals, rather than characters whose entire identity revolves around white people. This literary genre utilizes magic to show the Black characters in these stories that anything is possible with their supernatural abilities, even while they are living in oppressive societies. Ultimately, magical realism and the subversion of the "magical negro" trope in *The Water Dancer* allow Hiram to strengthen his connection with his ancestors through his Conduction powers and the ability to create a life for himself that is not dependent on serving white people.

II. Methods

For this project, the methods that I use are rhetorical analysis and library research. I utilize rhetorical analysis to illustrate how Ta-Nehisi Coates uses magic as a form of rebellion in *The Water Dancer*. I pull quotes to provide direct, textual evidence for my claims about the novel. Then, I use library databases to assist in finding academic articles that talk about magic, African American literature, and scholars that have already studied *The Water Dancer*. Library research helps me to show how my argument builds on the work of other researchers and how the topics that I explore have already been discussed in the past, helping me to demonstrate the particular intervention that I am making. Doing so allows me to demonstrate how my

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project joins academic conversations in the field of literary studies.

III. Results

Conduction and Ancestral Memory

At the beginning of the book, Hiram reveals that he has an excellent memory, except for the fact that he cannot remember anything about his mother or their ancestors. However, he starts recalling memories of his mother once he discovers his Conduction powers. Once Hiram starts working for the Underground Railroad, he meets Harriet Tubman and they have a conversation about their Conduction powers where she tells him that, "'memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom'" (Hughey 757). Hiram's Conduction powers allow him the opportunity to have full access to his family's memories as well as other enslaved people's histories. This allows Hiram to prevent history from repeating itself, since he has access to all of the enslaved people's memories that have come before him, and is aware of the various tactics that enslavers have used to oppress their enslaved populations. By having access to these memories, Hiram is already one step ahead of his enslavers since he knows the types of approaches they are going to use to try to put a stop to the Underground Railroad. Also, these memories allow him to honor his ancestors and make sure that they are not forgotten, since their enslavers have repeatedly tried to erase their existence from history due to the lack of historical records available on them and removing them from their homes. This prevents them from being able to form long-term connections with other enslaved people or settle down anywhere, since they are constantly on the move and being separated from their loved ones.

Magical Realism as Resistance

Moreover, Hiram also talks about how the Underground Railroad, and his Conduction powers have changed his perspective of the world and the ways that he engages with it. While Hiram is working for the Underground Railroad, he reflects on how much he has changed since he has left his plantation, known as Lockless. Hiram notes that when he discovered his Conduction powers he was "brought up out of the coffin, brought up out of slavery. And now I felt myself shedding the lie, like old skin, so that a truer, more lustrous Hiram emerged" (Coates 271). The repetition of the phrase "brought up" expresses the significant impact that Conduction has had on Hiram's life. This phrase is often used to describe a person's upbringing, which is usually a period marked by drastic growth. This suggests that Hiram has experienced a lot of changes in his life and the perception of the world as he has explored his powers. Furthermore, the word "up" typically has a positive connotation which suggests that his life has significantly improved since he first learned about his magical abilities. Hiram, making the comparison between his journey with his powers to shedding old skin conveys how his life has been forever altered by this revelation and that he will never be able to return to his old self. Hiram feels that his Conduction powers allow him to present a more honest version of himself to the world, due to his magical abilities allowing him to strengthen his connection to his roots. Additionally, Conduction allows him to not feel powerless against his oppressors anymore, since he now has access to resources that can help him fight against his enslavers. Conduction has also shown him that freedom can be attainable for him and other enslaved people, by his powers allowing him to transport enslaved people over waterways as they are escaping from their plantations. Through Hiram helping people escape from their enslavers that strip them of their humanity by treating them as pieces of property "he actively resists the systemic destruction of his identity and other enslaved ones, referring his connection to his ancestors and their firm resistance" (Aqeeli 4). Hiram's relationship with his ancestors is significant; their bond demonstrates that this battle against his oppressors is not just about his individual experiences but also encapsulates all of the trauma his family has faced in the past. Hiram rebels by running away from Lockless, his father's plantation, with his girlfriend, Sophia, at the beginning of the novel. He also joins the Underground

Railroad organization and helps other enslaved people escape from their enslavers. Hiram uses his Conduction powers to magically transport others over waterways, so they have an easier time escaping from their enslavers and can begin their journeys towards freedom. Hiram's magical powers allow him to envision a world where he can make his own decisions and have control over his future, which he has never been able to do before since he has been forced to follow his enslavers' orders his whole life. Similarly, in the novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, he uses magical realism "to re-create Colombian history to protest against the policies of the colonial masters and the way capitalism told upon the socio-political and economic structure of the region" (Ahmad and Afsar 6). Similar to Coates, Márquez uses the magical realism genre to critique colonialism and discuss the oppression that Colombian people experienced as a result. In both of these works, magic is used as a form of resistance against the social inequalities that are formed through colonialism. This allows Márquez and Coates to provide readers with an outlet of being able to imagine a world where they can use magic to combat these injustices. In short, during Hiram's journey towards gaining his freedom, he discovers that magic and rebellion can be found in a variety of ways, and that the world is not as simple as he once thought it was.

Reversal of Power Dynamics

Magic provides Hiram with the opportunity to envision a world where there is no social hierarchy. In the story it is revealed that there are two distinct social classes, known as the Quality and the Tasked. The Quality, who are the enslavers, are considered as the most powerful group in this society. Meanwhile, the Tasked occupy the bottom of the social hierarchy since they are Black people who are enslaved by the Quality. However, Hiram's magical abilities allow him the chance to imagine a society where everyone is perceived as equals. Hiram first discovers these powers after experiencing a near-death incident with his half-brother Maynard. As he learns more about his powers, he discovers a secret network called the Underground Railroad devoted to assisting enslaved people escape from their plantations. He becomes a member of this organization and attempts to help his loved ones on their journeys towards freedom using his ability to transport people over waterways to safety. Towards the beginning of the novel, Hiram experiences a near fatal accident when he almost drowns alongside his half-brother Maynard who is the white son of his plantation-owning father. Hiram has always had to submit to Maynard and his father, but as he discovers his powers, this changes. While Hiram starts to drown, he thinks about his mother and sees a blue light and he notes that, "there was peace in that blue light, more peace than sleep itself, and more than that, there was freedom, and I knew that the elders had not lied, that there really was a homeplace of our own, a life beyond the Task" (Coates 8-9). The blue light becomes synonymous with the inception of Hiram's powers. The light allows him to temporarily forget about the oppressive society that he lives in as a member of the Tasked by showing him that civilizations that do not utilize social or racial hierarchies are possible. This is expressed through Hiram describing the blue light as being peaceful and feeling a sense of "freedom" when he looks at it. Hiram feels freedom when he interacts with the blue light because "it is under the water of the river Goose that Hiram can shed…Maynard's presence as an act of resistance" (Sohail and Siddiqa 8). The blue light finally allows Hiram to have an opportunity to make his own choices, such as deciding if he is going to try to save his own life or sacrifice his life for Maynard's. Additionally, the magic enables Hiram to see that these powers can provide him the chance to create a world where African Americans are able to establish their own identities, without being forced to obey orders from white people. Overall, the blue light helps Hiram to start becoming aware of the possibility that he can create a life and future for himself that does not force him to serve others and be treated as lesser than white people for the rest of his life.

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IV. Discussion

One of the limitations that I found while I was conducting research was the discovery that not a lot of research has been performed on *The Water Dancer* in the United States. This is because it was published fairly recently (in 2019). Another limitation that I identified during my project was the lack of sources discussing how magical realism has been utilized as a form of resistance in Black literature. Ultimately, *The Water Dancer* shows how magic can be used as an alternative form of resistance that allows Black characters to imagine a world where they are not solely defined by their race and are able to be treated as equals to white people. Hiram's Conduction powers also express how magic can be used as a way for African Americans to reclaim their heritage, since the slave trade tried to erase Black people's history. The novel also expresses how magic can be found in a variety of forms of protest, such as the documentation of enslaved people's escape narratives. The fantastical elements in *The Water Dancer* illustrate how even small acts of resistance, such as boycotting and raising awareness about ongoing issues in the world, can end up having a powerful impact on society.

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