Original Article

Power, Resistance, and Black Masculine Identity in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*

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Abstract

Attempts to reconstruct black masculinity can be traced to the nineteenth-century slave narratives that challenged white representations of black male identity. In the wake of Obama's rise to presidency and the recent surge in public killing of black men, contemporary African American writers have revisited the antebellum narratives through the neo-slave narrative genre to reconsider the question of black masculinity. Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) is one such attempt to return to the Antebellum South to revisit the pain and suffering inflicted on generations of black men, women, and children while highlighting the significance of memory, narrative, and history in the pursuit of freedom. This article analyzes the text's representation of black male subjectivity, agency, and resistance through a conceptual framework drawn from Foucault's theorization of power and resistance; R. W. Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity; and bell hooks's conception of black masculinity. Through a close analysis of the representation of black male subjectivity in the novel, the essay explores how black men resist systems of white male hegemonic power through their memory's journey that not only allows them to understand their extraordinary powers but also redefine their masculinity. The essay concludes that through a representation of complex and multifaceted black male characters, Coates represents models of progressive black masculinity that challenge the received notions of hegemonic masculinity through their past consciousness.

Keywords: Hegemonic masculinity, black masculinity, memory, conduction, Ta-Nehisi Coates

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Ta-Nehisi Coates's debut novel, *The Water Dancer* (2019) has received considerable attention as a neo-slave narrative written by a contemporary black intellectual who enjoys widespread appreciation for his newspaper columns as well as non-fiction works, *Between the World and Me* (2015) and *We were Eight Years in Power* (2017). Emerging in the latter half of the twentieth century, the contemporary neo-slave narratives attempt to address the gap in the slave narrative genre foregrounding the historic impact of slavery on the descendants of former slaves in the wake of contemporary upsurge in violence against African Americans. In the wake of Obama's rise to presidency and the recent surge in public killing of black men, contemporary African American writers have revisited the antebellum narratives through the neo-slave narrative genre to reconsider the question of black masculinity (Siddiqa and Sohail 2023). *The Water Dancer* focuses on the life of its protagonist, Hiram Walker, a gifted slave with photographic memory and the power of Conduction. Mainly a neoslave narrative, the novel returns to the Antebellum South to revisit the pain and suffering inflicted on generations of black men, women, and children while highlighting the significance of memory, narrative, and history in the pursuit of freedom. Given that the novel is modeled on the nineteenth century slave narrative that documented the life and experience of a slave from an autobiographical perspective, Coates's protagonist has been compared to Frederick Douglass owing to the "parallels between the protagonist, Hiram, and the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass" (Grant 2020, para. 4). Like Douglass, Hiram is born to a slave mother and her master; is separated from his mother at a very young age; and proves to be an exceptional child (Grant 2020) who goes through the trials and tribulations of slavery to emerge stronger and with a renewed spirit. However, while both narratives are deeply concerned with questioning the mainstream American society's representation of black men, Coates's narrative also departs from Douglass's in profound ways.

Douglass is preoccupied with the dominant "construct of the 'self-made man', a construct most male ex-slaves embrace[d]" as it was unavailable to them under slavery. Douglass models his reconstructed identity on the Franklinian prototype of "self-made man" (Zafar 1990, p. 101-102) that emphasizes his masculinity to disrupt the feminized identities of black men. In his pursuit of the dominant model of an "autonomous and self-sufficient – masculine" (Drake 1997, p. 92-94), Douglass's narrative

ends up reinforcing the capitalist patriarchal structures that he sets out to dismantle. In emphasizing "his status as a representative American male", he compromises on his community, heritage, culture, and history. The result is a black masculine identity that climaxes in his physical overpowering of the overseer, Covey, in which his readers witness "how a slave was made a man" (Douglass 1995, p. 39). As Drake notes: "In achieving his masculine self-definition through physical power and a resulting measure of autonomy, Douglass turns away from both the maternal body and the maternal line, rendering them "nothing" (1997, p. 102). As such "Douglass's escape from slavery is the culmination of his "rebirth", his emergence into the patriarchy" (Drake 1997, p. 102). What ensues is a "Victorian model of masculinity" that is "precarious at best, and a sham at worst (Butts 2007, p. 58).

While Butts argues that "[o]ne hundred and sixty years later, the path to gaining and/or regaining, the manner of defining, and the spoils of obtaining black masculinity remain the same" (p. 55) as represented in Douglass's narrative, this paper foregrounds a different conception of black masculinity via Coates's *The Water Dancer*. The essay analyzes the text's representation of black male subjectivity, agency, and resistance through a conceptual framework drawn from Foucault's theorization of power and resistance; R. W. Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity; and bell hooks's conception of black masculinity. Through a close analysis of the representation of black male subjectivity in the novel, the essay explores how black men resist systems of white male hegemonic power through their memory's journey that not only allows them to understand their extraordinary powers but also redefine masculinity in relation to their history, community, and heritage. The essay concludes that through a representation of complex and multifaceted black male characters, Coates represents models of a progressive black masculinity that challenge the received notions of hegemonic masculinity through their past consciousness.

Reconceiving Black Masculinity: Discourse, Power, and Resistance

Michel Foucault's writing has long influenced scholarship on colonial discourse and power. In his notable works, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975) and *History of Sexuality* (1976), Foucault has established connections between power, discourse, and subjectivity. Foucault contends that human beings structure their sense of reality through discourse which, in turn, influences and controls their thoughts and actions. For

Foucault, discourse is both a source of oppression and resistance thus enacting its destabilizing effects. In a society, various discourses contest to attain power, and power is exerted through discursive practices. These discursive practices in turn produce subjects; hence, Foucault's claim that "power is exercised rather than possessed" (Foucault 1977, p. 26). It is the productive rather than the repressive nature of power which produces binary oppositions that are then used as means of social control and authority. These binaries condition the subjects and others around them to view themselves according to the dominant discourse (Foucault 1978).

These discourses are thus a form of power that creates subjects. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault argues that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere." (1978, p. 93). In *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault reiterates that "power is 'always already there', that one is never 'outside it, that there are no 'margins' for those who break with the system to gambol in" (p. 141). Foucault believes that all social relations are relations of power. As such, the classification of certain segments of population as abnormal, sick, or criminal entails the need for surveillance by those in authority. This surveillance is coded as a discourse, a system of knowledge that maintains the superiority of the dominant power structures over the peripheries. However, power is also interlinked with resistance: "Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault 1978, p. 95). Indeed, resistance is formed "right at the point where relations of power are exercised" (Foucault 1980, p. 142). Whether it is "necessary, improbable" or "spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent", resistance, "by definition…can only exist in the strategic field of power relations" (Foucault 1978, 96). Thus, "like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies" (Foucault 1980, p. 142). It is a product of the power network originally. These "points" of resistance "are spread over time and space at varying densities, at times mobilizing groups or individuals in a definitive way" (Foucault 1978, 96). Foucault's concept of power and resistance as interlocked provides a useful framework for understanding black manhood as a construction of the dominant discourse that also creates the possibility of resistance.

This dominant construction of black masculinity can be understood through R. W. Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity". Drawing on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Connell theorizes "hegemonic masculinity

as the 'normative' model of masculinity, dominantly white and heterosexual: the "most honored way of being a man, it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimates the global subordination of women to men" (2005, p. 832). Hegemonic masculinities express "widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires" (Connell 2005, p. 838) centered around the core elements of heterosexuality and whiteness. White men like the figures of Maynard and his father in *The Water Dancer* conform to hegemonic notions of masculinity. Although the concept has been widely debated, reviewed, and revised, its basic premise can be summed up as follows: "A set of values established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men's identity, men's ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy" (Jewkes and Morrell 2015, 113). The hegemonic model of masculinity is a useful concept for understanding black masculinity as the dominant discourse that idealizes "hegemonic masculinity" also situates black bodies as others/external to this paradigm. In doing so, it shapes the dominant discourse on black masculinity. Constantly set against white hegemonic masculinity, black masculinity is generally perceived as demonic and savage. Through the history of the U.S. black, men have been varyingly stereotyped as "animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers" (hooks 2004, p. x) so much so that the only possibility of black male visibility is "in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it" (hooks 2004, p. x).

Connell uses the concept of hegemony instead of domination since the former includes the possibility of agency (2005, p. 841). Like Foucault's interlocked conception of power and resistance, hegemonic masculinity also contains fissures. It is this resistant space where any notion of what hooks terms "counter-hegemonic cultural practice" of conceiving a "liberatory black subjectivity" (hooks 2015, p. 22). In theorizing her notion of a "radical black subjectivity", hooks notes that the narrow spaces of representation available to black men are not the only possibilities; rather, they must view and explore "marginal locations as spaces where we can best become whatever we want to be while remaining committed to liberatory black liberation struggle" (2015, p. 20). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity and hooks's notion of a "radical black subjectivity" within the context of Foucault's understanding of power and resistance provides a

productive framework for understanding Ta-Nehisi Coates's reconstruction of black masculinity in *The Water Dancer*. Foucault believes that structures of power that produce and discipline subjects through various discourses also create the possibilities of resistance. The most significant power structure that black masculinity interacts with is the hegemonic model of masculinity that marginalizes, stereotypes, and subjugates black masculinity. White hegemonic masculinity, as a Foucauldian power structure, gives rise to resistance or a "counter-hegemonic cultural practice" that allows room for reconstructing black subjectivity as "radical". This kind of black masculinity, as is evident in Coates's *The Water Dancer*, neither conforms to hegemonic masculinity nor is constructed in opposition to it. Rather, it draws on memory's power to probe the past for reconstructing it. The essay argues that Coates's black men, especially the protagonist Hiram Walker, resist systems of white male hegemonic power through their memory's journey that helps them understand their extraordinary powers and allows them to recreate their identities in relation to their history, community, and heritage.

Reconstructing Black Manhood

Ta-Nehisi Coates has widely written about social, political, and cultural issues pertaining to African Americans. Coates's non-fiction depicts the agony of living in America as a black man while his debut novel *The Water Dancer*, a neo-slave narrative, traces the plight of black slaves on the Virginia plantations. Influenced by writers like James Baldwin, Coates closely studies the dynamics of institutionalized racism in contemporary America in relation to the history of slavery. In *The Water Dancer*, Ta-Nehisi Coates looks at slavery and its ravages for individuals, their families, and the black community with a renewed interest. *The Water Dancer* explores the political and social implications of the institution of slavery while depicting the way power has come to shape and define the discourse on masculinity in the U.S. Coates's novel brings forth the inevitable interaction of the personal and the political and the way this relationship can be exploited by the writer to challenge and resist the controlling cultural discourses. While writing a neo-slave narrative in the post-Obama era, Coates re-visits the past to lay bare the close interaction of hegemonic structures of power and black manhood in order to challenge the dominant discourses on black masculinity.

A neo-slave narrative set in the American south; *The Water Dancer* narrates the atrocious conditions of black slaves under slavery, especially the pain of separation from their loved ones and the desire to be reunited with them. Hiram Walker, the black protagonist of the novel, suffers the agony of this separation from his mother at a very young age and grapples with his memory and imagination to find a trace of her. Bestowed with extraordinary memory, intelligence, and the power of Conduction through water, Hiram is able to discern the potential of the Tasked (slaves on the plantations) and the lack of the Quality (the white masters), which include his biological father and half-brother. After facing imprisonment and severe torture owing to his attempt to run away with his girlfriend, Sophia, Hiram decides to join the Underground. Working in close unison with Moses, the woman who familiarizes him with Conduction, Hiram hones his own power of Conduction that not only allows him to reunite other slaves with their families but also restore his own connection with his mother.

The novel opens with Hiram Walker driving his white brother, Maynard and his partner over the bridge upon the river Goose, after a hectic race day. The sight of the bridge on the Goose "stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way" (p. 3) brings glimpses of his mother to Hiram. The "awesome power of memory" brings alive the isolated dancing images of his mother reflected in the opening sentence of the text: "And I could only have seen her there on the stone bridge, a dancer wreathed in ghostly blue, because that was the way they would have taken her back when I was young" (p. 3). In the blink of an eye, the chaise enters the water, and suddenly everyone is under water, fighting for their lives. This brush with the memory of his mother furnishes him with the insight to weigh the nature of his relationship with Maynard, who has practically been his ward. Despite being black, Hiram had been assigned the task of supervising his white brother by their father, Howell Walker, on account of Hiram's superior intelligence, faculties, and maturity. In this moment, Hiram recollects how his manhood has always been crushed under the restraining impact of his brother's hegemonic masculinity: "All my life, I had been subject to his whims" (p. 9). Under the institution of slavery, Hiram's manhood is defined by the power struggle against the hegemonic grip of this familial tie of brotherhood. Hiram's agency to compare himself with his brother and become aware of his own capabilities, therefore, shapes his masculinity. He can clearly see that the hegemonic power enjoyed by

Maynard had a reductive effect on his identity and his manhood: "slavery murdered him" and "made a child of him" (p. 7).

It is the institution of slavery that renders the two brothers unequal in the eyes of their father. The enslaved status of Hiram prevents his father from ever acknowledging the blood tie between the two, reserving, for Hiram, "a half smile held frozen in a macabre rictus" which more often hinged on "sinister" (p. 40). While Hiram is often naturally pulled towards his father, he is warned by fellow slaves against trusting the man: "They ain't your family, boy. I am more your mother standing right here now than that white man on the horse is your father" (p. 22). Although Howell Walker is aware of Hiram's extraordinary abilities and intelligence compared to the insipidness of Maynard, he only wants to exploit them to the service of Maynard as he often instructs Hiram: "mind your brother . . . mind my boy" (p. 43). Hiram is as well-suited to be the heir of Lockless as Maynard is ill-suited to be one: "I was better than Maynard, given so much less yet made of so much more" (p. 33), and it is this knowledge which does not allow his father to recognize or acknowledge the former's potential. While Walker bitterly grieves Maynard's death in the chaise accident as he was the last memory of his dead wife, he is unremorseful of the fact that he had snatched the only identity and the missing link that Hiram had with his past and his maternal line: "He had taken my mother from me. But that was not enough. He took my memory of her too" (p. 397). Ironically, Hiram who is made to suffer the pain of this loss by his own father has been assigned the task to save and protect his white brother despite the latter's outrageousness.

Although white men in the novel want to claim hegemonic masculinity, they fail to uphold the badge of superiority that entitles them to it. The degenerate behavior of white men is nowhere more apparent as on the race day. Engaged in insulting, laughter, and drinking throughout the day, these whites please themselves by physically targeting the slaves. The horse race is more an occasion for swearing, betting, drinking, and voluptuousness for Maynard as well. On the occasion of the Social, the season's celebration, at his father's place, Hiram has moments of admiration both for his father's "splendor and regale" (p. 19) and his guests' display of "grace in their smallest movements" and "gentlemanly things" (p. 26). However, his fascination is soon interrupted as he witnesses the flip side of things: "But when they tired of dignity, the bottom fell out" (p. 27). Ironically, the figure of Maynard, Howell Walker, and other white men exemplify "the image of the brute—untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling" man (hooks

2004, p. x), associated with black masculinity in the popular imagination. Thus, the appearance and attitude of the white men in various public and private events make Hiram regret his earlier idealization of white people.

The hegemonic power structures created by white men are perpetually challenged by slaves. Hiram is discerning enough to observe that "[t]hey were no better than us, and in so many ways worse" (p. 62). Hiram's resistance not only lies in comparing himself with his white brother and concluding that he is far better than Maynard, but his agency also lies in his challenging the us/them binary. In fact, his own skills and abilities are way too extraordinary to be matched with any white men around him. His special gift of intelligence and discernment not only unsettles the normative binary created by the structures of hegemonic power but also makes him cognizant of his own identity as a black man and his understanding of superiority and inferiority: "I must live in fear of the Quality, I must necessarily live in fear of myself" (p. 48). Ironically, at the Social, Hiram's smartness and sharpness help boost the dwindling spirits of the guests who succumb to the allure of violence against the slaves present there, with a trick played with cards. The excitement that the guests experience proves that white men's leisure is as incomplete without black men's efforts as is their labor. Thus, virtues like those of hard work, associated with white men are exhibited by black men while the stigmas that the black men suffered are actually to be found in whites. This once more challenges the Quality/ Tasked, hegemonic binary. The negative branding of black men serves as a disguise for the lack in white masculinity so that the hegemonic masculinity constructs subjects of their choice. Ironically, the creators of void in black men's lives, hearts, hearths, and identities who "resented the pride of the Tasked" acknowledge that pride only if it "could be fitted to their profit" (p. 31). Thus, black men are capable of thwarting the dominant discourse created by white hegemonic masculinity through understanding their self-worth.

The novel makes repeated references to white men's use of violence and brutality to refrain black men from asserting their manhood and using their agency and power to resist power structures. Ryland's Jail is one such instance which was a daily reminder for black people that they "existed in the shadow of an awesome power, which, at a whim, could clap them back into chains" (p. 57). Such jails made the desire for freedom a crime. Masters kept their slaves in the dark regarding the Philadelphia freedom laws and threatened their families if they made any reference to freedom. At the same time, they tortured and killed their slaves if they dared to run away. Inflicted

with severe pain and torture, the old man in Ryland's prison succumbs to death. Hiram is engaged in mock manhunts by Ryland's hounds. The number of chasers and the distance covered increases every night to gauge his strength. Deprived of victuals in being "given a pittance of bread and water"; engaged in wild chases all through the night along with other prisoners; and finally, "taken, beaten, and tossed right back into the box", Hiram is made to manifest his suitability for the upcoming tasks to be assigned to him (p. 145). Likewise, Mary Bronson is threatened to follow the commands of her white master in the free state of Philadelphia. She feels tied to her white master through the invisible chain of slavery: "Chain is a power thing…a powerful, powerful thing" (p. 203) she tells Otha, the black man who delivers her from bondage. However, slaves find these acts of white violence liberating. Despite the wild manhunts, Hiram feels to have grown "stronger" and "faster": "I felt freedom … I was growing crafty" (p. 146). The old man liberates himself by confessing before Hiram while Mary Bronson resists white influence by refusing to call her son by the name her white master had given him. Indeed, slaves transform their violent encounters into acts of resistance.

Despite the disciplining tactics of the hegemonic power structures, the agency of black men in the novel lies in asserting their individuality and resisting the normative discourse through their ingenuity. Hiram and other black men around him must pretend to be docile to keep the white men satisfied with their own superiority. Even when he knows answers to the questions asked by Mr. Fields, the tutor, Hiram is forced to fake ignorance. This pretension, like Du Bois's "twoness", can be observed in everything related to black men as it becomes a condition for their survival. The Walker house has been designed in a way that the effort of the Tasked cannot be witnessed. The entrances, exits, and working stations for slaves are hidden so craftily from the eyes of the visitors as if the house ran on its own because it hurts white men's pride to acknowledge the toil of black men. So instead of acknowledging their effort, white men project their deception onto black men. Hiram's uncle, Nathaniel Walker, who is Sophia's master and calls her to his property over the weekends to satiate his carnal desires is full of Biblical references to hide his true self and to impress those who work under him: "And like the dumbwaiters and secret passages that the Quality employed to mask their theft, Nathaniel too employed means to take as not taking, and transfigure robbery into charity" (p. 46-47). White men encourage black men to practice the same deceptive tactics, and that is why

Hiram and other black men have to pretend to be what they are not, thus redefining their masculinity in the process.

White hegemonic power creates two models of black masculinity: one is portrayed through Hiram, Raymond, Hawkins, Otha, Macajah Bland, and other black men working for the Underground while the other is represented by Georgie Parks. The former is defined through resisting the white power structures and helping the slaves find their freedom and join with their families. On the other hand, Georgie Parks, considered "an officer of freedom, of some other life, of an Oregon for a colored man" (p. 62) by black slaves, emulates the ways of white hegemonic masculinity and becomes an agent in the perpetuation of slavery. Parks chooses to work for white men by spying on potential fugitives and is in turn "praised and esteemed by the whites" (p. 55). Envied by Hiram for his apparent freedom and agency and for living "like a man" (p. 59), Goergie Parks advises Hiram to smother the blooming man inside him, insisting that masculinity is no business for black men. Georgie Parks and Ryland's hounds are the disciplining apparatus of white men to control and subjugate the slaves.

However, these conditions of subjugation and oppression provide black men opportunities of resistance and agency in the Foucauldian sense: "a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy" (1978, p 101). The agency of black men in the novel is closely linked with the memory of their traumatic past. This memory not only assists black slaves in envisioning the traumatic past with clarity but also works as the source of knowing their real powers. Their memory fully acquaints the slaves with their past and assists them in embracing their trauma, which helps them shape their subjectivity through the recognition of their extraordinary powers. Hiram's power of conduction is tied with the blurred images of his lost mother water dancing, and the power is triggered by the pain of having lost touch with the maternal line. Hiram suffers the trauma of missing the lost link with the past that will complete his mother's image and give him his identity. His traumatic memory acquaints him with his hidden power of Conduction: "a secret path that would deliver me from Lockless to reunite with my mother" (p. 13). The recovery of his mother's shell necklace, that his father had kept hidden from him, provides him with the missing link to his identity and his power. Similarly, the old man in Ryland's jail is haunted by the traumatic memory of his sinning against his only son and of his inability to honor his dead wife's wish, due to the exploitation of slavery. His agency lies in confessing his past to Hiram and finding liberation. Otha

White, a devoted worker of the Underground narrates his history to Hiram to realize that his memory of whippings and separation from his beloved wife, Lydia, enables him to show love towards the enslaved and find family among other blacks. In this way, the traumatic memory helps the enslaved in not only expanding their families beyond blood ties but also shaping their identity and giving meaning to their existence.

Indeed, black men in the novel reconstruct their manhood in close connection to their maternal line. Hiram's superpower of Conduction is triggered by the faint image of his mother and aunt water dancing. In fact, Hiram has inherited his water conduction power from his mother and his maternal grandmother, Santi Bess, who had been a renowned water dancer at Lockless. His perpetual search for the missing link with his maternal line, the shell necklace that his mother had passed on to him, is indeed a search for identity and a reunion with his lost mother. His association with Thena is in fact a struggle to create a maternal bond that assists him in this search. Thena inspires Hiram by frequently telling him about the dancing skills of his mother and his aunt, Emma. Thena's words of wisdom spoken to Hiram as a child reverberate in his mind as an adult, working for the Underground. The bond he shares with Thena and Sophia in Virginia is reflected in his ties with Kessiah, Thena's escaped daughter, and Moses while in the free state of Philadelphia. He claims to have found "some lost part of myself" (p. 253) in Kessiah. These two women shape his masculinity at an early age helping him to make sense of the broken images from his past and connect these with his present situation. While Hiram inherits most of his extraordinary qualities from his mother and his virtue from Thena, he masters the skill of water Conduction with the help of "Moses of the Shore" (p. 217). Framed after the historical figure of Harriet Tubman, Moses delivers slaves through her power of Conduction. Moses shares her powers with Hiram, "the boy with invincible memory, and Conduction" (p. 232). These powers are triggered by unlocking the power of memory: "To forget is to truly slave. To forget is to die. … To remember, friend…. For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom" (p. 271). Triggered by the memory of his maternal line and powered by the past consciousness of the misery of the enslaved, Hiram, under the guidance of the maternal figure of Moses, is able to deliver slaves from bondage.

Indeed, slaves reject the patriarchal model of manhood and attempt to re-define their masculinity in relation to their maternal line. Having enjoyed

the luxury of freedom and independence that the Underground offers him, Hiram deliberately urges Corrine to send him back to Lockless as a slave. The act defines his male identity as a patriarch who returns to the shackled South to save his beloved Sophia and old Thena, his "only unerring family" (p. 327) making his hometown the space where he can "return for renewal and self-recovery, where we can heal our wounds and become whole" (hooks p. 49). Endorsing Otha White's claim, "A man can't be too long without family" (Coates, p. 205) and obsessed with the voice of his lost aunt Emma "Don't forget, family" (p. 216 original emphasis), Hiram challenges his freedom in Philadelphia: "What was I without Sophia, without my mother, without Thena"? (p. 204) This marginal position chosen by Hiram challenges the stereotype of irresponsible, careless, and absent black men, and his masculine identity emerges as a courageous protector who risks his freedom for his loved ones. Upon his return, he yearns to see Thena with the new realization that the pain of parting with their flesh and blood brings the two together: "I was born and made by this great parting" (p. 325). Hiram is astonished at the way his fellow Underground worker, Otha White, treats Mary Bronson: "with the dignity of a free woman, not an escaped slave" (p. 203) because "We all family up here" (p. 193). Black men value their families and redefine their masculinity in relation to them, defying the master narrative which portrays them as absent fathers, loveless husbands, and ill-bred sons.

The familial ties through the maternal line join black slaves with their heritage. Coates's black masculinity is deeply rooted in African experience: folklore, dancing, and singing. The novel makes repeated references to the ability of black men to narrate and re-narrate their experiences and tell their own stories. The use of the first-person narrative furthers this agency of Hiram to tell his story in his own words. The old man that Hiram meets in the Ryland's jail, and Otha White, his Underground affiliate re-narrate their past to him. Their agency to narrate their past and put that up for perusal by another man brings absolution and penance for the storytellers. Conduction is triggered by the power of the oldest stories slaves have known. Hiram's maternal grandmother, Santi Bess was "a pure-blood African" whose "gift of stories was so prized that the Quality would bring her up during their socials and she would put her stories to songs and rhythms that they had never heard" (p. 279). During his long runs, Hiram's mind is powered by the songs he had sung with his black folks. Having learnt to talk and sing even before he could walk as a toddler, Hiram reproduces every song he hears once.

Water dancing grants Hiram and his people their identity and powers their ability of Conduction. Closely linked with the trans-Atlantic passage in African collective consciousness, Conduction through water to liberate the enslaved, connects slaves' present with their African heritage. Water becomes the liberating medium for black slaves representing a world where power does not govern as it does on the Virginian land. It is under the water of the river Goose that Hiram can shed the "nagging weight" of Maynard's presence as an act of resistance. Ironically, the water current of the Goose that liberates Hiram from the weight of power structures becomes fatal for Maynard, the white man.

Besides memory, imagination and dreaming are the specific traits of black men that render them capable of challenging and redefining white men's portrayal of black masculinity. Dreaming is Hiram's power that not only separates him from the world, people, and responsibilities that chain him but also connects his present with the promise of a future world "where a man can live as a man should" (p. 111). Hiram's imagination makes him escape the humiliation of being checked by the slave traders, the "lowest of low whites" who "gloried in their power to reduce a man to meat" (p. 126). Similarly, while working for the Underground, going through the letters and other papers belonging to slaveholders, Hiram is able to answer every question about that man's life or habits. His acute imagination coupled with his memory astonishes Corrine. And he is himself elated on knowing his powers so well. The act of forging the white man's signatures grants Hiram power "right at the heart of those who condemned us" (p. 169). At the end, memory and imagination coupled with the support of community finally enable Hiram to successfully conduct his people out of their chained existence under slavery towards freedom. The experience also redefines his own identity. Thus, finally, at the end of the novel, wearing his mother's shell necklace, Hiram is able to counter his father: "I wanted him to know that I now knew all that he knew, that to forgive was irrelevant, but to forget was death" (p. 403). The strength of memory, dreaming, and imagination empower black men to counter the normative discourse on their masculinity.

Thus, in Coates's neo-slave narrative, black men confront white hegemonic power structures and reclaim their manhood through their memory's journey, their connection with the maternal line, their community, and heritage. Black men in the novel counter the oppressive power structures in the form of hegemonic masculinity and challenge the negative stereotypes associated with black masculinity. The expansion of the Underground

following Howell Walker's death and Hiram's successful experience of conducting Sophia and Thena out of Lockless demonstrate the Foucauldian concept about the possibility of resistance at the sites of power. Hiram's resolve to work as the Underground agent in Lockless instead of living the life of freedom in Philadelphia, after his father's death, is emblematic of hooks's "radical black subjectivity" that finds liberation in the most marginalized spaces. Through Hiram's choices to return to Lockless as a slave and to serve the Underground, Coates stresses the need for African Americans to connect with their past, their community, and their heritage in order to redefine their identity. While hegemonic power relations attempt to subjugate black men, the novel notes that resistance to power structures through a revisioning of the past is fundamental for African Americans to attain a radical black subjectivity.

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