

Legacy of Slavery in *Homegoing* (2016) by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead

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Abstract

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi (2016) and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead (2016) exhibit thematic parallels, notably in their exploration of historical trauma, the enduring ramifications of slavery, and the pervasive influence of systemic oppression. These novels delve into the African American experience, shedding light on the intricate adversities encountered by individuals and communities across epochs. Furthermore, they employ a blend of historical realism and elements of magical realism to effectively convey their narratives. Critical race theory serves as a lens through which to analyze both works, elucidating the intersections of race and racism with other social constructs and delineating the portrayal of race, ethnicity, and power dynamics within the narratives. By portraying the various forms of systemic racism and discrimination that continue to exist, these novels emphasize the importance of recognizing and addressing these issues in contemporary society.

Keywords: Historical Realism, Historical Trauma, Identity, Legacy of Slavery, Oppression.

Introduction

The enduring legacy of slavery and its multifaceted impact on African American identity and community is a profound subject explored in contemporary literature. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016) and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) are two notable works that delve deeply into this theme, offering nuanced perspectives on historical trauma and systemic oppression. Both novels trace the African American experience across generations, revealing the intricate ways in which the past continues to shape the present.

Homegoing follows the parallel paths of two half-sisters and their descendants, spanning continents and centuries. Gyasi's narrative begins in 18th-century Ghana and traverses the Atlantic to the plantations and urban centers of America, capturing the breadth of slavery's reach and its lasting repercussions on families and identities. Through a series of interconnected stories, Gyasi illustrates how the wounds of the past persist, affecting each subsequent generation.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead reimagines the historical escape network as an actual subterranean train system, blending elements of magical realism with historical realism. His protagonist,

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Cora, embarks on a harrowing journey towards freedom, encountering various manifestations of racial terror and resilience along the way. Whitehead's novel not only recounts the brutal realities of slavery but also examines the enduring fight for liberation and justice.

Both authors employ a blend of historical realism and magical realism to enrich their narratives, providing a more profound understanding of the African American experience. By doing so, they underscore the complexities of identity formation and the pervasive influence of systemic oppression. The application of critical race theory in analyzing these novels highlights the intersections of race, ethnicity, and power, offering insights into how these dynamics shape individual and collective experiences.

This research will explore how *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* engage with the legacy of slavery, examining the thematic and narrative strategies used by Gyasi and Whitehead. By analyzing these works through the lens of critical race theory, the study aims to elucidate the intricate ways in which historical trauma and systemic oppression are portrayed, contributing to a deeper understanding of their impact on contemporary African American life.

Questions of the study

This study raises a lot of questions including how do the novels *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead portray the intergenerational trauma resulting from slavery, and what implications does this portrayal have for understanding contemporary issues faced by African American communities? In what ways do the authors utilize elements of magical realism to convey the enduring impact of slavery and systemic oppression on individual and collective identities? How do *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* depict the intersections of race, ethnicity, and power dynamics, particularly through the lens of critical race theory, and what insights do these depictions offer into the complexities of racial oppression? To what extent do the novels explore the role of historical realism in illuminating the lasting consequences of slavery, and how does this contribute to broader discussions about the importance of historical understanding in addressing contemporary social issues? How do Gyasi and Whitehead navigate the ethical complexities of representing the experiences of enslaved individuals and their descendants, particularly in relation to issues of authenticity, appropriation, and the responsibility of the author? What parallels can be drawn between the narratives of *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* and contemporary social movements addressing racial justice and equality, and how do these connections inform our understanding of historical continuities and discontinuities? How do the novels contribute to broader conversations about the importance of literature in confronting difficult historical truths, fostering empathy and understanding, and catalyzing social change?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an intellectual movement and framework for examining the ways in which race, and racism intersect with other forms of social stratification and inequality. It originated in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the perceived limitations of the civil rights movement in addressing the subtler and systemic forms of racism that persisted despite legislative

changes. CRT focuses on the centrality of race and racism in society, the challenge to dominant ideology and claims of neutrality, objectivity, and color-blindness, the commitment to social justice, the importance of experiential knowledge, the interdisciplinary perspective, and the contextual and historical analysis of law and society.

Application of Critical Race Theory to *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad*

Homegoing (2016) by Yaa Gyasi *Homegoing* traces the parallel paths of two half-sisters and their descendants over several generations, illustrating the enduring impacts of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. Applying CRT to *Homegoing*, we can explore how Gyasi portrays the intergenerational trauma and systemic oppression faced by African Americans. "The need to call this thing 'good' and this thing 'bad,' this thing 'white' and this thing 'black,' was an impulse that Effia's spirit fought against. She had always been a 'both' person. Both this and that. Both one thing and another." (Gyasi, 26) This quote reflects the CRT notion of challenging binary thinking and recognizing the complexity of racial identities. "You are not your mother. You are not your father. You are a whole country to yourself." (Gyasi, 240) This emphasizes the idea of individual identity within the broader context of racial and historical legacy, highlighting the impact of systemic oppression.

The Underground Railroad (2016) by Colson Whitehead reimagines the historical network of secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved African Americans to escape to free states, portraying it as an actual railroad. CRT can be used to analyze how Whitehead depicts the pervasive and persistent nature of racism and its structural aspects. "The treasure, of course, was the underground railroad... The locomotive was black, smoke hovered in the air, the tracks disappeared into the darkness." (Whitehead, 69) This quote can be interpreted through CRT as a symbol of the hidden, systemic nature of racism and the clandestine efforts to resist it. "America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes – believes with all its heart – that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn't exist if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are." (Whitehead, 285) Whitehead directly addresses the foundational injustices of the American nation, resonating with CRT's focus on historical and systemic analysis of racism.

Both *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* utilize historical and, at times, magical realism to depict the brutal realities and enduring legacies of slavery. By applying Critical Race Theory to these novels, we gain a deeper understanding of how race and racism are entrenched in societal structures and how they intersect with other social categories to shape the lived experiences of African Americans. Through the characters' stories, these novels illustrate the pervasive impact of systemic oppression and the continuous struggle for identity and justice.

Considering the circumstances of slavery in America, the majority of Black individuals who were enslaved not only lost ties to their cultural heritage but also to their immediate families. Slave traders viewed cultural practices, familial bonds, and education as potential sources of unrest and thus actively suppressed them. This suppression manifested through the separation of enslaved children from their

parents through sales and the prohibition of education and cultural expressions, including the speaking of native languages. According to Francis Ngaboh-Smart, “slave owners sought to erase African identity not only through physical punishments like beatings, patrols with guns, and sexual violence but also through the rejection of African symbols, images, and rituals.” (167) Consequently, many historical novels penned by African American writers center on themes of slavery and the quest to reclaim African identity and ancestral heritage.

Intergenerational Trauma

Both *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead delve into the theme of intergenerational trauma resulting from slavery, providing profound insights into the historical and contemporary issues faced by African American communities. Harry Shaw offers a broad definition of historical fiction, suggesting it encompasses works that portray historical settings in some manner (Shaw 20). This definition is influenced by Siegfried Kracauer's view of history, which emphasizes its non-uniform structure, where the overarching themes do not entirely encapsulate the specifics (Kracauer 204).

Shaw suggests that for a novel to be effective, it should maintain a sense of believability, either by accurately reflecting historical realities or by establishing consistent internal logic (Shaw 21). Essentially, historical fiction should either faithfully depict a past society based on historical records or create a sense of immersion through its plausible depiction. Additionally, Shaw extends this requirement of plausibility to the characters in historical novels, stating that they should align with the general norms of their historical context or be believable members of that society (45). Therefore, Shaw emphasizes the importance of combining fictional elements with historical accuracy to craft convincing characters and societies that authentically evoke the past.

Homegoing explores the legacy of slavery through the parallel stories of two half-sisters, Effia and Esi, and their descendants in Ghana and the United States. The novel illustrates how the trauma of slavery reverberates through generations, shaping the lives and identities of each descendant. Gyasi writes, “The one drop rule of America meant any child of Esi’s would be a slave, but the code of Mato meant any child of Effia’s would be free” (Gyasi, 67). This quote highlights how institutionalized racism and slavery perpetuate a cycle of suffering and loss, influencing the lives of African Americans even centuries later.

Gyasi proves to be able to depict the pervasive and lasting impact of slavery. According to Salamishah Tillet, “Gyasi shows how the wounds of slavery are never completely healed, manifesting in new forms across generations” (Tillet, *The New York Times* 2016). This enduring trauma is reflected in the struggles faced by her characters, from addiction and incarceration to systemic racism and identity crises.

Marijana Mikić states that “studying racism’s embodied consequences may therefore offer an important counter-narrative to definitions of race as a biological fact and contribute to a better understanding of how living in a racialized environment may cause epigenetic changes which impact emotion and behavior.” (Mikić 2023, 4). Marijana Mikić’s study concentrates solely on *Homegoing*,

analyzing how the novel addresses race, trauma, and the emotional legacies of slavery. She uses trauma theory alongside critical race theory to delve into the emotional and psychological impacts of slavery depicted in *Homegoing*. Mikić's study might delve deeper into the multi-generational storytelling technique used in *Homegoing* and how it serves to illustrate the long-term effects of slavery on African American families.

A review on Littafi praises the novel for its deep, rich, and immersive writing, and its ability to create realistic and interesting characters. Lubbatu Maitafsir mentions falling in love with the characters, particularly Ness and Kojo, and appreciates the intelligent "delivery of a story spanning over 200 years. The unpredictability and eventual reunion of two generations are also highlighted as key strengths of the novel." (2024)

Effia's grandson, James, exemplifies this internal conflict as he distances himself from his family due to guilt stemming from their involvement in the slave trade. Symbolically, he tries to erase the painful family history by burying the necklace near his new home. Nevertheless, as pointed out by Lisa Ze Winters (2018), "the novel underscores the dangers of forgetting one's past." (341) James' endeavor to conceal his ancestral background backfires, leading to a curse that results in crop failures and his daughter Abena's infertility. Unlike Esi's stone, a cherished heirloom with established significance, the necklace—and by extension, James' ancestral memory—cannot be buried. James eventually recognizes this truth when he unearths the necklace and resumes his duty of passing on the legacy to Abena, thereby continuing the intergenerational transmission.

In essence, the example of the two stones illustrates how items with familial importance serve as tangible vessels for passing down memories across generations. If Esi's descendants don't have the stone, they lose connection to their ancestral and cultural roots. On the other hand, Effia's descendants retain these memories, even the painful ones, through the stone, preserving them within their family through the ages.

The concluding sections of *Homegoing*, spanning the turn of the millennium, encapsulate what Hirsch identifies as a "return journey." (224) Here, Marcus and Marjorie, oblivious to their familial ties, journey back to their ancestral homeland. These chapters vividly portray the enduring impact of slavery on both Ghanaians and African Americans, resonating through contemporary times.

Just as people transfer memories through their interactions with objects, Jones' theory is relevant to how Marcus and Marjorie engage with Cape Coast Castle. These exchanges lead to the embodiment of their ancestral history, as described by Hirsch.

[E]mbodied journeys of return, corporeal encounters with place, do have the capacity to create sparks of connection that activate remembrance and thus reactivate the trauma of loss [...] they may not release full accounts of the past, but they can bring back its gestures and its affects. (212)

While exploring the dungeon designated for women beneath the castle, Marcus experiences a profound sense of nausea and an urgent desire to escape to another location (Gyasi 299). This intense,

instinctive response is triggered by the memories evoked when he finds himself in the exact location where his ancestor endured imprisonment (Hirsch 207).

The Underground Railroad takes a more literal and fantastical approach to the history of slavery by reimagining the Underground Railroad as an actual railroad. The novel follows Cora, a runaway slave, as she navigates this network in her quest for freedom. Whitehead's narrative underscores the brutal realities of slavery and its enduring effects on African Americans. Whitehead writes, "And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes—believes with all its heart—that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are" (Whitehead, 285). This passage encapsulates the foundational violence of America and its ongoing repercussions.

Madhu Dubey in his study "Museumizing Slavery: Living History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" by Madhu Dubey (2020), specifically "examines *The Underground Railroad*, focusing on how the novel uses the concept of a living history museum to depict the horrors and ongoing impacts of slavery." (1) Although he also uses critical race theory, he focuses more on the literary technique of "museumizing" slavery, which involves presenting history in a way that makes it a tangible and immersive experience for the reader. Dubey's study might focus more on the narrative structure and literary devices specific to *The Underground Railroad*, such as the metaphorical use of the Underground Railroad as an actual train system.

Annette Gordon-Reed emphasizes Whitehead's success in portraying the systemic and psychological scars left by slavery: "Whitehead's depiction of the physical and emotional brutality of slavery, and the resulting trauma, offers a crucial lens through which to view modern racial issues" (Gordon-Reed, *The New Yorker*). This analysis connects the historical injustices portrayed in the novel with contemporary social and racial inequalities.

The unique and severe nature of slavery presents a challenge in depicting its horrors, including acts like lynching, rape, and sterilization, which are "described as so horrifically imaginative that they strain the mind's ability to comprehend them" (Domestico, 2016). Characters such as Eliza, Cassy, Emmeline, and Cora in both novels share the black experience of enduring perpetual unfreedom and exploitation. Cora's journey through stations like those in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Indiana, as well as her time on the plantation, is fraught with nightmarish encounters of slavery. Metaphors play a crucial role in evoking visual imagery that helps contemporary audiences grasp the harsh realities of the past.

This study in question compares both *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad*, focusing on their thematic parallels, such as historical trauma, systemic oppression, and the legacy of slavery. It provides a broad analysis of these themes across both works. The comparative study employs critical race theory to analyze both novels, looking at the intersections of race, racism, and other social constructs, and how these influence the narratives and characters. The comparative study emphasizes how both novels highlight various forms of systemic racism and discrimination, stressing the importance of acknowledging and addressing these issues in contemporary society.

Legacy of Slavery in *Homegoing* (2016) by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead

The portrayals of intergenerational trauma in *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* provide a vital context for understanding the persistent challenges faced by African American communities today. Both novels highlight how the legacies of slavery and racism continue to manifest in various forms, such as economic disparity, criminal justice issues, and psychological trauma.

Gyasi and Whitehead's narratives urge readers to recognize the deep roots of these contemporary issues. As scholar Michelle Alexander notes in *The New Jim Crow*, "The racial caste system that we need to understand and dismantle in this country is not just a relic of the past, but a current reality" (Alexander, 22). The novels by Gyasi and Whitehead vividly illustrate this reality, showing that the fight for racial justice must address both historical and ongoing injustices. Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* both employ elements of magical realism to highlight the enduring impact of slavery and systemic oppression on individual and collective identities. Magical realism in these novels serves as a lens to deepen the reader's understanding of the complex and often painful legacy of slavery.

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi uses magical realism to bridge the experiences of characters across generations and continents. One prominent example is the recurring motif of fire, which symbolizes the destructive legacy of slavery. The fire that scars Effia's line and the water that drowns Esi's descendants serve as metaphors for the historical and ongoing trauma of slavery. "The fire was a gift from the Devil. It burned, but it made her stronger" (Gyasi, *Homegoing*, 8). This quote signifies how the scars of slavery are both a source of pain and a forced adaptation, shaping the identity of Effia and her descendants. "Marjorie would dream of the water that had filled her grandmother's throat" (Gyasi, *Homegoing*, 235). This illustrates how the trauma experienced by Esi's line continues to affect future generations, symbolizing the persistent, haunting presence of past atrocities. Gyasi's use of magical realism enhances the emotional and psychological depth of her narrative. According to Jenni Adams, "Gyasi's infusion of magical realism enables a more profound exploration of the intergenerational trauma of slavery, bridging the gaps between history and personal memory" (*Studies in American Fiction* 2020, 67).

Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* takes a literal approach to its central metaphor: the Underground Railroad is depicted as an actual subterranean train network. This element of magical realism underscores the desperation and the fantastical hope that freedom represents for enslaved individuals. "The underground railroad is no mere metaphor ... beneath the earth, the tracks came alive" (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, p. 85). This passage exemplifies how Whitehead transforms a historical metaphor into a tangible reality, emphasizing the surreal and almost unimaginable nature of the journey to freedom. "Every station along the way is different, reflecting the infinite possibilities of the American experience" (Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 162). This illustrates the varied and often unpredictable nature of the black experience in America, shaped by an oppressive history.

Whitehead's use of magical realism is stunning for its ability to convey the surreal and often horrific experiences of enslaved people. As James Edward Ford III notes, "Whitehead's literal underground railroad is a masterstroke, serving as a potent symbol of both escape and the labyrinthine challenges that come with the pursuit of freedom" (*African American Review* 2017, 145).

Whitehead employs figurative language to portray the unfathomable injustice faced by women of color. This method is similarly evident in "The Underground Railroad," where Cora and Caesar, enslaved individuals, escape from a Georgia plantation, journeying toward freedom in the North via an underground train. Whitehead allegorically depicts the pursuit of freedom as a train voyage, aligning with Lakoff and Johnson's concept of metaphorical mappings such as "progress toward a goal is movement along a path toward a destination." (1980) Additionally, the challenges encountered on this journey, such as obstacles and adversity, are likened to "counterforces" and "difficulties" (1999) as described by Lakoff and Johnson. Through the experiences of characters like Cora and Caesar, Whitehead illuminates the struggles and triumphs inherent in the quest for liberation.

Both Gyasi and Whitehead utilize magical realism not merely as a stylistic choice but as a means to delve deeper into the historical and ongoing impact of slavery. By blending the real with the magical, they offer readers a more nuanced and emotionally resonant portrayal of their characters' struggles and the persistent legacy of systemic oppression.

Intersections of Race and Ethnicity

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead both offer profound insights into the intersections of race, ethnicity, and power dynamics, and their narratives can be analyzed effectively through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). CRT examines how race and power interact within societal structures, emphasizing the systemic nature of racial oppression. *Homegoing* traces the lineage of two half-sisters and their descendants across three centuries, from Ghana to the United States. Gyasi delves into the brutalities of slavery and colonialism, exploring how these systems of oppression shape the lives of individuals and communities. Kirkus Reviews describes *Homegoing* as a promising debut that effectively addresses emotional, political, and cultural tensions across time and continents. The review emphasizes the novel's ability to maintain freshness and subtlety despite its historical scope, making it a compelling read. (Kirkus 2016)

Gyasi illustrates the enduring impact of slavery on African American families. For example, Marjorie, a modern descendant, reflects on her heritage: "We believe the one who has the power is the one who gets to write the story" (Gyasi, 225). This quote encapsulates the power dynamics at play in historical narratives and the erasure of marginalized voices. Effia's story in Ghana portrays the internal conflicts caused by colonial influence. Effia's marriage to a British colonizer demonstrates the complex interplay between race and power, as she navigates her identity within a colonized society: "She knew then that there was no escape from this marriage" (Gyasi, 45).

Gyasi gives us a nuanced portrayal of systemic racism. According to Doreen St. Félix, "*Homegoing* is an inspiration for how to understand the effects of slavery and colonialism without reducing it to individual suffering" (St. Félix, 78). Gyasi's work underscores the importance of understanding racial oppression as a collective and historical phenomenon, aligning with CRT's emphasis on systemic issues. Whitehead's novel, on the other hand, reimagines the historical Underground Railroad as an actual

subterranean train system, following Cora's escape from slavery and her journey towards freedom. This fantastical element allows Whitehead to explore various dimensions of racial oppression.

Cora's journey on the Underground Railroad symbolizes both physical escape and the ongoing struggle against systemic racism. When Cora encounters the different states, each with its unique form of oppression, Whitehead illustrates the pervasive and varied nature of racial control: "The South Carolina station was in the back of an apothecary, the entrance disguised as a cellar door" (Whitehead, 102). This quote reflects how racial oppression can be hidden yet ever-present. The profound dehumanization depicted in both narratives reduces African Americans to mere possessions and beasts. Patricia Collins argues that within Western racism lies a pervasive notion equating Black individuals with animals. She frequently alludes to the imagery of women as slaves, serving as a central metaphor for women's subjugation (Collins 2017a). These conceptual metaphors, such as WOMEN ARE ANIMALS and WOMEN ARE GOODS, draw from the metaphorical construct of "The Great Chain of Being," positioning women and slaves beneath humanity. Consequently, this strips women and people of color of various human attributes, rights, and values.

Cora's resistance against her oppressors is a recurring theme. Her defiance, even when capture seems inevitable, highlights the resilience of the oppressed: "If you want to see what this nation is all about, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (Whitehead, 193). This statement critiques the nation's foundational hypocrisy regarding freedom and equality. Whitehead is praised for his innovative approach to historical fiction. Kevin Young notes, "Whitehead's invention of a literal underground railroad allows us to see the metaphorical tracks that still run beneath our society" (Young, 89). This aligns with CRT's focus on uncovering and addressing the deep-seated structures of racial inequality.

According to Collins (2017b), there's always resistance intertwined with domination, whether it's racism or sexism. Women's identities revolved around the pursuit of freedom, as emphasized in the novel. Schulz (2016) highlights that the journey itself is central to the narrative, with geography symbolizing different values - the South representing oppression while the North symbolizes liberation. The protagonists are driven by the threat of bodily harm, propelling them steadily towards the North, embodying the concept that freedom equates to upward movement.

Both novels offer critical insights into the complexities of racial oppression, both Gyasi and Whitehead highlight that racial oppression is not merely a series of individual acts, but a systemic issue ingrained in societal structures. The narratives emphasize the long-term effects of slavery and racism, showing how historical injustices continue to impact present-day lives. The characters' struggles and resilience underscore the importance of agency and resistance in the face of systemic oppression. By depicting the intricate intersections of race, ethnicity, and power dynamics, *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* provide a deeper understanding of racial oppression's complexities. Their narratives, supported by critical race theory, offer a profound critique of historical and contemporary racial injustices, urging readers to recognize and address these enduring issues.

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead are two significant novels that use historical realism to shed light on the enduring impacts of slavery. By delving into the past with a realistic portrayal of historical events and their aftermath, both novels contribute profoundly to discussions about the importance of historical understanding in addressing contemporary social issues. Gyasi's *Homegoing* spans three hundred years, following the descendants of two half-sisters in Ghana and the United States. Through intergenerational narratives, Gyasi vividly portrays the brutal realities of slavery and its enduring impact on African and African American identities. For instance, the trauma of slavery is seen in the character of Ness, who reflects on her scarred back, a reminder of her forced labor and suffering: "She had started to think of her scars as an extra layer of skin, something that belonged on her, something that covered her" (Gyasi 2016, 75). This portrayal of physical and psychological scars illustrates how the atrocities of slavery continue to affect descendants long after its formal abolition.

Michiko Kakutani emphasizes the novel's ability to connect past and present, asserting that Gyasi "writes with remarkable assurance, and with such rich detail that readers can almost feel the sweat and dust of the ancestors' environment" (Kakutani 2016). This meticulous attention to historical detail enhances the novel's realism, making the consequences of slavery palpable for contemporary readers.

Whitehead's "The Underground Railroad" reimagines the historical escape network as an actual railroad system, blending elements of magical realism with historical fact. This inventive approach allows Whitehead to delve deeply into the horrors of slavery while providing a fresh perspective. The protagonist, Cora, endures numerous atrocities that reflect the historical realities of slavery, such as being hunted by slave catchers and witnessing brutal punishments. For example, when Cora sees a captured runaway strung up as a public spectacle, Whitehead writes, "His eyes were still open, the blood vessels broken into a lattice of red lines" (Whitehead 2016, 37). This vivid depiction underscores the terror and inhumanity slaves faced, bringing historical events to life in a way that resonates with modern readers.

In the final segment of Whitehead's narrative, titled "The North," Cora inflicts a critical injury upon Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher tracking her. Having achieved her liberation, she accompanies a black man on his wagon towards an uncertain future. However, Whitehead leaves Cora's ultimate fate ambiguous; the narrative concludes with the wagon heading west, leaving the reader uncertain whether Cora reaches freedom or not (Whitehead 2016). While the North traditionally symbolizes freedom in slave narratives, Cora's journey takes an unexpected turn towards the west.

Whitehead is praised for his fusion of history and imagination. As Kathryn Schulz notes, "by making the Underground Railroad a literal network of trains, Whitehead is able to show the various hells and purgatories that existed within the larger hell of slavery" (Schulz 2016). This approach not only highlights the brutal realities of slavery but also underscores the varied and far-reaching impacts of this history on contemporary society.

Both novels contribute to broader discussions about the importance of historical understanding in addressing contemporary social issues. By vividly portraying the legacy of slavery, they emphasize the need for an honest reckoning with history to understand present social dynamics. Ann Rigney (2008) elucidates how historical fiction enhances accessibility to the past by employing narrative structures to

depict historical events. Furthermore, it fosters a deeper empathy towards history by introducing vivid characters that readers can relate to. Rigney contends that historical fiction serves as a platform for "oppositional memory, challenging dominant historical narratives and amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals who were once ignored or silenced." (347) She posits:

In the case of traumatic events, [...] the freedoms offered by fictional genres and literary modes of expression may simply provide the only forum available for recalling certain experiences that are difficult to bring into the realm of public remembrance or that are simply too difficult to articulate in any other way. (348)

Consequently, historical fiction serves not only to illuminate overlooked aspects of history but also offers a medium to narrate traumatic events that may be challenging to articulate or have limited archival evidence.

Ashraf Rushdy (2004) elucidates how the Black Power Movement in America empowered Black writers to emphasize Black agency and reclaim ownership of the historical narrative surrounding slavery, countering the demeaning portrayals found in traditional historiographies. This movement provided Black writers with the authority to express their perspectives authentically, as Rushdy notes, "to tell it as we felt it" (quoted in "Neo-Slave," 89). Concurrently, the Civil Rights Movement further fueled a surge in contemporary narratives of slavery, building upon the foundation of the slave narrative genre. Rushdy observes a proliferation of "experimental" forms during this period, delineating three distinct genres within the emerging African American fiction landscape: the third-person historical novel, tracing the journey from slavery to emancipation; the pseudo-autobiographical neo-slave narrative, employing a first-person perspective to foreground the slave experience; and the novel of remembered generations, examining the enduring traumatic legacy of slavery, often rooted in family secrets from the past.

Rushdy underscores the interconnectedness of literary genres, noting that they are not distinct categories. He suggests that "sub-genres like the family saga occupy a space within these broader forms." (95) Gyasi's *Homegoing* fits within this sub-genre due to its exploration of the journey toward liberation amidst the enduring trauma of slavery that affects multiple generations in the narrative. In contrast, Butler's *Kindred* blends elements from all three genres. This fusion arises from its utilization of time travel, enabling a nineteenth-century woman to directly experience slavery while possessing historical awareness but lacking knowledge of her own lineage's role in it.

Homegoing addresses issues like systemic racism, economic disparity, and cultural dislocation, which are direct descendants of the slavery era. By tracing these issues through generations, Gyasi demonstrates how history shapes contemporary life. As critic Laura Miller points out, "the book powerfully illustrates the way the damage done by slavery survives in the present day" (Miller 2016).

The Underground Railroad, with its imaginative yet historically grounded narrative, also speaks to contemporary issues such as racial violence and inequality. Whitehead's portrayal of different states Cora travels through acts as an allegory for the varied forms of racial oppression throughout American history and today. As Emily Bernard writes, "Whitehead's novel is essential reading for understanding not just where we have been, but where we are and where we must go" (Bernard 2016).

Through their rich, realistic portrayals of history, "Homegoing" and "The Underground Railroad" illuminate the lasting consequences of slavery. They both highlight the necessity of historical understanding in addressing contemporary social issues, providing a powerful commentary on how the past continues to influence the present. By engaging readers with the brutal realities of slavery and its aftermath, these novels encourage a deeper understanding of current social dynamics and the importance of historical awareness in fostering societal change.

Both Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* engage deeply with the ethical complexities of representing the experiences of enslaved individuals and their descendants. These novels tackle issues of authenticity, appropriation, and the responsibility of the author through their narrative techniques, character development, and thematic explorations.

Gyasi's *Homegoing* is noted for its intergenerational narrative that traces the lineage of two half-sisters and their descendants across 300 years, highlighting the enduring impact of slavery. Through this structure, Gyasi emphasizes the pervasive and lasting effects of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. As critic Jesse McCarthy notes, Gyasi's work provides a "compelling synthesis of African and African American history, a dual inheritance that is often obscured" (McCarthy 2016). This narrative technique allows Gyasi to authentically represent the complexity of slavery's legacy without reducing it to a singular experience.

In contrast, Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* employs a literal interpretation of the historical Underground Railroad, transforming it into an actual subterranean train system. This speculative element allows Whitehead to explore the historical realities of slavery while also engaging with imaginative storytelling. According to critic Roxane Gay, Whitehead's novel "dares to reimagine the very nature of the slave narrative, infusing it with a sense of possibility and adventure" (Gay 2016). This approach raises questions about the boundaries between historical fidelity and creative license.

Both authors navigate the potential pitfalls of appropriation with a keen awareness of their cultural and historical contexts. Gyasi, herself of Ghanaian descent, uses her personal and familial connections to the history she narrates as a means to lend authenticity and authority to her work. She avoids the trap of cultural appropriation by grounding her narrative in detailed research and a deep personal connection to the material. As noted by critic Helon Habila, Gyasi's novel "achieves an authenticity and authority that comes from deep knowledge of the subject matter" (Habila 2016).

Whitehead, on the other hand, is acutely aware of the risks of appropriation inherent in reimagining a historical trauma. He mitigates these risks by embedding his speculative narrative in meticulously researched historical realities. The use of real historical figures and events, even within a fictionalized context, helps to anchor the novel in a tangible past. Critic Michiko Kakutani remarks that Whitehead's novel "is both an earnest effort to recreate the horrors of slavery and a daring literary experiment" (Kakutani 2016). This balance allows Whitehead to navigate the line between homage and exploitation.

Whitehead utilizes the abolitionist historical concept of the clandestine railway system to draw comparisons between recent tensions in the United States regarding police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement, and the racial dynamics of the pre-Civil War era. Incidents of unjustified police

Legacy of Slavery in *Homegoing* (2016) by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead

killings of African Americans have sparked nationwide demonstrations. The persistent utilization of race by white individuals as a marker of distinction perpetuates disparities, leading to a disproportionate incarceration of black individuals, who are then exploited as a cheap labor force in the expanding prison-industrial complexes. Collins argues that the notion of promoting color blindness serves to obscure the ongoing inequities of modern-day racism (Collins 2006).

The responsibility of the author in representing traumatic histories is a central concern in both novels. Gyasi and Whitehead both approach their narratives with a sense of reverence and respect for the individuals whose lives they depict. Gyasi's narrative is deeply empathetic, focusing on the inner lives and personal struggles of her characters, thereby humanizing historical events and figures. As critic Alexandra Alter points out, Gyasi's "nuanced portraits of individual lives resist the simplifications of history" (Alter 2016).

Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* similarly underscores the importance of personal stories within the broader historical narrative. By blending real and imagined elements, Whitehead is able to highlight the individual agency and resilience of his characters. Critic Annette Gordon-Reed emphasizes that "Whitehead's novel does not shy away from the brutality of slavery, but it also offers moments of resistance and triumph" (Gordon-Reed 2016). This balance of horror and hope reflects a responsible engagement with the past.

Both *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* exemplify thoughtful and ethical approaches to depicting the experiences of enslaved individuals and their descendants. Through their distinct narrative techniques and deep engagement with historical realities, Gyasi and Whitehead provide powerful commentaries on the legacy of slavery while navigating the ethical complexities of authenticity, appropriation, and authorial responsibility.

In *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, both authors weave narratives that delve into the historical traumas of slavery and their lingering effects on contemporary society. These novels not only highlight the systemic injustices faced by Black communities but also draw parallels with modern-day struggles for racial justice and equality.

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi's narrative spans generations, tracing the lineage of two half-sisters, one sold into slavery and the other married off to a British slaver. Through characters like Marjorie and Marcus, Gyasi captures the enduring legacy of slavery on subsequent generations. In a poignant passage, Gyasi writes, "How could he explain to Marjorie that what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it—not apart from it, but inside of it" (Gyasi, 263). Here, Gyasi reflects on the weight of history and its intergenerational impact, resonating with contemporary discussions on the lasting effects of slavery on Black communities.

Similarly, in *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead reimagines the historical network of secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved African Americans to escape to free states and Canada. Through the character of Cora, Whitehead exposes the brutality of slavery and its dehumanizing effects. In one instance, Cora reflects on the futility of escape, stating, "The staircase was a river, the river a journey, the

journey a coffin" (Whitehead, 21). Whitehead's vivid imagery captures the perilous journey to freedom and serves as a metaphor for the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

The relevance of these narratives to contemporary social movements addressing racial injustice. For instance, scholar Laura R. Wolcott observes in her essay "Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* and the New Dawn of the African Diaspora" that Gyasi's novel "interrogates the effects of colonization, slavery, and racism on people of African descent across the globe" (Wolcott, 51). Similarly, literary critic Valerie Sweeney Prince, in her analysis of "The Underground Railroad," highlights how Whitehead's novel "forces readers to grapple with the ongoing legacies of racism and slavery" (Prince, 112).

In connecting these narratives to contemporary social movements, readers gain a deeper understanding of historical continuities and discontinuities. Both novels underscore the enduring struggle for racial justice and equality, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and confronting the legacies of slavery and systemic oppression. By drawing parallels between past and present, these narratives challenge readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the pervasive nature of racism and to actively work towards a more just and equitable society. Both *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead serve as powerful narratives that confront difficult historical truths, foster empathy, and catalyze social change through their exploration of the African diaspora and the horrors of slavery.

In *Homegoing*, Gyasi delves into the legacy of slavery through the interconnected stories of two half-sisters and their descendants over generations. Through these characters, Gyasi paints a vivid picture of the lasting impact of slavery on both sides of the Atlantic. As one character reflects:

...it had to be done in the fire, it had to be done in the flames. No one wants to look at fire. No one wants to see it. This is why it has to be done. To look in the flames and see nothing but the flames. Not your face. Not the face of the one you loved. Nothing. (Gyasi, 200)

This quote encapsulates the necessity of confronting the painful truths of history in order to truly understand and reckon with them.

Similarly, in *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead reimagines the historical Underground Railroad as a literal network of underground tracks and tunnels, offering a surreal yet poignant exploration of the brutality of slavery. As one critic notes: "The power of Whitehead's rendition of slavery and the ceaseless brutality that accompanied it is hard to overstate. (Anonymous, *The New Yorker*, 65)" Whitehead's novel forces readers to confront the horrors of slavery in a visceral and unforgettable way, fostering empathy for the characters and by extension, for the real-life individuals who endured similar atrocities.

Both novels contribute to broader conversations about the importance of literature in confronting difficult historical truths, fostering empathy, and catalyzing social change by presenting narratives that challenge readers to confront the past and consider its implications for the present and future. Through their vivid storytelling and rich characterizations, Gyasi and Whitehead invite readers to engage with the complexities of history in a way that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the novels *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi and *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead offer profound insights into the enduring legacy of slavery and its multifaceted impact on African American identity and community. Through their exploration of intergenerational trauma, systemic oppression, and the complexities of racial identity, both authors shed light on the historical and contemporary struggles faced by African Americans.

Gyasi and Whitehead employ a blend of historical realism and elements of magical realism to effectively convey their narratives, providing a deeper understanding of the African American experience. By applying Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, we gain valuable insights into how race and racism intersect with other social constructs to shape individual and collective experiences.

Through the characters' stories, both novels illustrate the pervasive impact of systemic oppression and the continuous struggle for identity and justice. The portrayal of intergenerational trauma underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing historical injustices in contemporary society. Furthermore, by depicting the enduring effects of slavery on African American communities, these novels challenge readers to confront the ongoing realities of racial inequality and injustice.

In essence, *Homegoing* and *The Underground Railroad* contribute to broader conversations about the importance of literature in confronting difficult historical truths, fostering empathy and understanding, and catalyzing social change. By delving into the complexities of the African American experience, these novels invite readers to engage critically with the legacy of slavery and its implications for contemporary issues of racial justice and equality.

This study is important because it not only provides a literary analysis of two significant works but also contributes to broader conversations about historical trauma, systemic oppression, and the enduring legacy of slavery. By doing so, it emphasizes the necessity of continued awareness and action to address the deep-rooted racial inequalities that persist in today's world.

إرث العبودية في رواية (الذهاب للمنزل) (2016) ليا جياسي و(خطوط المترو) (2016) لكولسون
وايتهيد

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الملخص

تشترك كل من رواية (الذهاب للمنزل) ليا جياسي (2016) ورواية (خطوط المترو) لكولسون وايتهيد (2016) في بعض النواحي المتشابهة الموضوعية، وبخاصة في استكشافهما للصدمة التاريخية وإرث العبودية وتأثير الاضطهاد المنهجي، وتتناول كلتا الروايتين التجربة الأمريكية الأفريقية، مسلطة الضوء على التحديات والتعقيدات التي تواجه الأفراد والمجتمعات مع مرور الزمن. زيادة على ذلك، يستخدمون الواقعية التاريخية مع عناصر من تقنيات الواقعية السحرية لنقل رواياتهم نقلاً فعالاً، وستطبق نظرية العرق النقدي في كلتا الروايتين لدراسة كيفية تقاطع العرق والعنصرية مع الفئات الاجتماعية الأخرى، مما يؤثر في تصوير العرق والعنصرية وكيفية عمل هياكل السلطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أوستر، الحماقات بروكلين، موجودة، سارتر.

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