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"Useful Delusions"

Tracing the Flying Africans in Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Emily Stephens

And Toby sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise. He said them all around to the others in the field under the whip, ". . . buba yali . . . buba tambe . . ."

There was a great outcry. The bent backs straighted up. Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn't shuffle in a circle. They didn't sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to Free-dom. (Hamilton 171)

There is a popular Black American folktale about a tribe of Africans who, upon becoming enslaved in the American South, rose up into the air and flew away. Some suggest that the legend's origin is the historical incident of Igbo Landing, where thousands of enslaved Nigerians committed mass suicide by walking into a Georgia swamp together (Allison). Others suggest that the legend finds its roots in stories of runaway slaves who seemingly disappeared into the air and communicated their plans with the code phrase: "Come fly away!" (Hamilton). Regardless of its origins, this story, called the legend of the flying Africans, has been handed down from generation to generation in Black communities as a testament of hope and perseverance in the face of great suffering. The tale whispers to its listeners: freedom is within your reach—keep striving.

For Black communities, the story of the flying Africans continues to represent freedom from oppression and trauma. Recently, Black female creators have reimagined the story in film, music, and literature. *Daughters of the Dust*, a 1991 film directed by Julia Dash, narrates the lives of the residents of Igbo landing. Beyoncé's 2016 Grammy-winning album *Lemonade*, which calls for the liberation of Black women, uses imagery of birds and the ocean to reference the myth. Toni Morrison incorporates this myth into *Song of Solomon*; her character, Milkman, confronts his family's past, and in doing so, gains the ability to fly. In Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, the protagonist Avey contemplates the incident at Igbo Landing as she embraces her connection to both her ancestors and her African culture.

More recent Black fiction (interestingly written by male authors) incorporates the story of the flying Africans by reimagining forms of the fantastical escapes from slavery. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his 2019 novel *The Water Dancer* explains the tale of the flying Africans, imagining that the escaped slaves did not literally fly but teleport. This gift, called "Conduction," is only possessed by a few, but it allows hundreds to walk into the Virginian marshes and seemingly fly away. In the book, Hiram, who possesses the gift of a perfect memory, learns to harness Conduction by accessing his buried memories and uses the power to help others escape from slavery. Colson Whitehead also narrates a magical escape from slavery in his 2016 book, *The Underground Railroad*. However, instead of teleporting, Cora rides to freedom on a literal underground railroad. Just as Hiram must access his buried memories to learn to "fly," Cora metaphorically descends into the darkness

of trauma and rebirth in order to escape from slavery. While these novels may not literally depict flight, they retell the story of the flying Africans by reimagining the ways in which enslaved people may have disappeared from slavery and ran toward freedom.

These reiterations of the story of the flying Africans all have commonalities. In order to “fly,” the characters must embrace their pasts and trade them for new stories of hope. In her song “All Night,” Beyoncé remarks, “I’ll trade your broken wings for mine.” She suggests that she lets go of her past “wings” that would not let her fly—the trauma from her husband’s infidelity—and embraces her own power to fly. Morrison’s *Milkman* revisits his family’s past. In doing so, he reaffirms his identity and is finally able to fly. Marshall’s *Avey* lets her mind fly into the past in order to understand her identity. These retellings present embracing and rewriting trauma as the key to flight. They reinforce Whitehead’s claim that “sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useful truth” (290). Reimagining and repurposing the past may be seen as a delusion, but ultimately that delusion is critical to forging a future that includes obtaining freedom and embracing identity.

These stories do not just contain insight into overcoming trauma—they literally embody it. The legend of the flying Africans reclaims and repurposes history for survivors of slavery and their descendants. Sophia Nahli Allison, a writer for the *New Yorker*, states that “these stories [about the flying Africans] became a truth that enabled survival . . . it continues to represent black mobility towards liberation.” The stories become true as they create meaning for Black communities. Reclaiming history and turning slavery into a tale where the oppressed successfully escape oppression allows those who suffer from the effects of trauma to find hope and freedom. They trade their “broken wings” and fly.

When most critics discuss these adaptations of the story of the flying Africans, they use the label “magical realism.” Jesús Benito, Ana Manzananas, Begoña Simal, Daniel Bautista, and P. Gabrielle Foreman are just a few of the critics who label Morrison and other Black American writers as magical realists. Due to the number of critics who have associated Morrison with magical realism, her novels now top a google search for examples of magical realism. The term seems to be so commonly associated with Black American literature that even the back cover of *The Underground Railroad* states that Whitehead draws on elements of magical realism in the novel. The label

“magical realism” has become normalized and unquestioned by both critics and the general public.

While these novels do check the boxes of magical realist fiction, Morrison has expressed discomfort with the label, stating, “if you could apply the word magical then it dilutes the realism” (Davis). Echoing Morrison, I would even assert that the label “magical realism” is a form of colonialism. In claiming that the books are “magical realism,” outsiders of Black communities attempt to dictate what the Black experience is. Black voices, for whom enchantment and mystery are real and are an important part of their culture, have been overpowered by other voices. I intend to amplify Black voices by reiterating the claim that the label “magical realism” dilutes the real.

Additionally, Whitehead adds a unique contribution to the tradition of the flying Africans; his term “useful delusions” argues that stories do not have to be true, or historically accurate, from them to be useful (Whitehead 290). In fact, to embrace delusions is to defy the accepted reality. In other words, by embracing delusions, Black communities push back against other’s attempts to annihilate Black history. Black people can then rewrite their trauma, giving them the wings and the hope they need in order to overcome that trauma. In this essay, I will first examine how *The Water Dancer* and *The Underground Railroad* are extensions of the tradition of the flying Africans and how each novel uses that story to define trauma and freedom. I will subsequently argue how, as “useful delusions,” these stories embody more than just “magic realism”: they themselves are examples of Black American authors rewriting history and healing the wounds of history (Whitehead 290).

Tracing the Flying Africans

Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *The Water Dancer* invokes the story of the flying Africans by explaining that they flew due to the power of teleportation. This solidifies his place in a tradition of rewriting the narrative of slavery and trauma in order to give the oppressed power. Hiram’s past is framed with a version of Igbo’s Landing: his own grandmother, Santi Bess, led forty-eight slaves into The River Goose and teleported them back to Africa. The presence of this story among Hiram’s community mimics the presence of the tale of the flying Africans. Hiram says it exists as “a mix of rumor and whisper,” passed

on by word of mouth (Coates 92). And while Santi Bess does not literally fly across the water to freedom, the elements of Conduction, the name for the teleportation, mimic flight. In fact, Hiram, in attempting to outrun capture, contemplates his need to unlock his still mysterious power, which he calls “flight.” He concludes, “I was running, when what I needed was to fly. Not in my mind, but in this world. I needed to lift up away from these low whites, as I lifted away from Maynard and the river” (Coates 147). While he may not be literally lifting up into the air as in the story of the flying Africans, he is able to appear from place to place and carry himself away from the chains that bind him. In this way, Hiram is Coates’ version of a “flying African.” Like Morrison’s Milkman or Marshall’s Avey, Hiram is Coates’ modern inheritor of the tradition of flight.

Cora’s escape in *The Underground Railroad* ties more ambiguously to the story of the flying Africans. Because Whitehead does not mention Igbo Landing or even flight, it may seem that *The Underground Railroad* does not tie into the tradition of adapting the tale of the flying Africans. On the surface, the two stories seem to be total opposites: the image of the enslaved Black people disappearing into the blue sky emits sensations of liberty, weightlessness, and hope, while Cora’s descent into the underground suggests grittiness, confusion, and secrecy. As Caesar and Cora first descend into the railway, “a sour smell [emanates] from below” (Whitehead 66). There is no clean, unbridled air, unlike the sky that gave wings to the flying Africans. As Caesar and Cora ride to freedom “there [is] only darkness, mile after mile,” no sunshine, no blue sky (Whitehead 70). Although Cora admires the tunnel for its architectural wonder, the tunnel is still subterranean, literally the opposite of flying free into the sky. Similarly, the railroad does not promise freedom, but instead carries Cora from one version of slavery and oppression to another. While flight bears the enslaved Africans back to Africa and back to freedom, the railroad seems to only to shuffle Cora around on a horrid tour of American oppression. The lack of freedom and the literal darkness of the underground railroad contrast it with the legendary escape of the flying Africans.

However, the underground railroad bears more similarities to the flights of the enslaved Africans than may initially appear, particularly in its mystery and its ability to transport its passengers secretly and quickly. Lumbly, the engineer who takes them down the first time, has no explanations for the railroad’s existence. He admits mysteriously that “solving the problem of

ventilation . . . took a bit of time,” and when Caesar asks how it was built, he answers, “with their hands, how else?” (Whitehead 67). The mystery of the railroad is just as pervasive as the mystery of flight; Whitehead offers no explanation for the railroad, instead forcing the readers to accept its mystery. The lack of explanation surrounding Cora’s escape is just as potent as the tale of the flying Africans’ inexplicable depictions of flight. Similarly, the railroad’s ability to quickly transport its passengers from location to location mimics literal flight: Cora is able to travel almost seamlessly from station to station. While the literal passengers of the Underground Railroad were forced to flee into the swamps and woods and to run from house to house, this mystical underground railroad transports its passengers as quickly as though they were flying from station to station. Both the underground railroad’s mysterious existence and its apparently seamless transportation of its passengers allude to the tale, suggesting that Whitehead’s story inherits the tradition of rewriting the tale of the flying Africans.

Unearthing Trauma

These novels similarly contribute to the recent tradition of the flying African by agreeing with Morrison (and Beyoncé) that light and freedom cannot be truly achieved without first facing past trauma. In *The Water Dancer*, Hiram must unearth his buried memories of his mother in order to teleport. Harriet Tubman, while teaching Hiram about Conduction, instructs that “the jump is done by the power of the story,” by remembering “all of our loves and all of our losses” (Coates 278). In order to “fly,” to move from place to place, Hiram must dig up memories of loss that he had long since buried. Among the numerous horrors of slavery, he “knew men who had held down their own wives to be flogged” and “children who’d watched those men hold down their mothers” but “worst of all [he] knew how the memory of such things altered [them], how [they] could never escape it, how it became an awful part of [them]” (Coates 384). Hiram learns that the trauma of slavery can never truly be forgotten, as it becomes a part of those who suffered. However, despite the horror of the memories, the only way that Hiram can “fly away” to freedom is to open the “lockbox” in which he shut the memory of his mother’s sale (Coates 384). Through the power of embracing the memory of his mother, Hiram is able to teleport and fly to freedom. In other words,

Coates agrees with recent adaptations of the flying Africans: he reiterates that flight is achieved by embracing and accepting past sorrows, not by avoiding them. Perhaps, Sophia's final decision that they "are what [they] always were . . . underground" carries that meaning (Coates 403). While Hiram can fly, he can only access that power by ironically embracing the weight of his trauma. Going "underground" with the weight is the only way to be free.

Unlike Hiram's power of teleportation, the power of the underground railroad does not literally function on the power of Cora's repressed memories. However, like *Conduction*, "flight" on the railroad is not an escape from hardship, but a journey through it. As Cora uses the underground railroad to flee slavery, she surfaces each time in places that introduce her to new versions of hardship. Her train ride is a tour of America's atrocities against Black communities, from lynchings, to forced sterilizations and inhumane medical experiments, to the slaughter of entire communities and the death of Cora's loved ones. When she surfaces, she is forced to face one question: "In what sort of hell had the train let her off?" (Whitehead 155). Cora's tour down memory lane is not personal, like Hiram's, but national. Each stop contains moments in history or symbolic events, suggesting that Cora experiences not her own trauma but the trauma of the nation. She is given the advice to "look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (Whitehead 310). The underground railroad is a tour of the Black American community's hardships; Cora lives the trauma of oppression over and over on her flight to the north.

After experiencing these hardships, Cora goes underground, seeking to fly away on the railroad, just as Hiram is determined to fly away from his captures; it is under the ground that she faces her past traumas. Each experience brings about a new death: after each stop, she returns again to the railroad and is symbolically entombed. While some of her descents below the ground are more pleasant, fixed with lights and companionship, twice she becomes trapped in the tunnel, as if literally buried in a grave. Under the South Carolina station, Cora is trapped in the darkness and comes to the conclusion that "years ago, she had stepped off the path of life" (Whitehead 147). She faces her trauma, understanding that she "was a stray in every sense" and in doing so, faces metaphorical death (Whitehead 147). However, this entombment under the earth doubles as a womb, as she is reborn when she emerges from the tunnel. After she is trapped under the earth for the final time in Ohio in the "ghost tunnel," she realizes, "On one end there was

who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light” (Whitehead 310). After Cora’s symbolic death is realized by coming to terms with her own trauma, she is reborn as a new person. This cycle of death and rebirth through embracing the past mimics Hiram’s need to embrace a new story each time he conducts, reiterating the concept that in order to flee towards the promise of freedom, past trauma must be confronted.

While Cora’s rebirth and Hiram’s teleportation may symbolize their flights towards freedom, they are never truly guaranteed safety. In this way, both Whitehead and Coates add to the current tradition of the flying Africans by arguing that trauma is not overcome only once, but over and over. Unlike the flying Africans (or Milkman, for that matter) who achieve freedom as their bodies take flight, both Cora and Hiram’s freedom is always in question. Even as *The Underground Railroad* ends, Cora reappears above ground yet again, her future is still unclear. She lives by the “slave’s choice”: “anywhere, anywhere but where you are escaping from” (Whitehead 311). Her repeated suffering upon each cycle of rebirth suggests that her struggles are not over at the book’s close. Similarly, Hiram does not flee north with Sophia but chooses to remain in Virginia: “underground” (Coates 403). Although he can go up North whenever he likes, he chooses to work in the South as a member of the underground railroad, close to the dangers from which he once ran. Furthermore, each use of teleportation requires a story from the past: each time he wishes to flee, he must remember and embrace his past. Coates and Whitehead, in making the nature of Cora and Hiram’s remembrance of trauma cyclical, argue that in order to maintain hope for freedom, trauma must be confronted not once but over and over.

But what exactly is the trauma that both Cora and Hiram—and each modern rendition of the flying African—experience? Critic Eugene L. Arva, in his book *The Traumatic Imagination: Histories of Violence in Magical Realist Fiction*, addresses the trauma that enslaved people in the Caribbean and their descendants face in his chapter “Surviving Slavery.” He asserts that their trauma is caused by “an elusive sense of identity” due to displacement from home and a lack of knowledge of ancestry (117). Although, in this case, Arva speaks of enslaved people of the Caribbean who experienced a different diaspora than the slaves of the American South, this loss of identity seems to be the main cause of at least Cora and Hiram’s trauma. Both lose their mothers at a young age and are not wholly embraced in their plantation’s

community. Cora is banished to the Hob while Hiram's status as the master's son elevates his rank and moves him from the fields to the house. Cora, as the train arrives to whisk her from the South, embraces her identity as "a stray in every sense. The last of her tribe" (Whitehead 147). Cora has no family, has no community. Hiram similarly is disconnected from his family because the memory of his mother "has been for so long tucked away, hidden away in a fog" (Coates 394). This disconnect from community, from family, and from ancestry perhaps causes the trauma that not only mars Hiram and Coates but also the communities that were displaced due to slavery and colonization.

Although neither Cora nor Hiram is able to completely repair their damaged families, they are able to come to terms with their past, and through their acceptance of the past they are able to "fly away" toward the hope of freedom. Arva likewise comes to the conclusion that keeping stories alive heals communities and repairs the trauma associated with lack of identity. In other words, the effort to keep stories alive is an effort to rewrite history not in the words of the oppressors but the oppressed. Morrison argues in her 1986 interview with Christina Davis, "the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in this importance because . . . the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is our own" (Davis 142). This history and thus the identity of Black people in the United States has been overwritten, ignored, "annihilated": Black people must reclaim history and retell trauma in order to heal. Thus, stories of the past, such as the stories and truths of Cora and Hiram, are the wings of the flying Africans, connecting Black communities back to their roots and enabling them to embrace the hope of identity and freedom.

Magical Realism and "Useful Delusions"

These stories that heal trauma and give wings to the oppressed come in many forms: fiction, reality, and a mix of the two. For example, in *The Water Dancer*, Hiram embraces the truth about his mother; reality is his means of healing. Cora, in contrast, does not know the truth about her mother; the story of her mother's escape is fictional. However, the story is still a means of healing

and strength for Cora. Whitehead, in showing Cora's repeated reliance on an untrue story, suggests that stories do not need to be true in order for them to hold power. Most critics label stories that adapt the flying Africans to be fantasy: a delusion. They label novels such as *The Underground Railroad* and *The Water Dancer* as magical realism because they contain elements that seem to be magical. However, Whitehead suggests that stories, even fantasies, hold power that effects real change in the lives of those who hear them.

Many critics, in discussing retellings of the story of the flying Africans, use the label magical realism in order to analyze their novels.¹ Others seem to recognize the injustice of using the term; when discussing Black fiction, they qualify their definition of magical realism.² However, they still embrace the term to define the genre, suggesting that the label is deeply rooted in critical thought. Since these narratives reflect a real belief in the supernatural, some authors³ have taken fault with the label. Notably, Morrison explained her discomfort with the term in an interview with Christina Davis in 1989. She said, "I was once under the impression that that label magical realism was another one of those words that covered up what was going on . . . for literary critics it just seemed to be a convenient way to skip again what was the truth" (Davis 143-44). Morrison also stated, "my own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew" (Davis 144). Belief in enchantment, in Black culture, is real. Stories that other cultures might label as fantasy, delusion, or magical, are actually reflections of reality. They are realism. To label these stories as magical is, like Morrison stated, a way of "annihilating" Black history and strips the Black community of their ability to recover from trauma through their stories.

Moreover, Whitehead contributes to the tradition of the flying Africans through his invention of the term "useful delusions" (Whitehead 290). He argues that whether the stories are true does not matter. Instead, their usefulness to those who believe them is more important than whether they are fact or fiction. Throughout the novel, Cora believes that her mother, Mabel, escaped from slavery. This story gives her hope that she too can escape. Although she denies that she is "a luck charm because Mabel got away" and feels resentment towards her mother for leaving her, Cora contemplates her mother's freedom, wondering if she is a beggar on the street or a free woman living in Canada (Whitehead 46). Although Mabel is not mentioned frequently, the knowledge that she did get away sits in the back of both

readers' and characters' minds as a promise that freedom is possible. The story is a source of hope.

However, Whitehead reveals that that source of hope was not true but fiction. In the novel's final chapters, Whitehead reveals that Mabel died in the swamp next to the plantation: she did not even make it a mile away. By deceiving the readers up until the end, Whitehead creates a similar hope in them, only to reveal that the hope was based on falsehood. Not only do the readers experience the deception, but they realize, in a moment of dramatic irony, that while Cora believes she is following her mother, she is actually forging her own path to freedom. Since Cora believes that one person escaped, she believes she can do it too. Although Mabel's story is not real, it still gives Cora the hope to make it real in her own life. It is a "useful delusion": it is untrue yet still has meaning in the lives of those who believe it (Whitehead 290).

While the word "delusion" suggests that the story or belief is false, it actually signifies believing in a narrative that is not dictated by the prominent culture to be real. The Oxford English Dictionary defines delusions as "the action of befooling with false impressions or beliefs; the fact or condition of being cheated and led to believe what is false." While it seems that this definition is adamant that a delusion is believing something that is false, another definition provided by Oxford Languages suggests otherwise. They define delusions as "an idiosyncratic belief or impression that is firmly maintained despite being contradicted by what is generally accepted as reality or rational argument." This definition holds a key difference: delusions are not necessarily false but instead simply go against what is "generally accepted" as reality. In other words, delusions defy the accepted narrative. Whitehead mirrors this idea, illustrating that just because delusions are not accepted as real, that does not mean they cannot be. As an example, he states three delusions: "that we can escape slavery"; that "the negro deserved a place of refuge"; and that America exists, since a country founded on "murder, theft, and cruelty" "shouldn't exist if there is any justice in the world" (Whitehead 290-91). Although these are delusions, they are believed in and made real. America should not exist, yet it does. Black communities cannot find refuge, yet in some cases they do. Just because Mabel did not escape the plantation does not mean that Cora cannot. In his definition of "useful delusions," Whitehead suggests that stories that defy the dominant

narrative may be seen as delusions; however, they can be powerful because they create hope, which leads to action and, ultimately, reality.

The Flying Africans and the Power of Stories

“Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking” notices Cora (Whitehead 119). White people continue to manipulate the truth about Black experiences, just as the museum Cora works in alters the history of slavery and Black oppression like a shop window. “The presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways,” argued Morrison (Davis 142). Black stories have been persecuted and censored, demoted as fantasy and omitted from history. Labeling Black authors as magical realists similarly ignores the truth that they tell about their perceptions of reality. By stripping away Black stories, white people have stripped away Black identity.

Then what is to be done? In the words of Morrison, Black voices must be given the opportunity and platform to do “the job of recovery” which is “their own” (Davis 142). They must be allowed to tell their own stories and reclaim their own history. In Hamilton’s version of the flying Africans, words are the true power that causes the Africans to fly. “Toby sighed the ancient words that were a dark promise,” just as Hiram spoke the story of his mother, and just as the story of the flying Africans is written, sung, acted, and spoken (Hamilton 171). Stories, or in other words, *delusions*, have power. The trauma that Black communities in the U.S. face as the inheritors of an annihilated history can be overcome as they are given the space to reclaim and retell their history and their stories. Then, they will be able to “rise on the air” and “fly away to *Free-dom*” [sic] (Hamilton 171).

Notes

¹ Art Taylor, Robert Gringer, Daniel Bautista, Jesús Benito, Ana Manzananas, Begoña Simal, Stephen M. Hart, and Wen-chin Ouyang are several of the critics who use the term magical realism to define black authors' works.

² Eugene L. Arva, uses the term magical realism, although he admits that the magical elements are "far from being reality" but still "signify the real" (Arva 185). P. Gabrielle Foreman uses the term "amplified reality" to explain the effect of magical realism.

³ Gabriel Garcia Marquez, a Latin American writer commonly labeled as magical realist, argued, "the sense of wonder and infinite strangeness which emerges from much Latin American writing is a true reflection of the complex realities of Latin American experience, not merely the product of feverish, literary imagination" (Minta 37).

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