

# The Representation of Colonial Discourse in *The Underground Railroad*

## Introduction

In my paper, I will analyze Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* through the frame of colonial discourse developed by Homi K. Bhaba. I will use his concepts in relation with the notions of fixity, enunciation and iteration. The aim of this paper is to analyze the book and have a closer look at regimes of truth that have helped construct the colonial discourse, in this case in relation to American slavery. I want to look closer which ideas lay behind it, how the story showed it was maintained and fixed and at the same times the dynamics that were also a part of this discourse, the forms of resistance that came to be. With regard to these regimes and the way the establishing of the colonial discourse is represented in Whitehead's book, I will focus on two main themes. Firstly, on the close linkage of slavery, colonial discourse and capitalism and secondly psychological and physical trauma. Both these themes are related to how the slaver, 'the other', the illiterate is being produced by the colonial discourse. Or put in other words, I want to have a closer look how the building of the American story, 'the American dream' is represented and how this is linked with the colonial discourse and the producing of the literate and the illiterate.

My second goal is to look how slavery is represented in the book and how the colonial discourse that is part of it is reconstructed, or maybe better said in relation to Bhaba, how it is repeated in the enunciative space of the novel. Because the story of *The Underground Railroad* is set during slavery I think in a very telling and interesting way it shows more clearly and more brutally certain regimes of truth that are fundamental building stones of the colonial discourse that lives on till this day. What makes it also interesting to analyze this story with the notion of colonial discourse is the way it represents and retells colonial discourse within the timeframe of slavery. With this it distances itself from the discourse, repeating it and retelling it and in this repeating and retelling also uncovers how this discourse was constructed and maintained and at the same time which form of resistance where active.

First, I would like to take a short detour and focus on what I think is an important and maybe sometimes overseen aspect of the ideology behind the racial and colonials discourse of American slavery. As Bhaba himself also says: "In order to

understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of 'truth', not to subject its representations to a normalising judgement" (19). That's why it's important first to have a closer look at the ideology of the discourse and to unveil why some utterances, certain ideas are being claimed as true and others as untrue. It gives an insight in the so-called production of truth, the machinery and dynamics behind this discourse which separates the ones who are inside and the ones who are not. It shows how the colonial discourse produces 'the other'. In getting a better understanding on how the colonial discourse of American slavery produces the other, according to which regime of truth, I will focus on the capitalist ideology that lies at the basis of slavery.

### **Capitalism and the construction of colonial discourse**

For the American colonizers, the slave owners, slaves were commodities. Slaves were their possession and they had one main purpose and that was working for the white man. It's very important, and maybe even surprising, that slavery in the United States came to be not primarily, or maybe not even at all, out of racial and racist motives. Before anything else it was 'imported' into the United States out of economic reasons. In his book *Capitalism & Slavery* Eric Williams gives a very telling anecdote, almost mythical, of why in the United States African slaves were used. Williams starts off by quoting the philosopher Adam Smith in saying that 'the prosperity of a new colony depends on one simple economic factor' and that is 'plenty of good land'. (Williams, 4) The example that he gives is the story of 'the great English capitalist' Mr. Peel. This Mr. Peel took £ 50.000, - and three hundred laborers with him and went off to the English colony Australia. The plan was that his laborers would work for him just as in England. But when they arrived in Australia where there was as said 'plenty of good land' the laborers draw their own plan and instead of working for Mr. Peel they start working the land for themselves. What the American colonist and plantation owners learned from this was that you should have a complete control over your laborers. This is just one example of how capitalist and economic interest were one of the main motivations of implementing the institution of slavery and using African-American as slaves.

The reason that I focus on this relation between capitalism and slavery is because this is also a reoccurring theme within the book and especially in relation to the colonial discourse that is represented in the book and it is one of the ways, and maybe one of the main ways, that the colonizer imposes his power on the colonized. The book shows how the plantations are like prison factories. Slaves are held captive, are being oppressed and are pushed to the limits of what their body can hold to improve the production rate. Slave-owners push the bodies of enslaved people past the limit of endurance and treat the matter of an enslaved person being injured or dying through overwork without remorse. And because the slave-owners knew the population of slave kept growing, they not always mind that much losing one. In this sense, enslaved people are treated, for example, more like horses than human beings.

Also, the way the slaves are valued is staggering, it bears some resembling with a cow market. On the slave markets woman are grabbed by the breast. They squeeze the breast gently to investigate if they are already able to give milk and bear children. This off course to estimate how much she will cost, a female slave who can became pregnant and have children and make new 'free' slaves is off course much more valuable. The story tells how Ashanti man are of great worth because they are big and strong.

### **Psychological trauma and colonial discourse**

The second fundamental construct of the colonial discourse that I want to focus on, and is closely linked the systematic and brutal way capitalism interested formed slavery, is the case of trauma. *The Underground Railroad* being a book that has a main narrative of a character escaping the tortures prison of plantation looking for freedom up north. The book can be read as a modern day and cynical Odyssey. Set in the time of slavery it's about a runaway slave looking for freedom, trying to establish agency and her own identity and on this trip, arrives in all these different places, meeting different people, helpful and hateful, and encountering all these different forms of oppression and aggression on this journey to freedom, defying her agency and identity. The cynicism is already in this comparison to the old Greek story. Where Odysseus journey has as goal to go back home, the whole concept and

idea of home is for Cora blurred and even unknown. And I think this rupture from home, this deliberately and systematically traumatizing the slaves taken from Africa the colonizer destabilizes, marginalizes the colonized.

The book starts right off from page one on establishing this theme of family and giving some telling examples of how the African slaves were traded off and in a way tracing the heritage of Cora, or better said the lack of it. The first chapter of the book is called 'Ajarry' after the grandmother of Cora. Ajarry was the first of her family to set foot on American soil as slave, so in a way her story as slave starts there. It is already telling that the book starts off with Ajarry without telling almost nothing of herself. Her own parents don't make it past page one. The story begins telling how first the men of Ajarry her village were taken and that a day later women and children followed. When she arrived at the dungeon, she at least is looking forward to seeing her father again, only finding out that because her father couldn't keep up the pace 'the slavers stove in his head and left his body by the trail'. Instantly followed by the line that her mother had died years before. Besides this we get told that before being shipped to America, she was held in a dungeon in Ouidah (Benin). At the same time, it is being told that she 'had never seen the ocean' before that time. From this fact, it would be safely to say that this would mean she herself wasn't from there.

Within only a page the tone for the rest of the book is set and the first traumatic experience for Africans in becoming African-American, or in that moment of time only slaves, is told; the sudden but immediate rupture of your homeland and family. The continuing of traumatic experience already occurs on the ship. Because of her young age, although it isn't said exactly how old she is something that all slaves have in common and something that reoccurs throughout the book the lack of a date of birth, after six weeks on the ship some 'seasoned mates' drag her into a passage and have their way with her. After this traumatic experience, she twice tries to kill herself. Both times she gets stopped by the sailors. Not out of act of humanity but out of protection of their goods, their property.

This all clearly reflects the fact that the identity, heritage and history of the African slaves were deliberately destroyed by the white slave-owners and traders. This all had just one simple goal and that was controlling the African slaves. The story shows clearly the different ways that the white Americans destroyed this possibility of a collective memory. The way they took the slave from their home

country and ripped them apart from their family is just one narrative the story shows of how slaves were isolated. I think by doing these slaves were deprived from an important aspect of agency and identity. By causing this fracture with the home country, nationality, a fracture with family and heritage, without even having a date of birth, an age in general. Without all these important things, the slaves' identity became fractured and more and more lost. And being deprived from their familiar social environment and being captivated on the plantation being owned by the white American slave owner, they simply become slaves, that's all they were in a sense. They were made part of the system of slavery. They became 'the other' within this discourse of slavery and in many ways illiterate.

### **Surveillance, fixity and the dynamics of discourse**

The role that the slave-catcher Arnold Ridgeway plays in relation to the colonial discourse is an important one. He is what he self says a firm believer in 'manifest destiny', that is the idea that white people have the right and even the duty to colonize America and make sure that African-Americans are kept to their 'role' as slave and as constructors of America. In his view it is interesting to see how the racial aspect and the working aspect are entwined. The capitalist and the racial aspect of the colonial discourse are here melted in one truth in one coherent vision that legitimizes the white American as colonizer and marginalizes the African-American to a working instrument, unfit to be on the side of the white man as ruler of the country. And the role of Ridgeway is a very interesting one with regards to this discourse and with this regime of truth, because as we know that this forming of this specific truth is nothing more than a social construct it is important that it continues to be repeated to keep it intact. The narrator also describes him as playing his part in the system "serving a nation rising to its destiny." In this Ridgeway is a product of this ideology and of this colonial discourse, his whole way of live depends on this constructed truth of the colonizer and the colonized. His whole literacy is granted on the given that he is white at first but also that he takes on the role of hunting runaway slaves and with this action protects the colonial discourse. It is his task to repress the dynamics of resistance given by the slave, the colonized. He is there to catch the slaves that escape through the physically (whips and other tools or techniques of torture) and

psychological (the way the slave-owners try to dehumanize the slaves taking away freedom, agency and identity) cracks of the colonial discourse.

In this way Ridgeway, his function is closely linked to Bhaba his notions of fixity and enunciation. In a conversation Ridgeway has with Cora he gives an explicit view on how he sees the system of slavery and his role in it:

“We do our part,” Ridgeway said, “slave and slave catcher. Master and colored boss. The new arrivals streaming into the harbors and the politicians and sheriffs and newspapermen and the mothers raising strong sons. People like you and your mother are the best of your race. The weak of your tribe have been weeded out, they die in the slave ships, die of our European pox, in the fields working our cotton and indigo. You need to be strong to survive the labor and to make us greater. We fatten hogs, not because it pleases us but because we need hogs to survive. But we can’t have you too clever. We can’t have you so fit you outrun us.”

The clear divide of the discourse is laid bare here, again both racial as economical. The white politicians and sheriffs raise strong sons where the slaves are rolled in to do the hard labor. But it also shows the forms of resistance that are part of the power relation within the discourse. Slaves can’t become too clever, can’t become too fit because this will give possibilities of deconstruction the regime that needs to stay fixed. As Bhaba says fixity has a certain dynamic that resonates a certain ‘rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition’. And when we take a step back, I think we can see two other interesting things with regard to the instability of the colonial discourse.

First, *The Underground Railroad* is a representation, a retelling of slavery. This opens up the possibility of an enunciative space. The story not so much contradicts the colonial discourse, there is no meta-narrative or an explicit distance the writer takes from it, the story simply repeats the colonial discourse. But by repeating it the writer makes this discourse explicit, it lays bare the ideology and the methods that are behind the discourse and that helped it constructed. By this the discourse gets displaced in a way and the focus is laid on the construct that it is. Implicitly the story gives resistance to the colonial discourse and points the reader at the construction of

the discourse and asking the writer to connect with the horrors of slavery, not directly but subtler, although at the same time very brutal by the forms of torture and racism,

Besides that, the story gives also an interesting shift at the notion of surveillance. Ridgeway can be seen as the personification of the idea of surveillance, having the main goal of keeping the colonial discourse intact and returning runaway slave back to their 'righteous owners'. There is another very telling utterance that Ridgeway himself does talking about how he sees his role:

"You heard my name when you were a pickaninny," he said. "The name of punishment, dogging every fugitive step and every thought of running away. For every slave I bring home, twenty others abandon their full-moon schemes. I'm a notion of order. The slave that disappears—it's a notion, too. Of hope. Undoing what I do so that a slave the next plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too. If we allow that, we accept the flaw in the imperative. And I refuse."

Not only does this utterance show the so-called flaws, or better said forms of resistance, of the colonial discourse, it shows not only how Ridgeway catches slaves but also how this catching is causing a feel of hopelessness. But if we take a step back, what we can see happening here is that the writer turns the gaze on the one that has the role of surveillance. As Bhaba mentions 'the look of surveillance returns'. The observer is becoming the observed, observed by us as the readers. And again, what we see here is a repeating of the colonial discourse with the aim to subvert this discourse and lay bare its weaknesses.

Where Ridgeway is the antagonist of the story and within this argument the protector of colonial discourse, Cora is the protagonist and can be, together with her 'side kick' Ceasar, seen as being on the other side of the power relations of the discourse. Cora and Ceasar are both the personification of the resistance that is embedded in this discourse and its power relation. Playing these different characters out to each other you can uncover an interesting dynamic which I think is indispensable from the colonial discourse as is represented within the novel.

In these first two chapters Whitehead creates this world and image of the slave as a displaced person. Taken from their homeland and ripped apart from their

family. On the plantation, they get isolated and are objectified as commodity. It sets the dark tone of the story and that of the time and the place. This beginning of the story also gives you the reasons why Cora would run but at the same time why so many slaves won't do it and will never have but a vague idea of freedom. The plantation is an isolated area. Guarded from the inside by people who won't hesitate to shoot on sight or handle the whip when necessary, or just out of personal cruelty. And even outside of the plantation you must cross a swamp and you're still property of the slave-owner. In a way, you're a free slave but you are still a slave, the other, your illiteracy is written on your body, by the color of your skin, by a literal burning mark that slave-owners place on the skin of their slaves and they were also still slaves 'According to the law, most of them were still property, their names on pieces of paper in cabinets kept by the United States Government.'

Where it comes down to is that all the black characters in a way are constantly in a navigating state of mind and are doubting between staying on the plantation undergoing the horror of slavery or rebel and trying to run with the great risk of a horrible death. The ingenious and sadistic system of slavery is designed to make the slaves believe that there is no way out, that there is no freedom. The whole concept of freedom is always something vague, partly because it's illegal for slaves to learn to read or write. The whole idea of torture might make one think of the example that Foucault gave when he speaks about the sovereign king and why executions were done public, as an example of the sovereign over his people<sup>1</sup>. Before Cora decides to run away, she views the option of enduring slavery as the only way in which she can exercise autonomy: "White man trying to kill you slow every day, and sometimes trying to kill you fast. Why make it easy for him? That was one kind of work you could say no to." At this point you can see how all the torture is in a way internalized and how she has adapted to this form of life. We as a reader can only read with astonishment how a person can talk about autonomy on a life on a plantation.

But when one of the slaves get tortured in such a gruesome way Cora decides to run from the plantation in search of her freedom. I think, there are also two interesting things to say on how Cora decides to be, or in a way becomes, a runaway slave in search for freedom. The first is related to Cora her mother Mabel. When Cora was just a little girl her mother fled the plantation leaving her behind. Unlike

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punishment. The Birth of the Prison*



Cora we as reader discover that her mother never made it past the swamp that surrounds the plantation, she even planned to go back but before she could she was already bitten and killed by a poisonous snake. But for Cora, her mother was the one that did get away but left her behind. In Cora's mind her mother lives a free life and she can't forgive her mother for not taking Cora with her. In a way Cora's mother planted a seed in her, a seed of freedom, a seed of resistance and a way out.

Another circumstance or person that activates Cora to flee is Caesar. Before being sold to the same plantation as Cora Caesar was being owned by Mrs. Garner and lived in Virginia. Mrs. Garner views on slavery where a bit more humane. The word humane is dangerous to use in combination with slavery but what I mean by that is that he at least had the freedom to learn to read, something that was normally strictly forbidden for slaves, there it could lead to emancipation and undermine the regime. Caesar personifies a form of freedom unknown to Cora. The other way around Caesar sees Cora as some sort of lucky charm. Not only is he aware that her mother did escape in her he sees and feels already some sort of uniqueness and difference that sets her apart from the other slaves. Besides that, it seems that he admires her for the way she survives on the plantation and it looks like he has some romantic feelings for her. Unfortunately, Cora is not able to react to this, being traumatized by being raped at a young age, she becomes unfit for this kind of loving interaction with another man, something that also is a form of illiteracy as consequence of slavery. But this couple is everything that slavery and colonialism devise. Two colonized persons, trying to escape from this regime of physical and psychological oppression, trying to break free from a system that produces and tries to make them in commodities, objects to use for the colonizer. The relationship they do have, the sense of freedom that they pursue, the goal to look for agency and try to reestablish an identity build up on their own terms is everything the colonial discourse is developed for to suppress. The hunt between them and Ridgeway represent the dynamics and undermines the fixity of the colonial discourse.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, I wanted to show two things. First off all I wanted to show certain regimes of truth that laid and lay behind colonial discourse. How the system of

capitalism and the project to make America great (which nowadays echoes again) needed slavery. It needed slavery for their modes of production, they needed a group of people who were not only stripped from their freedom, but also stripped from their heritage, from family from a sense of identity and agency after a while only knew life on the plantation. This is also a reason why torturing, humiliating and dehumanizing practices were an important part of this system. By traumatizing the slaves, a rupture came in their being, you could say that their own personal narrative got fragmented and deep psychological issues became part of who they were. Ajarry who got broken after being raped, wanted to kill herself on more than one occasion. Cora unable to love again. And the book shows in horrific but ingenious style how a slave community never really was a community but more a sort of snake pit, an animal-like space where the rules of the strongest counted, survival of the fittest.

And secondly, I wanted to show what literature can do in representing colonial discourse. In this case in an era as slavery and the discourse that was part of. In great parts being a realistic historic novel, *The Underground Railroad* and Whitehead describe and show us as readers just how something as slavery not only was but stayed for so long. It shows how the discourse of slavery that was systematically interwoven with everyday life in America perverted all sense of morality. Although the book also shows how some white people fought for the slaves the majority took passively or actively part in the dehumanizing activities of slavery. But besides that, with representing, retelling and remediating the colonial discourse Whitehead also beautifully and painfully lays bare the regime of truth, mostly economic and from that racial, that constructed this discourse and as readers distanced from this whole life you become aware just how it worked. This also proves what Bhabha says about the dynamics and fixity of the colonial discourse and how in the necessity to be repeated to keep its power space of resistance is made possible and I think that is what this book accomplished magnificently.

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