

**The Unfinished Project of Freedom in  
Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad***

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Summer Term 2017

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## **1. Introduction**

In 2016 Colson Whitehead published his novel *The Underground Railroad*. As the title suggests this novel describes a slave's escape towards freedom. Yet, Whitehead's novel offers more than a simple account of such a journey. He includes a fantastical element into his narrative by turning the metaphor of the Underground Railroad into a literal train with rails running through America. By using this fantastic element, Whitehead manages not only to tell a compelling story, but also to make claims about the situation of African Americans today. He sets out to show the unjust and cruel treatment of people of color in the USA through time and does so by including intertextual references, references to real historic events and, most importantly, the trope of time travel. By these means, he exposes that, even today, freedom and equality for black people have not been accomplished.

This thesis aims to place *The Underground Railroad* within the tradition of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. Moreover, it intends to show how Whitehead manages to make his statement about the American society and its treatment of African Americans throughout time. To achieve the aforementioned, the characteristics of a slave narrative shall first be laid out to show in which tradition Whitehead partakes. After that, the genre of the neo-slave narrative shall be introduced. Following that, a closer look at the different stations of *The Underground Railroad* shall be taken, while paying special attention to intertextual references Whitehead makes to the genre of the slave narrative and the inclusion of fantastical elements.

## **2. The Slave Narrative**

The slave narratives produced in the context of American chattel slavery count around 6.000 works and present the largest body of writing that any enslaved people have probably ever produced (Ernest 218). Generally, a slave narrative is defined as a first person narration of a person who is unfairly enslaved under inhumane conditions (Bland 6). However, these narratives can further be divided into non-fugitive and fugitive narratives, the latter being tales of slaves that escape from slavery to freedom (Bland 13).

Before the slave narrative became a distinct genre, there was already an interest in tales of captivity, namely the captivity of devout Christians by the hands of Indians (Sekora 486). When Briton Hammon's tale of such captivity was published in 1760, it incorporated a new element, namely "a slave whose spiritual error was to flee his owner's protection" (Sekora 486). This tale might be the first which was narrated by an American slave (Sekora

486); however, the first actual slave narrative is often considered to be Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African. Written by Himself* which was first published in 1789 (Carretta 44). According to Carretta, Equiano "established all of the major conventions reproduced in the vast majority of nineteenth- and twentieth-century factual and fictional African American slave narratives" (44). However, there was another force that shaped the slave narratives significantly.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the antislavery movements gained more popularity due to the influence of Enlightenment ideology, revolutionary ideas about natural rights, and the rise of sentimentalism (Gould 11). In consequence, more slave narratives were published under the sponsorship of evangelical Christian groups, as well as relatively small abolitionist societies, to aid them in their cause to expose the nature of slavery which should then be abolished (Gould 11).

Gould points out that not until the foundation of "more radical antislavery societies in America during the 1830s and 1840s [...] did the genre turn its energies upon Southern plantation slavery" (12). The genre then focused on the exposure of the cruelty on Southern plantations, the daily life of slaves, and the exposure of the hypocrisy of Southern Christianity (Gould 19). With Harriet Ann Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which was published in 1861, the topic of sexual abuse and the special predicament of slave women came into focus as well (Sinanan 77).

The abolitionists did, without doubt, prompt a significant rise in the production of slave narratives and their popularity (Gould 21), but their influence was not only enabling, but also restricting in nature. They were asking the slaves to "give us the facts [and] we will take care of the philosophy," as Frederick Douglass famously recalls (qtd. in Sekora 491). Hence, the former slaves were invited to tell, but not to interpret their life stories.

The abolitionists developed questionnaires that should ensure that the former slave would address issues that the white sponsors deemed relevant and helpful to their cause (Sekora 496). Thereby, they did not only emphasize their preference for the use of facts that could be proven, but they also shaped the structure of the slave narrative, which was ordered around these facts as preferred by the abolitionists (Sekora 497). Thus, the former slaves were restricted in their choice of which events to narrate and how to place, let alone interpret, these events with regard to the contemporary discourse.

Moreover, the title page of a slave narrative generally included the phrase 'written by him/herself.' However, the fact that the tale was 'sandwiched' between white testimonials to the authors' intelligence and character already suggests that the abolitionist influence was

more pronounced than the phrase ‘written by him/herself’ would suggest. So, as Sekora points out, “if he (a slave) were to discover personalizing words for his life, he must do so within the institutional language of abolition” (500). Or in other words: the black life story was given a place by a white institution, which shaped it according to its needs and taste and also selected who was permitted a place on the stage they provided.

Due to these massive restrictions of authorial authority, scholars are still not decided whether slave narratives can be seen as autobiographies or should be regarded as propaganda literature or if they belong to an entirely different genre (Bland 6). Furthermore, the doubts concerning the credibility of works like Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* as well as the doubts concerning their importance for subsequent black authors are explainable due to the aforementioned peculiarities of their creation.

### **3. The Neo-Slave Narrative**

As mentioned before, the slave narratives were long neglected. However, their importance cannot be denied if one takes into account how they influenced a subsequent genre, namely the neo-slave narrative. The term ‘neo-slave narrative’ first entered the literary discourse with Bernard W. Bell’s study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* in 1987 (Smith 168). He described neo-slave narratives as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (qtd. in Smith 168). Rushdy points out the link to the slave narratives in his definition of the genre as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (qtd. in Smith 169).

These definitions have expanded over time. Smith asserts that today texts from the days of slavery as well as from the period of Reconstruction and even texts set in our present time can be included in the genre (Smith 168). It can also be argued that not even the first-person voice that Rushdy assumes is mandatory since canonical works, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, are mostly written in the third-person. In addition to that, the genre approaches slavery as an institution from different angles. It includes everything from “realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire and works that combine these diverse modes” (Smith 168).

In spite of these relatively late definitions, the first neo-slave narrative is considered to be Margaret Walker’s *Jubilee*, which was published in 1966 (Smith 170). Her novel was published at a time when the Civil Rights Movement in the United States demanded equality for people of color and the end of racial segregation, a time during which the aftermath of slavery was still easily visible. Walker and many other authors like e.g. Butler or Morrison

thus turn “to the past to illuminate the persistence of injustice and resistance throughout history” (Smith 171). Their texts show the high importance of history and especially the importance of “the memory of slavery to our individual, racial, gender, cultural and national identities” (Smith 168).

Rushdy asserts that the genre “adopt(s) the conventions [...] of the antebellum slave narrative” (qtd. in Smith 169), yet, the conventions have arguably been changed. In the slave narrative, the abolitionist influence was very strong and restricted the former slaves to stick to facts and certain tropes as was explained in section 2. Since the writers of neo-slave narratives have never experienced slavery themselves and are not subject to such a restricting influence, they are free to write what they want. The focus thus shifted from the claim of authenticity and the importance of facts in the antebellum slave narrative to a focus on emotional experience and the imagination in the neo-slave narrative. Dubey asserts that this “burden of realist racial representation began to ease off only by the 1970s” (780) and that “speculative fictions of slavery began to appear only when the task of historical recovery seemed to be relatively far along” (783).

Smith points out that the writers were now free to “use the imagination to explore the unacknowledged and elusive effects of the institution of slavery” (169). Dubey suggests that the new genre, especially the speculative fiction of slavery that emerged out of it, tries to reject the notion that slavery was just an occurrence in history that has no effects on today’s society (780). Dubey and Smith both emphasize the role of the imagination for the creation of a narrative that provides an emotional experience in order to comprehend and relate to the past. Dubey writes that “the truth of this past is more fully grasped by way of an antirealist literary imagination that can fluidly cross temporal boundaries and affectively immerse readers into the world of slavery” (785). When talking about Morrison’s *Beloved*, Smith states that Morrison and others have taken on “the challenge of recovering the lived experience of enslavement” (174). She quotes an interview with Marsha Darling in which Morrison remarks that she needed to add imagination to her historical research about the real slave woman Margaret Garner in order to be able to write her book (Smith 174).

Due to this shift in focus, different tropes started to appear in the neo-slave narratives. These new tropes include supernatural occurrences, especially haunting (Smith 172), time travel and possession (Dubey 786) as well as the representation of trauma through severed mother-daughter relationships (Smith 170) and slavery in futuristic capitalist societies (Dubey 801). Especially the new supernatural tropes manage to minimize the felt distance between

the days of slavery and the present (Dubey 786). Writers are thus enabled to turn to the past to address issues of the present and evoke an emotional response.

The genre of the neo-slave narrative has been discussed critically. Levy-Hussen argues that “either they (neo-slave narratives) will provide an opportunity for articulating and working through our relationship to a traumatic past, or they will tether us to an irreparable history of injury and grievance” (195). The expression ‘traumatic past’ is a bit problematic here. It is unclear whose past Levy-Hussen means, the black people’s past? The United States’ past? Evidently, American chattel slavery was an institution that traumatized generations of black and, arguably, white people alike since they experienced and/or witnessed unspeakable cruelty. One may be tempted to assert that this traumatic past has been overcome and that it did not influence generations which were born after the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Yet some, like Marianne Hirsch, say the trauma of slavery is still existent in subsequent generations.

Hirsch develops the concept of postmemory which describes how trauma can be passed on to following generations. She describes postmemory as “the relationship of the second generation to a traumatic past that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (Hirsch 103). Hirsch describes the experiences that constitute this traumatic past as stories of parental generations among which subsequent generations grew up (106). These stories were then, according to Hirsch, reproduced so often, so deeply, and so emotionally that they become nearly as powerful as a personal memory (107, 109). Therefore, these stories cannot be “mediated by recall but by imaginative investment” (Hirsch 107).

This concept seems to be especially relevant in the context of the trauma that people of color experienced due to the institution of slavery and its memory that seeped through to following generations. Thanks to the abolitionists, the stories about slavery have been preserved. Additionally, there have been efforts to record the testimony of former slaves towards the ends of their lives by the Federal Writers Project who interviewed more than 2000 former slaves starting in 1936 (N.N. xviii). The majority of these texts might have been factual and restricted by the abolitionists, yet the neo-slave narratives that build on this literary tradition are not. They cannot ‘recall’ due to the generational removal of their authors, so they employ lots of what Hirsch calls ‘imaginative investment’ to provide the emotional experience of an ancestral story that Hirsch sees as being at the core of postmemory. Therefore, the significance of the genre for present generations should not be underestimated.

#### 4. The Underground Railroad

Colson Whitehead is an African American author who, even before writing *The Underground Railroad*, had made a name for himself with works such as *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days*. *The Underground Railroad* is his eighth work; and even though it is the first of his novels that deals with the issue of slavery directly, he has been known to address issues of racial injustice in other works like *The Intuitionist* or *Sag Harbor* as well.

*The Underground Railroad* can definitely be read as a neo-slave narrative. Dealing with the life of Cora, a fictional character, whose story is a product of imagination makes that clear. The story is not told in the first-person voice as Rushdy suggests is typical for neo-slave narratives (qtd. in Smith 169). Instead, it is told by an omniscient narrator. Whitehead's narrator also leaves Cora's side when he narrates events in the lives of people around her, like Ajarry, Ridgeway, Stevens, Ethel, Caesar, and Mabel. This is a break of the structure that an original slave narrative would assume. Whitehead makes frequent references to the genre of the slave narrative, but, *The Underground Railroad* being a work that includes a lot of fantastical elements, he also often breaks that structure. The fantastical elements and the intertextual references to the slave narrative genre are both crucial for transporting the message of the novel and building up Whitehead's claim about the situation of black people in the United States throughout time. In the following subchapters, these intertextualities and fantastical elements and their meaning and effect shall be analyzed further to show how they support Whitehead's claim.

##### 4.1 Georgia

The reader first encounters Cora, the main character, on the Randall plantation in Georgia, which is her home. Soon the slave society and its rules are introduced, and it becomes clear, that Cora is an outcast even among her fellow slaves because she lives in the building that has the lowest social status ascribed to it. The hut called 'Hob' is described as a place for "those who had been crippled by the overseers' punishments, [...] those who had lost their wits" (Whitehead 16) and orphans. Cora lives there for two reasons. Firstly, her mother has run away from the plantation never to be seen again, which left her without family (Whitehead 40), and secondly, she refused to give up a little plot of land that her grandmother and her mother had already tended to (Whitehead 19).

The reader also learns about a slave named 'Jockey' who is the oldest slave on the plantation and therefore has a certain authority. He is the only slave who gets to celebrate his birthday, which he can declare any day (Whitehead 25). It also becomes clear that Cora has



already been the victim of sexual violence (Whitehead 21). Even though her mother has (supposedly) run away successfully, Cora does not have plans to flee until she is asked to accompany Caesar on his escape. First she refuses (Whitehead 26), but when she is severely whipped for standing up to the punishment of her young friend Chester and the plantation goes to her master's cruel brother, who ordered that punishment, she changes her mind (Whitehead 48).

The tropes Whitehead employs in the first part of the story, which he titles 'Georgia', after the location of the Randall plantation, are tropes which are typical for slave narratives. As pointed out in chapter 1, the daily life of slaves and the makings of their society were of interest to the abolitionists. Slave narratives generally explained the workings of these structures present on a plantation, which were often hidden from white people's eyes. Furthermore, the cruel punishment that is being exposed when Chester is beaten for staining his master's shirt with a single drop of wine is typical for a traditional slave narrative. The political agenda the slave narratives were written to support was the abolition of slavery, whose cruel workings were best exposed by accounts of horrible and unjust punishment as can be seen in Frederick Douglass' *A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

In addition to that, Cora's special predicament as a slave woman is brought up. The sexual violence that Cora experienced was performed by black men; however, the overseer is also prone to sexual violence (Whitehead 25). This aspect reminds the reader of earlier works like Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, which address the special danger for slave women. All these tropes refer back to the slave narrative genre. These intertextual references can easily be spotted if one is familiar with slave narratives.

Another aspect that can clearly be seen as an intertextual reference to the slave narrative genre is the structure of the 'Georgia' chapter. At first, the society and Cora's life are described, then an event occurs, in this case the beating of Chester, which changes the protagonist's attitude. Cora is unhappy on the plantation beforehand as well; yet, she is passive and rejects Caesar when he asks her to escape with him. However, when Cora is whipped for standing up for her friend and the plantation changes owners, her attitude changes too and she becomes active. She seeks Caesar out and tells him that she wants to escape. This pattern of a passive beginning, a turning point event and the change to activity is especially typical for the fugitive slave narrative.

Through these intertextualities to the genre of the slave narrative, Whitehead manages to place his narrative in time. The readers can relate Cora's home and the society she

grew up in to what they know about Southern plantations and the lives of American slaves in the antebellum South. The Randall plantation is fictional, and so is Cora, but due to the intertextual references, the picture Whitehead paints of the place and the characters appears to be more credible. Moreover, Whitehead includes newspaper advertisements before the chapters 'Georgia,' 'South Carolina,' 'North Carolina,' 'Tennessee,' 'Indiana,' and 'The North.' These advertisements describe the physical aspects of runaway slaves and ask for them to be returned. The most recent dates from 1839 (Whitehead 142). All but the last advertisement are authentic and help create the credible picture of the situation for runaway slaves in the antebellum South.

Another remarkable aspect of the story which instantly becomes apparent is the trauma of maternal loss, which Cora suffers from. Her mother ran away when Cora was still a child (Whitehead 14), and although she was never heard from again, Cora assumes that she must be in the free North. Cora is hurt deeply by the fact that she was left behind and harbors hate for her mother (Whitehead 98). The trope of trauma through maternal abandonment is frequently employed in neo-slave narratives (see chapter 3). In this case, Whitehead employs a trope in his novel that is typical for the genre that this work is to be placed in.

#### 4.2 The Railroad

When Cora and Caesar manage to reach the first station of the Underground Railroad, the reader could be surprised to learn that Whitehead turns the metaphor, which was used to describe an underground network of people, into a literal underground. During the time of slavery, people who were sympathetic to the abolitionist cause formed a network that tried to help fugitive slaves escape to the Free states (Buckmaster 12f.). In Whitehead's novel there is also a system of people who want to help the fugitives; however, they do so by transporting them from station to station in a literal underground.

The Underground Railroad works as a fantastical element in the novel. It is evident that there were no undergrounds in the United States in the antebellum period. The first underground in the United States was built in Boston, starting in 1895 (Brooks). Therefore, the existence of the underground itself is a blatant anachronism.

Moreover, the underground has another function in the novel than just to carry fugitives across the country. The underground also works as a time machine. Whenever Cora steps off the underground, she finds herself not only in a different state, but also in surroundings that suggest a different era. This time travel is never commented on. In fact, Cora does not seem to notice that she is being transported in time. Furthermore, it is never

explained how this time machine works. The novel neither employs science fiction, nor does it use supernatural explanations to describe how the passage through time is possible. The reader only recognizes the different epochs through anachronisms and references to real historical events or concepts. Thus, the reader needs a certain degree of historical knowledge in order to recognize the imaginative device of time travel.

When Cora first sees the railroad, she asks where it starts and ends. The local station agent only answers: “Stations are discovered, lines discontinued. You won’t know what waits above until you pull in” (Whitehead 68). Thereby supporting the notion that the underground leads to a variety of destinations which cannot be described, because the station itself and the characteristics of the time and place are unknown both to the passengers and the people who operate the railroad. When Cora then asks who built the railroad the station agent asks her “who builds anything in this country?” (Whitehead 67). For Cora this means that the railroad was built by black people. In conclusion, the very device that will supposedly carry her to freedom was built by black people and not by white abolitionists.

Before Cora leaves on her first trip with the Underground Railroad, the station agent says his goodbyes with the following words: “If you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (Whitehead 69). Later, Cora follows the agent’s instructions, but due to the fact that she is going through a tunnel system, she can only see darkness while she travels (Whitehead 70).

Yet, if one reads the station agent’s comment with regard to the underground as a time machine, it makes sense. If the readers ‘ride the rails’ with Cora, they travel through time, and if they pause to take in the special characteristics of each time, especially concerning the treatment of black people, they will be able to find the truth. The whole novel builds up to the claim that there has never been freedom and equality for people of color in the United States and that still, these ideals have not been fulfilled. The trope of time travel is especially helpful in order to come to that conclusion since it enables the author to address different periods in time.

It also has to be remarked that time travel has become a very important trope in neo-slave narratives. Octavia Butler used it in *Kindred* to much success and so does Phyllis Alesia Perry in her novel *Stigmata*. As Dubey points out, authors have often used “dramatic foreshortening of the temporal distance between slavery and the present” (786) in order to make claims about history as well as the present. Furthermore, she reasserts the importance of the trope of time travel for the genre by emphasizing that an imagination, which can cross

temporal boundaries fluidly, is crucial in order to understand the truth about the time of slavery (Dubey 785). Thus, time travel helps to connect this imaginative journey through time to the present.

#### 4.3 South Carolina

The first stop Cora and Caesar reach is in South Carolina. The very first thing Cora notices after stopping in South Carolina is a skyscraper (Whitehead 70). Later on, Cora learns that this skyscraper is called ‘the Griffin building’ or just ‘the Griffin.’ It is described as a building with twelve floors that house government offices, a bank, and some successful firms (Whitehead 86). Further, Cora remarks that the building is the highest structure in the entire south and the pride of the town (Whitehead 86). However, for Cora this building has a second meaning, she sees it as “a monument to her profound changes in circumstance” (Whitehead 87). Cora’s fate did change, she is housed in a dormitory (Whitehead 89), she learns to read and write (Whitehead 95), and she works for a kind family (Whitehead 85).

Yet, there is a downside. Cora is confronted with the choice whether to partake in experiments on female sterilization, especially tubectomy, when she goes to the doctor for her mandatory appointment (Whitehead 113). The doctor tells Cora that this was a chance for her “to take control over [her] own destiny” (Whitehead 113), which is ironic considering the fact that he tries to coerce her into submitting to the procedure. Later, she learns that experiments on the cures for syphilis are also being conducted on black men without them knowing (Whitehead 121). The proctor of her dormitory also tries to convince Cora to submit to the operation (Whitehead 127).

For the reader it is instantly apparent that Cora has indeed travelled in time when she describes the Griffin building. The first skyscraper in the USA was built in 1885 in Chicago, so the presence of a skyscraper is an anachronism (“Skyscraper”). Furthermore, the experiments that are performed in this chapter of the novel bear a strong resemblance to the U.S. eugenics program that was active in the USA from the 1920s until the 1970s (Nittle). In this program, women, who were black, mentally ill, Native American or otherwise ‘undesirable’, were sterilized against their will and often without them even knowing (Nittle). Being aware of these aspects and the fact that Caesar works in a factory in this chapter (Whitehead 103), the reader is able to place the time somewhere in the first couple of decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During her time in South Carolina, Cora is lured into believing that she is safe. She is amazed by the kind treatment she receives from white people around her (Whitehead 89) and

even though she soon has to abandon the family she works for to work as a museum exhibit, she appreciates that her bosses always treat her kindly. Cora and Caesar repeatedly have the possibility to take another train on the Underground Railroad to leave South Carolina; yet they are unwilling to leave because of their false sense of safety (Whitehead 104). They fear that the place they would reach next would be worse, and they are reluctant to give up their new belongings even if they are not valuable (Whitehead 104).

The comforts of their new life blind them for the danger around them. Officially, they pose as slaves bought by the state of South Carolina (Whitehead 92); so they are not even legally free. However, this fact is neglected due to their good living conditions. It is never even mentioned again that Cora and Caesar might feel that they are free, without legally being free. Furthermore, Cora is given the possibility to learn how to read and write (Whitehead 95), which is an important trope in the slave narrative and therefore presents an intertextual reference to the genre.

In this chapter, Whitehead exposes that, even though people of color might have lived in relatively good conditions until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were by no means free, let alone equal to white people. He also shows how people might be blinded by small comforts and how this makes them neglect their instincts and agendas and lures them into staying in line. Cora and Caesar went on the dangerous journey to be free and not to be the slaves of another, more distant and more institutionalized master. Yet, at first, they are unable to see how this new master, namely the government, controls people of color and, just like on the plantation, takes their children away. In sterilizing black people like animals, they are denied their humanity.

This aspect is also visible in Cora's work as a museum exhibit. Not only is she working in the Museum of Natural Wonders, where mostly taxidermied animals are exhibited (Whitehead 108), she is also denied a voice. She has to stay behind glass, which makes it impossible for her to speak to the visitors (Whitehead 109) and she is not taken seriously when she proposes changes in the setting to make it more realistic (Whitehead 116). She is denied not only her status as a human being by being shown alongside dead animals, but furthermore, she is denied the authority over her own story. She is made to represent a picture that is shaped and put on display for white people to see, and even though she knows much more about life on a plantation as a slave, her opinion is not valued.

This aspect can be read as a critique on the representation of black people by white people. Starting with the slave narratives, the representation of people of color was shaped by white people. Some of these ideas resonate until today. Some still have prejudices about black

people, their intelligence, and their behavior. How dangerous these prejudices are manifests itself in the high number of unemployed people of color and the recent rise in police shootings with black victims, which suggests a bias due to deep rooted prejudices within law enforcement (Johnston).

#### 4.4 North Carolina

Cora's time in North Carolina stands in a stark contrast to her experiences in South Carolina. In the novel, the situation for people of color is much worse in North Carolina. As Martin Wells, the local station agent, tells Cora, the state had abolished people of color altogether by forbidding them to settle on North Carolina soil (Whitehead 165). Furthermore, the black people who already lived in the state were sold or chased away, and the ones who hid or refused to leave were murdered and hanged along a road that is called 'the Freedom Trail' (Whitehead 153). The workforce needed to pick cotton is then made up of European immigrants, which would later become fully accepted citizens (Whitehead 165).

Moreover, Cora witnesses a hanging the first day she stays in her hideout. These hangings take place on Fridays in the village park, and they are accompanied by picnics, theatre performances, and merriness and are thus called 'Friday Festival' (Whitehead 156). The victims of these hangings are provided by a gang of men that is called 'the Night Riders.' These people are a gang who have the authority to search anybody's house for fugitive blacks, and in the authority they possess, they remind not only the reader, but also Martin Wells of law enforcement officials (Whitehead 161f.).

The reader soon learns that the situation is not only very dangerous for Cora, but also for Martin Wells and his wife Ethel, who is very unhappy about her husband's involvement with the Underground Railroad (Whitehead 153). Ethel tells her husband and Cora that they would get them all killed and what appears to be an exaggeration at first soon turns out to be the truth (Whitehead 153). The penalty for white people who help fugitive slaves is indeed death (Whitehead 188). Since they cannot risk for Cora to be seen or heard, they hide her in the crawlspace of their attic, which is described as coming "to a point three feet from the floor and [running] fifteen feet in length" (Whitehead 154). This hideout has a small hole through which Cora can observe the proceedings in the village park (Whitehead 154).

In the North Carolina chapter, Whitehead makes very visible intertextual references to a well-known slave narrative, namely Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In her narrative, Jacobs describes how she hid in her grandmother's attic for seven years. She describes her hideout as follows: "The garret was only nine feet long and seven wide. The

highest part was three feet high [...]” (Jacobs 173). Jacobs also tells her readers that her refuge did not have any windows or holes to let air in until she drilled some herself with a tool of her uncle’s (Jacobs 175). She watches her children and the people in the town square through this hole, which provides her with something to occupy her thoughts with (Jacobs 175). These aspects of Jacobs’s experience are, of course, very similar to the ones that Whitehead describes in his novel. Again, he manages to make his story more credible by including these references to a well-known slave narrative.

As for the trope of time travel, the surroundings in which Cora finds herself in North Carolina seem much less advanced than what she experienced in South Carolina. There is no mention of technology or skyscrapers. However, the descriptions of mass killings and the display of mutilated bodies remind the reader of a hyperbolic depiction of the time of apartheid, segregation, and Jim Crow laws, which were active in the United States from 1880 to 1954 (Lasner). In the novel, people of color are being abolished; they are killed, or made to leave the state. When the laws for segregation came in place, the aim was to separate people by the color of their skin in daily life (Nightingale 300). Therefore, Whitehead’s hyperbolic image just goes one step further by not only separating white and black people in the public sphere, but by separating them along state lines. It needs to be remarked, that during the time these laws were in place, lots of black and some white people did protest against them (Lasner). However, they were often scared into abandoning their agenda (Lasner). Here, Whitehead does again take a historical fact and depicts it in a much more severe, hyperbolic way, because in his narrative, Ethel and Martin risk no less than their lives.

Apart from that, the Night Riders, who are depicted as a tight knit band of merciless men in the novel, remind the reader very much of the Ku Klux Klan. These people were especially active in the South of the USA during the period of Reconstruction, but they remain active on a smaller scale until today (Nightingale 299). They performed acts of violence against people of color, advocated for even stricter laws of segregation, and scared people into accepting their agenda (Nightingale 299).

Even if it is evident, Whitehead shows that there was no freedom or equality for people of color during the time of segregation and the Jim Crow laws, to which Cora is transported by time travelling in the Underground Railroad. By depicting the cruelties and the dangers of this time in a hyperbolic and more severe way, he manages to create a dystopia within American history. The genre of the neo-slave narrative aims to shorten the distance between the time of slavery and the present, and it tries to convey the felt experience of the time (see chapter 3). Whitehead manages to convey what it must have felt like to live in the

time of the Jim Crow laws by depicting it as a dystopia. He evokes a remembrance of this past, which is not even long over by using hyperbolic depictions. Yet, he manages to keep his narrative credible by including a blatant intertextuality to a well-known slave narrative whose credibility has only recently been reaffirmed (Ernest 219).

#### 4.5 Indiana

After Cora is found by the slave catcher Ridgeway, she travels through Tennessee with him until she is rescued by a band of young men, some of them black (Whitehead 225), who take her to the next station where they board an underground train to Indiana (Whitehead 258). In Indiana, Cora becomes a part of Valentine farm, where she seems to finally find peace. She finds friends (Whitehead 240), and she makes great progress with regards to her education (Whitehead 273). She also falls in love with Royal, one of the people who saved her from the slave catcher (Whitehead 304).

Valentine farm presents itself as a utopia. The owner of the farm, John Valentine, offers shelter to anybody who needs it, and, in exchange for their labor, he lets people not only live in comfortable houses, but he also feeds them (Whitehead 241), schools them (Whitehead 239), and lets them use his library (Whitehead 273). He does not view the farm as his property, but as a joined creation (Whitehead 274). This notion is completely new to Cora, and she needs a little time to adjust. Cora also makes friends with a little girl called Molly, who reminds her very much of her friendship with Chester (Whitehead 241).

The farm is not only a novelty for Cora, but for anyone who hears of it, black or white. Valentine farm is often a venue for abolitionist speeches (Whitehead 250). Sometimes people also come to simply see the way the place is run and to reaffirm their abolitionist belief that black people should not be enslaved because they are capable of enjoying freedom (Whitehead 250). However, some people, especially a slave named Mingo, think that through this symbolic character of Valentine farm for the abolitionist cause, it also becomes a target (Whitehead 284).

Mingo is especially afraid of the destruction of this utopia, and he fears that harboring fugitive slaves and criminals could lead to its downfall (Whitehead 284). It seems that now that the former slaves are given the authority to self-govern their little community, they have troubles to find a common approach. Exactly this disunity is what leads to the destruction of the utopia by the hands of the slave catcher and his helpers, who raid the farm in order to find fugitive slaves, especially criminals like Cora, who is wanted for murder.



In this chapter, Whitehead depicts surroundings that could not be more different from the dystopia previously presented in North Carolina. On Valentine farm, Whitehead rarely includes white people. There are some visits from popular abolitionists, but apart from that, there is only the black enclave. So, the reader is tempted to think that the inhabitants of Valentine farm have indeed found freedom. However, this attempt at building a free place is destroyed from within. Mingo has no compassion for fugitives like Cora, and it is this lack of compassion which ultimately leads to the downfall of the black society on the farm as opposed to white racism that destroyed Cora's previous attempts at finding freedom. It is suggested that Mingo informed the slave catchers of the farm's doings, but it is never explicitly stated. Another suggestion is that the slave catchers might have been looking for a man called Elijah Lander, who was to speak at the farm.

What happens in Indiana shows the effects of slavery on Mingo. He has internalized the violence he experienced, and his lack of solidarity for his fellow blacks proves to be fatal. He advocates for a slow and gradual approach to freedom, which would not upset the white population so much (Whitehead 284). His counterpart is a man called Elijah Lander, who is described as a very light skinned and a popular abolitionist. He says, "This place must be a delusion [...]. Yet, here we are" (Whitehead 285). He calls for solidarity and says that "in some ways the only thing we have in common is the color of our skin [...]. Color must suffice" (Whitehead 285f.). However, Lander's speech comes too late.

It is not apparent to which time the Indiana chapter corresponds. There is no mention of advanced technology or important political events that would help to place the events. Yet, the political agency, the speeches, and the notion of black solidarity, which Lander represents, remind the reader of the Civil Rights era. Furthermore, on Valentine farm, black people are segregated from the white rest of the local population. However, they can visit their shops and apart from that, they also enjoy relative freedom. These aspects suggest a link to the Civil Rights era, but the links are too few to finally make the case for this argument. Another era or idea that could correspond to what Whitehead describes in this chapter would be the notion of some people who, within the framework of Black Nationalism, advocated for the foundation of an exclusively black nation (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Black Nationalism").

Through the destruction of the utopia of Valentine farm, Whitehead shows that, even if people of color feel safe and free like Cora does, this does not necessarily mean that they are. He exposes that solidarity and a united front are just as important as the destruction of racist ideas for the realization of freedom and equality. It is the very fear of losing the farm and the shelter and freedom it provides that ultimately leads to its destruction.

#### 4.6 The North

The last chapter of Whitehead's novel is titled 'The North.' After Cora is taken away from the Valentine farm by Ridgeway, she has to show him the small Underground Railroad tunnel near her last place of refuge. She manages to injure Ridgeway fatally and escapes on a small handcar (Whitehead 303). When Cora reaches the surface again, she decides to go west with a black man on his wagon (Whitehead 306).

Here Whitehead breaks with the expected structure. During the entire course of the novel he adhered faithfully to the structure of the slave narrative and some of its well-known tropes. He described Cora's life on the plantation, the events that prompted the decision to leave, as well as the different stations of her perilous journey and the pains she goes through to educate herself. Yet, he diverts from this structure in the end. Instead of letting his protagonist reach the free north to live a happy life, as was customary in the slave narrative, he lets her go west. Cora does not reach the free North, and by calling the last chapter 'the North,' but sending Cora west, Whitehead shows that there is no place for her in the North. The North was associated with freedom by runaway slaves, but Whitehead treats it differently in his novel.

This is the most important claim Whitehead makes in the novel. Instead of showing his readers a free and happy place within American society, he leaves them in the unknown. The reader never learns, whether Cora finds freedom in the West or not. Anyhow, the frontier myth, which deals with the notion of going west to build a better life, is generally a white myth (Slotkin 139). Yet, Cora joins a black man on his journey west. Whitehead implies that the free place, which people of color long for, cannot simply be found, but has to be built by means of their personal strength.

Furthermore, towards the end, the reader learns that Cora's mother Mabel did not reach the free North but was bitten by a snake and died close to the plantation (Whitehead 295). Throughout the novel, Cora was searching for her mother, harboring a deep hatred for the woman who supposedly abandoned her to live a better life. With every new place she comes to see, she goes back to this trauma of maternal abandonment. Only in the end, the reader is able to transcend from Cora's melancholy concerning the loss of her mother, to mourning. Since Cora never learns that her mother died, she is unable to accomplish the same transcendence.

Whitehead's work can, without doubt, be read as a neo-slave narrative; still the case can be made to read *The Underground Railroad* as something more than that. Margo Natalie Crawford suggests another addition to the genres that descended from the slave narrative. She

introduces the concept of the 'post-neo-slave narrative.' According to her, the unknown takes a much more important place in the post-neo-slave narrative than in the neo-slave narrative. She asserts that the post-neo-slave narrative is characterized by "the refusal to fill in the gaps, but to linger in the unknown" (Crawford 71) as opposed to the neo-slave narrative which did attempt to fill in the gaps of history by using the imagination (see chapter 3). The unknown is a very important component in Whitehead's novel. Not only do the readers never learn where the Underground Railroad starts or finishes, they also never learn how it works. Furthermore, the novel's protagonist does not reach the free North or any other place for that matter. Her destination is unknown, and it is also unknown whether she reaches that destination.

Moreover, Crawford states that there is a "push, in post-neo-slave narratives, against the time and space of 'from slavery to freedom'" (72). She also points out that, for her, post-neo-slave narratives are also more experimental in their form (Crawford 74). In addition to that, Crawford suggests that "post-neo-slave narratives pressure readers to [...] read slavery against received epistemologies" (71). With regard to these aspects, Whitehead's novel could again be read as a post-neo-slave narrative. Not only does Whitehead break with the well-established structure of 'slavery to freedom', he also uses quite experimental means. Such means could be the inclusion of chapters about multiple other characters than Cora, the use of authentic newspaper advertisements, and the figure of the literal Underground Railroad rather than a simple network of people. He rejects the notion of a free place that a former slave can simply go to and leave the past behind. Instead, he establishes the idea that this free place has yet to be built, thereby, challenging the norm.

Another claim of Crawford's is that the "call for collective mourning in the space of the unknown sets the post-neo-slave narrative apart from the neo-slave narrative" (82). Cora stays in the unknown all the time. She does not know where she will end up when she boards the Underground Railroad. Furthermore, she never learns what really happened to her mother, or who really betrayed the people at Valentine farm. Thus, she needs to mourn everything and everyone she lost, while she repeatedly dives into the unknown. Arguably, the reader experiences this sensation with her. It is impossible to see what is coming next and especially when Cora leaves South Carolina and Indiana, the reader mourns what Cora had to give up because it is evident that she was relatively happy there.

Additionally, Crawford rejects the notion that mourning and melancholy can only exist in a strict temporal order, she makes the case for coexistence of melancholy and mourning (70). One could argue that these two concepts do exist in the novel at the same time. On the one hand, Cora and the reader mourn the places and people she had to abandon,

on the other hand, Cora keeps going back to her trauma of maternal abandonment. Since Cora thinks that her mother also ran away, she keeps identifying herself with her mother which brings her back to this loss again and again.

Moreover, Crawford highlights that the post-neo-slave narrative features a “subject who refuses to prove her [sic] humanity” (71). Whitehead includes authentic newspaper advertisements that call for the return of fugitive slaves, of which all but the last one are authentic. The last one reads “ran away from her legal but not rightful master [...] a slave girl called Cora. [...] She has stopped running. Rewards unclaimed. She was never property” (Whitehead 298). This advertisement shows that by neglecting that she was property, Cora’s humanity is asserted but it is not proven through testimonies to her character or intellect.

The final chapter of Whitehead’s novel has the highest importance in building up his overall claim that the project of freedom is unfinished and that a free place for people of color never existed, does not exist today, and has yet to be built. Furthermore, this chapter showed that *The Underground Railroad* can be read as a post-neo-slave narrative that focuses on different aspects than the neo-slave narrative as laid out in the previous chapter of the thesis.

## **5. Conclusion**

Whitehead’s novel employs different means to bring across its message and it does so to much success. First of all, Whitehead manages to make his work appear credible by including intertextual references to the genre of the slave narrative. The author includes some of the genre’s most important tropes like the makeup of the slave society or the cruel punishment of slaves. Yet, the references are mostly to be seen in the structure of the novel, which only diverts from the established pattern of the slave narrative in the end. This diversion is to be seen in the fact that Cora never reaches freedom. Additionally, the author includes a very obvious reference to Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a slave Girl*, which also serves to make his story more credible.

After taking a closer look at *The Underground Railroad*, it became clear that the novel can definitely be read as a neo-slave narrative. It employs tropes like time travel and trauma through maternal abandonment, which are typical for the genre, especially in its more recent manifestations (see chapter 3). The trope of time travel is especially important since it helps to bring the long gone past closer to more recent time periods and the present. This approximation of past and present through a fantastic element is also typical for the genre of the neo-slave narrative.

Throughout the novel, Whitehead keeps reasserting that freedom and equality for people of color have not been accomplished. Cora experiences relative progress and modern technology in South Carolina, which reminds the reader of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As the story proceeds, she also lives through the utter dystopia in North Carolina that can be described as a hyperbolic depiction of the time of segregation and the Jim Crow laws. Furthermore, when she spends time at Valentine farm in Indiana, she gets to know a community which loosely resembles the Civil Rights era and evokes remembrance of the Black Nationalist movement. In all of these different places and periods, Whitehead exposes that there is no freedom for people of color, let alone equality. He shows that, even if the situation seems pleasant for Cora at first, which is the case in South Carolina and on Valentine farm, this little bit of happiness is ultimately being corrupted either by white people from without or by black people from within the community.

However, the by far most significant part of Whitehead's novel is its ending. Instead of letting his protagonist end up in a free northern state, the author breaks with the structure of the slave narrative he so often referenced before. Cora does not reach the free North, but goes west with a black man. By refusing to show a happy North, where people of color can be free, Whitehead suggests that there might not be such a place. Thereby, he prompts the reader to reflect whether such a place exists in today's society or whether the black experience of today is more of an illusion of freedom like Cora experienced repeatedly in the novel. The fact, that Whitehead lets Cora go west instead of north in the last chapter of the novel is also significant. In the American context, going west suggests the building of something new, the creation of an ideal, an individual or a community longs for, in the wilderness. This movement westward in the novel also supports the notion that Whitehead doubts the existence of a free place. Instead, he implies that this free place has yet to be built rather than discovered.

It is this element of the unknown that gives the novel a distinct feel. Whitehead never explains how the Underground Railroad works or where it starts and ends. Moreover, he does not disclose whether Cora really reaches the West or what the West is like. The unknown in his novel is accepted and embraced. It is given a place. Hence, the case for reading *The Underground Railroad* not as a neo-slave narrative but as a post-neo-slave narrative in the understanding of Margo Natalie Crawford can be made. This viewpoint can be supported by the fact, that the structure of "from slavery to freedom," as Crawford calls it (72), is broken in the novel. In addition to that, Whitehead seems ready to experiment when he feeds the reader

information that he keeps from his protagonists, thereby enabling his readers to experience the time of slavery not like Cora, the slave on the run, but from a more omniscient perspective.

After all, Whitehead depicts the situation for people of color to be persistently bad throughout time. Without doubt, there are chapters in the novel, e.g. ‘North Carolina’, where the situation appears to be worse than in others. Yet, the fact that, in every chapter of the novel, people of color are unwanted, unfree, and unequal remains. With regard to the novel’s recent publication, in 2016, these issues appear to be especially relevant. In the last few years, debates about police violence against people of color have become more frequent. Especially the shootings of Michael Brown Jr. in 2014, Freddie Gray, and Brendon Glenn in 2015 have led to angry protests all around the United States (Funke and Susman). These three incidents and many other of the same nature have caused the ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement to evolve “from a social media hashtag into a national protest against police brutality” (Funke and Susman). These events have sparked a new discourse about racial equality in the United States.

Whitehead takes part in this discourse with his novel. He manages to show how persistent the ideas about race and the cruelty resulting from these ideas are, by depicting what forms they can take in the different periods of time his novel addresses. Whitehead invites black and white readers alike to critically review the situation of African Americans in the United States today. He seems to be quite pessimistic concerning this issue. However, even if Whitehead’s novel does not explicitly call for political agency concerning issues of racial equality, it manages to expose cruelty and inequality and will certainly be inspiring and eye-opening for readers all around the world due to its unique makeup and compelling plot.

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Hiermit versichere ich, Kaylie-Anne Ward, an Eides statt, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig und ohne fremde Hilfe verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe, alle Ausführungen, die anderen Schriften wörtlich oder sinngemäß entnommen wurden, gekennzeichnet sind und die Arbeit in gleicher oder ähnlicher Form noch kein Bestandteil einer Studien- oder Prüfungsleistung war.



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