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FORCED MOBILITY AND RACIAL MAPPING IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

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Abstract

This article reads Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* as a narrative structured by forced mobility. By tracing Cora's displacement across Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and finally "the North," Whitehead constructs an alternative mapping of the United States in which mobility does not lead to freedom but instead reveals geographically differentiated regimes of racial domination. Drawing on mobility studies, the article shows that mobility in the novel is never neutral but coerced, precarious, and dangerous. Ultimately, Whitehead deconstructs the myth of equating the North with freedom, so prevalent in slave narratives, and reframes mobility as a central mechanism through which racial control operates while simultaneously exposing its limits as a site of resistance.

Keywords: mobility; migration; travel; cartography.

Introduction

Colson Whitehead's sixth novel, *The Underground Railroad,* is generally considered a work of speculative fiction by critics such as Matthew Dischinger (2017), Madhu Dubey (2018), and Nicole Waller (2022), or as one belonging to the neo-slave narrative genre, as argued by Stephanie Li (2019), and Débora Spacini Nakanishi, and Cláudia Maria Ceneviva Nigro (2019). I want to complement such views by arguing, however, that it can also be understood as a narrative about forced mobility within the United States. Although set within the

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borders of the U.S., *The Underground Railroad* narrates mobility as a hemispheric condition shaped by slavery, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism; in other words, processes that exceed national boundaries and resonate across the Americas. Revolving around Cora's forced dislocation across different states from Georgia through the Carolinas, Tennessee, Indiana, and simply "the North", the novel makes mobility a central issue, revealing how each state organizes racial control and violence.

Each forced stop during Cora's escape for freedom in the Underground Railroad discloses a distinct regime of racial violence, ranging from overt necropolitical control to seemingly progressive policies, suggesting that freedom within the U.S. is geographically contingent, unstable, and eventually provisional. More importantly, by transforming the historical railroad into a literal underground train, Whitehead (2016) suggests that forced mobility should be viewed as a defining feature of the African American experience. My claim is that the narrative ultimately produces a counter-map of the nation, one that replaces the promise of escape with an exposure of how racial control is spatially reorganized across different territories. In this sense, I agree with Waller's claim that the novel creates a revision of "the national map of the United States, a map that denies its existence on stolen Native land and posits the North as the site of freedom, the West as the site of 'free' land, and the New South as an improvement of the Old South" (53).

The novel is organized into chapters that trace both the characters and the states through which Cora travels via the Underground Railroad. As Cora's journey unfolds, mobility operates less as a promise of freedom than as a narrative mechanism that educates readers about the spatial reconfiguration of racism in the U.S. From this perspective, the Underground Railroad also functions as a pedagogical device through which readers are invited to comprehend not only the cultural diversity of the country, but more significantly, the heterogeneous forms of racial violence which structure it. In the opening chapter, entitled "Georgia", Lumbly, one of the station agents, introduces the underground transit system to Cora and her companion Caesar. After explaining the mechanics of the system and securing the fugitives on the train, Lumbly observes that:

> Every state is different . . . Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop . . . 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 64-65)

The passage discloses a naïve and optimistic view of the Underground Railroad in which travel seems to offer a linear path toward freedom. However, as Cora will later discover, Lumbly's rhetoric of "possibility" does not function as a

roadmap to freedom, but as a naïve misreading of how racial power is unevenly organized across state lines. Ultimately, what Cora, Caesar, and readers confront is a national landscape profoundly shaped by chaos and uncaring violence.

The accounts of fugitives escaping slavery, together with the help they received from citizens associated with the Underground Railroad, are profoundly marked by violence. According to Robert H. Churchill (2020), these reports reveal a *geography of violence*, that is, "a shifting cultural landscape on which norms of violence shaped the fugitive experience and the operations of the Underground Railroad" (3). Churchill observes that such a *geography of violence* "is an empirical reality that can be discerned by observing patterns of violent behavior over dozens of individual cases and analyzing the cultural norms that produce these patterns" (4-5). Therefore, rather than understanding violence as a universal phenomenon, I treat it as localized practices of power whose forms and meanings change across states. Mobility thus operates as a narrative mechanism through which readers apprehend the regional variability of racial violence, rather than as a vehicle for historical resolution. With the state-chapters, the novel ultimately constructs an alternative national cartography that blends historical events with anachronism, foregrounding historical cycles and repetitions of racial domination. In this context, the Underground Railroad operates as the only viable form of mobility capable of extracting Cora from diverse regimes of racial control.

To pursue this theme, I foreground my approach in mobility theory, with particular attention to George Lipsitz and Ronald R. Sundstrom's work on the relationship between race and space in the United States. Building on this theoretical support, I examine how each state Cora is forced to travel across via the Underground Railroad reconfigures racial control through distinct regimes of violence and containment. I then propose that Cora's itinerary produces an alternative cartography of the country, one that deconstructs the traditional association of the North with freedom that has shaped both abolitionist discourse and slave narrative conventions. Considering the fact that Cora never reaches the North and instead continues moving west, *The Underground Railroad* dismantles the common knowledge that equates northward dislocation with possibilities of emancipation, revealing mobility itself as a precarious and unfinished condition of Black life.

Mobility and Race

Recent scholarship in mobility studies provides a theoretical framework for reading *The Underground Railroad* as a narrative that maps racial power through uneven movement and forced displacement, emphasizing how mobility is differentially regulated and racialized (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007; Cresswell 2010; Hinger 2022). Throughout the novel, mobility operates in distinct forms such as flight, forced displacement, infrastructural movement,

confinement, and compelled transit, each producing different regimes of racial control. I approach mobility in the novel with the understanding that it cannot be separated from race and space. In fact, these terms are not independent analytical categories, but mutually constitutive.

As George Lipsitz (2011) argues, "the racial projects of U.S. society have always been spatial projects as well" (52). This formulation underscores the extent to which racial hierarchy in the U.S. has historically been produced through the organization of space and mobility, through decisions about where different populations may live, work, move, or be confined. From the dispossession of Indigenous lands and the forced migration and enslavement of African peoples to segregation, incarceration, and environmental racism, spatial arrangements have functioned as key mechanisms for sustaining racial inequality. Therefore, mobility and immobility are never neutral conditions; that is, individuals do not freely choose where to live or move but are compelled by economic or racial constraints. In this context, Lipsitz argues that:

> The racial imagination that relegates people of different races to different spaces produces grossly unequal access to education, employment, transportation, and shelter. It exposes communities of color disproportionately to environmental hazards and social nuisances while offering whites privileged access to economic opportunities, social amenities, and valuable personal networks. The lived experience of race takes place in actual spaces, while the lived experience of place draws its determinate logic from overt and covert understandings of race. (6)

Therefore, mobility and space are mechanisms that significantly impact the lives of individuals, especially those who are racially marginalized.

In *Race and Place: Social Space in the Production of Human Kinds* (2003), Ronald R. Sundstrom focuses on the role that race plays in the distribution and allocation of spaces within the U.S. His analysis shows that race in the U.S. operates through the spatial regulation of mobility, determining what he terms Americans' "environmental and spatial cognition." Racialized sites such as the "ghetto", "inner city", or "suburb" function as mental and material maps that organize who may move, where, and under what conditions. In this sense, space does not merely reflect race but actively generates it through uneven regimes of movement and restriction (92-93). This dynamic becomes clear in the novel's opening state chapter, Georgia, where mobility emerges not as an option but as a condition imposed by the transatlantic slave economy itself.

Georgia and the Transatlantic Slave Trade

Whitehead's central concern in *The Underground Railroad* lies in forced mobility and the geographies of violence. From the outset, the novel situates

Cora within a long and violent history of forced displacement that originates in the transatlantic slave trade and culminates in slave plantations of Georgia: a trajectory personified in the life of her grandmother, Ajarry. Treated as a commodity, Ajarry is repeatedly sold across the Southern U.S. and forced to move across various plantation spaces until she is ultimately brought to the Randall plantation. During her confinement there, she gives birth to Mabel, Cora's mother, who represents an enduring symbol of the possibility of escape and mobility, as she was believed to have accomplished both. As a result, Cora grows up under the shadow of her mother's nearly impossible acts, a legacy which attracts the attention of a newcomer to the plantation, Caesar.

From his arrival, Caesar insists that Cora escape the plantation via the Underground Railroad, motivated by his belief that Cora's lineage might bring them good luck. Later in the novel, however, it is revealed that Mabel died during her escape; because her body was never found, the symbolism attached to her escape prevailed on the plantation. At first, Cora dismisses all of Caesar's entreaties, but, due to a series of escalating violence committed against her, such as sexual assault, physical punishments, isolation in the Hob, and the loss of her small plot of land, she is finally compelled to accept Caesar's invitations and see mobility as her only viable option. At this point, the novel disrupts its historical realism through the introduction of a literal Underground Railroad, materialized as a subterranean train capable of traversing the interior of Georgia. This disruption highlights mobility as infrastructure, making escape dependent on the anachronistic technology represented by the whole underground system and, more importantly, on secrecy. Cora's doubts about the railroad system, questioning whether "they did operate this deep in Georgia?" and "how would they alert the railroad in time?" (Whitehead 26) mark the moment when the novel moves from realist representation toward speculative fiction, inaugurating a series of deliberate anachronisms.

Eventually, with the help of a white abolitionist, Mr. Fletcher, both Cora and Caesar are able to reach their embarkation point, which is inside Lumbly's barn, another member of the Underground Railroad. There in the barn, Lumbly opens a trapdoor and invites both fugitives to descend and get to know the underground station. Their astonishment is mingled with awe and skepticism. Cora looks around the magnificent station and wonders about "the sheer industry that made such a project possible" (Whitehead 33). Caesar notices that "two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel," stretching "south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting towards a miraculous terminus" (33). Then he asks Lumbly who could have built such an impressive station, and Lumbly's ironic reply, "[w]ho builds anything in this country?" (33) directly exposes the historical erasure of African American labor from narratives of national progress. According to Dischinger (2017), the railroad operates as a "national allegory" that is "inconceivable in its ambition, design and construction," much like the promise of the United States itself (89); however, the "black mouths" (33) of the tunnel thus materialize a paradox at the heart of the

national landscape, which discloses a modern infrastructure built through Black labor that simultaneously enables movement while sustaining regimes of racial domination.

Despite its magnitude, the underground station has several limitations, all of which Lumbly makes clear to Cora and Caesar. Because of its secrecy, the railroad is an unstable transit system whose routes are limited, stations may be dismantled without previous warnings, and, more significantly, destinations cannot be foreseen. As such, the precariousness of the system aligns with the hovering theme of the novel in which fugitive mobility is depicted, at best, as a dangerous endeavor. In other words, the journey on the train may not necessarily result in freedom, so much desired by both fugitives, but it may lead them to an unpredictable destination where freedom is not even an option. From the outset, the Underground Railroad is presented not as an emancipatory endpoint, but as a fragile infrastructure that displaces Cora from one unstable space to another.

South Carolina and Biopolitical Control

After leaving Georgia via the Underground Railroad, the first stop that Cora and Caesar reach is South Carolina. There, they encounter a markedly different regime, introduced by Sam, who informs them that their former identities must be erased. Sam explains that because they "were runaways", they are required to "commit [their] names and [their] story to memory" (Whitehead 44), thereby becoming formerly enslaved individuals officially recognized as free by the state. Such a renaming signals that the railroad has not only removed them from Georgia but has also stripped them of their previous selves, replacing lived identity with state-sanctioned performance. The demand for performance is particularly evident in Cora's employment at a museum, where she is required to embody sanitized scenes of American history, transforming brutal survival into a fake representation of the slave trade.

There is a remarkable contrast between Georgia and South Carolina. Georgia is connected to the culmination of the transatlantic slave trade's forced displacement and centers on plantation life and its episodes of violence, whereas South Carolina initially appears to be its very opposite offering fugitives a level of liberty close to full citizenship. It is evident, however, that Whitehead creates a fictitious version of the state because, from a historical perspective, South Carolina sustained a plantation-based slave economy similar to any other slaveholding state and was, moreover, the first state to secede from the Union at the outset of the Civil War. In the novel, South Carolina is depicted as a progressive state that takes full care of the newly arrived fugitives. For example, all fugitives are incorporated into a government-sponsored program of resocialization that includes formal education and public health initiatives, all framed as part of a progressive political agenda.

Cora, for one, feels elated to receive an education which she describes as "among the most nourishing" aspects of her new life (Whitehead 87). Nonetheless, during her classes with Miss Lucy, she is reminded that such access to education is exclusive to South Carolina, because in case she were in North Carolina, ironically the state she will travel to next, the same practice would constitute a crime punishable by lashes. Miss Lucy further notes that such penalties derive "from the law," while a master's punishment would likely be worse (86). Through this juxtaposition of Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina, the novel deconstructs Lumbly's naïve comment that each state was different and "each one a state of possibility". Rather than signaling a break with plantation logics, South Carolina's apparent progress will eventually expose how racial governance can shift from overt violence to progressive administration without abandoning domination.

The dark side of the state, so to speak, is gradually revealed through the public health program, which requires mandatory medical examinations for all newly arrived fugitives. During her visits to Dr. Stevens, Cora is presented with sterilization as a "gift" of modern medicine. In a very paternalistic manner, Dr. Stevens further explains that sterilization is part of a broader initiative designed to promote population control through a surgical procedure described as "simple, permanent, and without risk" (Whitehead 101). Although described as voluntary, the program is revealed to be coercive when the doctor admits that the procedure has become "mandatory for some in the state," specifically targeting "colored women who have already birthed more than two children" (101). The language of science and calm professionalism masks a biopolitical regime in which reproductive capacity is regulated by the state, reducing Black women to objects of demographic management. Cora's reaction exposes the violence embedded in this racist progressive system. Cora gradually realizes that "mandatory" sterilization signals a loss of bodily autonomy that recalls the conditions of enslavement, as women are treated "as if they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased" (101). Her comparison between herself and her white employer, questioning whether Mrs. Anderson's instability would render her similarly "unfit", reveals the racial bias underlying the policy (102).

In fact, the medical program operating in South Carolina is part of a disguised eugenic project intended to curtail African American life; that is, while Black women are subjected to direct and coercive reproductive intervention, Black men are targeted through a different mechanism of racial control. African American men are drawn into what is presented as free medical treatment, only to be used as experimental subjects in a government-sponsored syphilis program. This racist approach to population management reveals a biopolitical logic which establishes that reproduction is regulated through the forced sterilization of women, while male bodies are rendered disposable through medical experimentation. Moreover, the syphilis program depicted in *The Underground Railroad* alludes to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932–1972), conducted by the United States Public Health Service. As Susan Reverby explains in *Examining Tuskegee: The*

Infamous Syphilis Study and Its Legacy (2009), African American men were deliberately misled into believing they were receiving medical treatment while physicians observed the untreated progression of syphilis, even after effective cures became available. By transposing this twentieth-century episode into an antebellum setting, Whitehead underscores the historical continuity between slavery, racialized medical experimentation, and the exploitation of Black bodies under the rhetoric of scientific progress.

Together, these practices expose the racist violence underlying South Carolina's progressive façade. Thus, mobility into the state does not result in full citizenship as Cora had imagined, but in incorporation into a racialized government program of experimentation and demographic control. Moreover, by alluding directly to the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, the novel situates South Carolina's health initiatives within a longer history of scientific racism perpetrated in the U.S. By embedding racial extermination within the language of science and progress, the novel exposes how South Carolina's governance transforms mobility into a paternalistic mechanism for managing and ultimately reducing Black life.

North Carolina and Necropolitical Terror

Cora and Caesar's stay in South Carolina is abruptly cut short by the arrival of Ridgeway and his posse. They burn Sam's house and capture Caesar, but fail to arrest Cora, who had anticipated the raid and once again escapes through the Underground Railroad just in time. From inside "the darkness of the platform" (Whitehead 126), she overhears the sound of Sam's house being destroyed and burned down. She regrets her previous decision to stop in South Carolina rather than continue moving north toward the free states, realizing that, after all, "it was still the south, and the devil had long nimble fingers" (126). She comes to understand that South Carolina was merely a repetition of the logics of the Randall plantation, whose chains, though "of new manufacture," nonetheless "accomplished the purpose of chains" (126). Ultimately, despite the distance of travel from Georgia, she realizes that both of them "had not traveled very far at all" (126).

Whereas South Carolina presents itself as a space of managed progress, one that promises education, employment, and civic inclusion while covertly practicing eugenics and biomedical control, North Carolina represents a radical reversal of this model. If South Carolina governs Black mobility through inclusion and regulation, North Carolina enforces racial order through absolute exclusion and terror. The state has abolished slavery not as a step toward emancipation, but as a mechanism for racial cleansing; that is, Black people are banned entirely, and any who remain are publicly executed. As Cora soon discovers, "North Carolina was an improvement, beneath the surface," but only in the most bitterly ironic sense (Whitehead 131). Above ground, the state is governed by a regime of spectacle and terror in which lynched bodies hang from trees along the road,

forming what the novel calls the "Freedom Trail" (133). These bodies function as geographic markers, transforming the landscape itself into an archive of racial violence.

In an interview with Terry Gross, Whitehead explains that the counterfactual elements present in his novel enabled him to revisit the antebellum South in a new format without having to invent a totally new historical space. He highlights that "[t]he book took off from [the] childhood notion" that the underground railroad was a literal train, and this allowed him to explore the following question: "What if every state our hero went through as he or she ran north was a different state of American possibility?" ("A Literal Train to Freedom"). According to Dischinger, "[t]he settings may offer an alternative to the real histories of the places in which the novel is set, but…[e]ven as the novel rearranges history, it hardly invents or exaggerates (83)." In other words, the underground train stations, the skyscrapers, Eugenics, and the Syphilis Program will eventually arrive. When Gross mentions the violence depicted in the chapter about North Carolina, Whitehead responds that:

> In order to solve the problem of slavery, [North Carolina] outlawed all black people. So, if you have dark skin and you're found in North Carolina, you can be lynched. It's a white separatist, supremacist state-much in the way that towns in Oregon, when they were being settled, were settled on a white separatist, supremacist ideal . . . Every Friday there's a happy lynching festival, where they execute the latest black person who's been caught up in their program of genocide. So again, it's taking aspects of American history and taking them to a certain extreme. ("A Literal Train to Freedom")

The rendering of North Carolina as a white supremacist state represents, *de facto*, an extreme version of racial extermination, yet with echoes in historical realities. Its depiction recalls not only Oregon, cited by Whitehead himself, but also the innumerous lynchings that occurred during and after the abolition of slavery. As Dischinger observes, "the novel's movement in and out of states of possibility at once allows readers to place themselves in another world only to find it all too familiar (96)".

Dubey interprets these movements in and out of history as "asynchronous or multisynchronous" depictions of an alternative America "mashing up counterfactual and recognizably actual dimensions of history pulled from the antebellum period up at least to the 1930s" (2). This is achieved by parataxis structured via the various anachronistic episodes that produce "temporal simultaneity", causing readers to feel "a sense of being stuck in history" (15). Dubey also highlights that Whitehead is inclined to take a current term and apply it to the novel's antebellum context, such as the infamous Freedom Trail, which today names a historical tour in Boston that celebrates the American Revolution. I would highlight the irony underlying Whitehead's juxtaposition of the national symbol of white liberty with the trees laden with black bodies to foreground

the historical exclusion of African Americans in the fight for freedom. Such a strategy, Dubey further explains, not only challenges naïve conceptions of linear, periodized history but also criticizes "our tendency to quarantine slavery to a premodern past" (15). From such a point of view, Cora's dislocation across states via the Underground Railroad represents not only a movement across different racial regimes but also across overlapping historical episodes, all of which are filled with violent modes of racial domination. North Carolina thus collapses historical time, revealing how regimes of racial terror recur rather than recede within the national narrative.

Cora is assisted in North Carolina by Martin Wells and his wife, Ethel Wells, a white couple whose involvement with the Underground Railroad is inherited rather than chosen. Martin's father, Donald Wells, had secretly aided fugitives for years, constructing a small hidden space in the attic of their house. Unlike the expansive underground stations of earlier chapters, this hiding place is extremely cramped. Cora must remain motionless for weeks in a space so small that she can neither stand nor stretch fully, emerging only at night. This episode explicitly alludes to Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, in which Jacobs hides for seven years in a garret above her grandmother's house. Like Jacobs, Cora becomes both a witness and a prisoner, observing the world from a position of enforced invisibility. From her attic vantage point, she watches daily life unfold outside the window, including the ritualized violence of lynchings and the public enforcement of racial law. As in Jacobs's narrative, concealment becomes a paradoxical form of survival as safety is achieved only through immobility.

By juxtaposing Cora's dislocation from South Carolina to North Carolina, the novel makes a transition from biopolitical power to necropolitical terror. The chapter represents a radical shift towards what Achille Mbembe (2019) defines as necropolitics, that is, "the ultimate expression of sovereignty largely resides in the power and capacity to dictate who is able to live and who must die" (66). I argue that such sovereign power is explicitly illustrated by the chapter's depiction of lynchings as warnings, punishment, and spectacle. In other words, the chapter reproduces this transition, replacing the paternalistic control of Black bodies with a regime structured around public terror and extermination. Cora is introduced to such a regime of death-as-spectacle right after meeting Martin Wells, who had come to the Underground Station to leave a note warning that he could no longer house fugitives due to the extreme racial politics recently adopted by the state. Although he initially intended only to leave a message, he comes across Cora, who is desperate in the darkness of the station, and decides to take her.

Cora's enforced concealment inside the attic of the Wells's house further intensifies this necropolitical landscape. Confined to that cramped space, unable to stand upright, she survives only by becoming invisible, reduced to what Mbembe calls a "living dead" existence, life preserved solely through proximity to death (92). From her hiding place, Cora watches lynchings unfold in the town square every Friday night, which leads her to think: "What a world it is… that makes a living prison into your only haven" (Whitehead 155). Her thought

exemplifies Mbembe's claim that necropolitical power creates "death-worlds" defined by "new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead" (92). In this sense, North Carolina represents the novel's articulation of necropower as the state operates a racial regime in which governance is no longer concerned with managing life but with producing death as a condition of social order.

Cora's stay in North Carolina once again ends abruptly when her hiding place is discovered. The Wells are put to public execution while Cora escapes the gallows by the intervention of Ridgeway, who happens to be in town at the moment of her capture. Exceptionally this time, her dislocation to another state does not occur through the Underground Railroad. She is forced to travel with Ridgeway and his posse towards Tennessee. By creating these regimes as successive stops along a journey, *The Underground Railroad* shows how racism is not only reformulated but remains a continuous threat to fugitives who travel across states via the underground train.

Tennessee and Spatial Collapse

Tennessee represents a complete change in the novel's geography of violence. Unlike the two previous states, Tennessee is in total collapse, ravaged by wildfires and yellow fever, which put everyone in peril, black or white. Cora enters the state without the protection of the Underground Railroad's tunnels, noting that "for the first time, she crossed into another state without using the underground railroad" (Whitehead 176). The absence of a subterranean passage exposes her to a devastated surface landscape shaped by fire, displacement, disease, and death. Grace Heneks (2020) adds that "[i]n Tennessee, Yellow Fever has broken out and a wildfire has decimated the countryside, making the state an apocalyptic wasteland" (144). After two days of moving through what appears as *Dante's Inferno* with crows gliding over a world "scorched and harrowed", "a sea of ash" made of burnt black trees, burnt houses, and animals, "they were covered in black grime" (172). Cora believes Tennessee was cursed and deserved such a destruction as justice for "enslaving her people, for massacring another race, for stealing the very land itself. Let them burn by flame or fever . . . until the dead have been avenged" (185). The westward detour through the state, forced by Ridgeway's pursuit, derails "the northern direction of the fugitive slave narratives," creating a map of "zigzag lines, incomplete or abandoned segments, unpredictable connection points, and numerous detours and dead ends" (Dubey 12). Tennessee exemplifies such a dead end. Thus, mobility becomes contingent and redirected by violence rather than guided by hope.

Whitehead frames Tennessee as a terrain of mass displacement rather than refuge. Towns are overrun with "escapees," both Black and white, fleeing the wildfires and Yellow Fever. Cora sees inconsolable white families who lost everything in the fires and feels somewhat surprised to hear the screams of white

babies, as she was accustomed to hearing only the little black ones. The chapter also foregrounds the entanglement of Black displacement with settler colonial expansion. As Ridgeway explains while traveling through the region, the land they traverse was once Cherokee territory, cleared through forced removal: "They sat on what was once Cherokee land… until the president decided otherwise and ordered them removed" (Whitehead 175). Using anachronisms, or parataxis as explained by Dubey, Whitehead alludes to the historical forced removal by the U.S. government of several Native American tribes from their native land between 1830 and 1850 to the west. The episode is invoked in the novel as a "Trail of Tears and Death," linking Indigenous dispossession to the same logic of forced mobility that sustains slavery (175). Tennessee thus emerges as a palimpsest of racialized displacement, where Black fugitivity unfolds within earlier histories of colonial violence.

Ridgeway understands the dispossession and forced mobility of both Indigenous and African American peoples as part of the country's "Manifest Destiny" (189). On his terms, this is part of a process of racial supremacist conquest which justifies the stealing of whatever white Americans feel proper "whether it's red men or Africans" (190). He adds that he believes in:

> 'the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate. Our destiny by divine prescription—the American imperative'. (190)

Ridgeway's reflections on Manifest Destiny articulate how forced dislocation is historically grounded in ideological terms. In his logic, westward expansion, dispossession of Native peoples, the displacement and enslavement of the Black population are not illegal acts but foundational principles of American nation-building, legitimized by divine rights, a theological imperative of conquest.

Mobility, on his terms, equals domination: Native peoples are removed to clear land for settlement, while African Americans are forcibly transported to extract labor and sustain the plantation economy. It is a lethal logic that structures the system and celebrates its sovereign power to determine who should move away or have the capacity to remain alive. Mobility here is inseparable from death, as dislocation across states is done under high risks of annihilation. In comparison to Cora's travels, Ridgeway's worldview functions as a counterpoint to her forced mobility because his views do not offer a map of different racial regimes across the nation but just the opposite, namely, the U.S. is tied together by a unifying principle of subjugation and death of marginal peoples. This is why mobility fails to produce freedom because it is part of a national project of continuous disenfranchisement. Thus, Tennessee becomes the space where forced mobility, settler colonialism, and racial extermination converge as articulated by Ridgeway.

Indiana and the Limits of Black Sovereignty

In the novel's final state chapter, Indiana reframes Cora's mobility by shifting from escape to the precarious possibility of settlement. Indiana initially appears to offer what no previous state has provided, that is, a Black-founded and Black-governed community, the Valentine Farm, where formerly enslaved people live openly, cultivate land, educate one another, and debate the future of Black freedom. As Dubey observes, this chapter is grounded in historical reality, as Valentine Farm is modeled on nineteenth-century Black farming settlements established in Indiana by free landowners and fugitives from the Upper South, communities that sought permanence rather than escape (17). In fact, the farm synthesizes several historical forms of Black communal life in the United States, directly grounding the novel's Indiana chapter in nineteenth-century realities resonating with earlier and parallel formations, including maroon communities like those in the Great Dismal Swamp and free Black settlements such as Seneca Village (c. 1825–1857), located on what is now Central Park in New York City. The residents of such communities were commonly displaced through state intervention. By condensing these histories into Valentine Farm, the novel situates Black aspirations for rootedness within a longer tradition of communal autonomy repeatedly rendered precarious by racial violence and dispossession.

Whitehead embeds this historical depiction in John Valentine's own migration narrative. Leaving Virginia because it was "an unfit place to raise a family," Valentine sells his land and relocates to Indiana, where "land was cheap" and where white residents were present but "not so close" (Whitehead 225). The farm grows into both a destination and a node within the Underground Railroad: it is described as "the latest office of the underground railroad," a place where fugitives can rest, contribute labor, and, if they choose, remain indefinitely (226). Mobility here is transposed into a solid possibility of a future, as movement along the railroad is temporarily converted into collective labor, schooling, and self-sustaining social life. Dubey emphasizes that Valentine Farm is not only a site of agricultural cooperation but also a space for cultivating Black aspirations to modernity (17). This shift is registered most clearly in Cora's own redefinition of freedom. Reflecting on life at the farm, she realizes that what she once imagined as freedom does not resemble this scene at all because "[f]reedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare" (Whitehead 232), and this she finds in Valentine. As Waller observes, "Valentine Farm's principles of Black uplift and communal land ownership almost convince her that the 'elsewhere' exists" (53). Indiana thus becomes the novel's sustained experiment in the possibility of liberty, testing whether the logic of escape can give way to rootedness and collective belonging.

Yet Indiana is also where Whitehead stages another violent ideological conflict over what should follow mobility. The community's meetings become a forum for competing visions of racial progress, embodied most clearly by Mingo and Elijah Lander. On one hand, Mingo articulates a cautious, gradualist

position, warning that the farm's visibility will provoke white retaliation. "We can't save everyone," he insists, reminding the community of the nearby white population and urging them to "stop activities that will force their wrath upon us" (Whitehead 241). His argument translates geography into risk as proximity to whiteness becomes a constant threat, and survival depends on restraint and limited visibility. On the other hand, Elijah Lander counters this position by framing the very existence of Valentine Farm as a historical impossibility that nevertheless demands recognition. "Valentine farm is a delusion," he declares, "[b]y every fact of history, it can't exist. This place must be a delusion, too. Yet here we are" (242). Lander then scales his argument outward, transforming the farm into a critique of the nation itself: "America, too, is a delusion…the grandest one of all…This nation shouldn't exist…for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are" (242). In Lander's rhetoric, Indiana becomes an alternative version of American space, one that claims the right not merely to move through the nation, but to occupy it openly.

Building on Dubey's reading, Valentine Farm can be read through the lens of racial uplift discourse that defines that "slavery must be narrated as a subordinate phase within a broader process of racial advancement" (17). As such, I contend that Whitehead's depiction of Valentine Farm engages in this tradition while also exposing its vulnerability. The farm's library, which houses "the disparate literature of the colored tribes," allows Cora to recognize her own story within a larger Black archive, including "the stories of black people yet to be born" (Whitehead 232–33). At the same time, the surrounding racial order immediately identifies this intellectual infrastructure as dangerous, captured in the chilling remark that "the only thing more dangerous than a nigger with a gun . . . was a nigger with a book" (232).

At this point, the Indiana chapter reveals the limits of communal life as a solution to the problem of racial violence. The farm's destruction does not result from internal failure or ideological error, but from the intolerability of Black sovereignty itself. The violent attack that annihilates Valentine Farm demonstrates that even stationary Black futures, rooted in property, the possibility of education, and community, remain subject to eradication. In this sense, Indiana does not resolve the novel's geography of violence but completes it. After tracing regimes of managed mobility, enforced immobility, and ecological collapse, *The Underground Railroad* arrives at a devastating conclusion signaling that freedom imagined as settlement is no more secure than freedom imagined as escape.

The North, or is the West?

The last chapter of the novel focuses on mobility in two distinct, yet interconnected manners. The first takes place inside the Underground Railroad itself, described as "the ghost station" (Whitehead 253), where Cora confronts Ridgeway for the last time; the second takes place on the surface, somewhere

in the country, as Cora travels on wagons en route to California. Cora's capture and forced transport from Valentine Farm to the station by a battered and weakened Ridgeway, who "had been diminished since Tennessee . . . [h]is speech was different, less commanding" (253), foregrounds the logics of settler colonial expansion. Even weakened by his violent life, Ridgeway insists Cora lead him to the Underground Railroad so that he might "uncover them all . . . every line, every one" (253), seeking total knowledge and control over the most secretive and effective means of slave fugitivity.

When descending the steps, Cora realizes that the slave catcher "would not be the first white man to see the Underground Railroad, but the first enemy" (Whitehead 255). Conscious that allowing Ridgeway to see the railroad would mean a profound act of betrayal of those who had helped her, both directly and indirectly, through the work that built its infrastructure, Cora decides to stop him. Imagining the act "as if in a slow dance", "as if it were just the two of them in the lonesome world, bound to each other until the end of the song", Cora pulls him close, and "the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness" (255). Ridgeway bears the brunt, resulting in a shattered thigh bone protruding from his leg and his head covered in blood. When Ridgeway asks Homer, "where are we?" (256), the question signals the failure of both his white authority and the ideological project he represented, ending his hunt for "more niggers" and his belief that such lives were his by Manifest Destiny.

Cora takes a handcar and rides "[i]nto the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere", or "[i]nto northness" (Whitehead 256). As she moves on, she thinks about those involved in the building of the Underground Railroad and its transformative effects on those who travel through it:

> Who are you after you finish something this magnificent—in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. 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. The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart. (Whitehead 257)

Her reflection on mobility clarifies the paradox of the Underground Railroad, that is, it leads nowhere in a geographic sense, as each stop simply reenacts the lethal logic of the plantation; however, it sustains freedom, albeit momentary, within "the contours of a new nation hidden beneath the old" (257). Freedom here means continuous mobility "anywhere, anywhere but where you are escaping from" (257), just as slavery is defined by forced (im)mobility. Moreover, traveling through the Underground Railroad symbolizes a passage from an old self to a new one, altered by the impact of the labor used in building the station and the collective force of resistance involved in the process.

When Cora comes out of the tunnel, she is completely disoriented and does not know if she is in "Michigan or Illinois or Canada… [p]erhaps she wasn't in America anymore but had pushed beyond it" (258). As Waller observes, the "North" of the novel's final section is "decidedly not the North associated with a specific US state or the terminus of the Underground Railroad" (356). Instead, Whitehead defamiliarizes both North and West, removing Cora from what Waller calls the "linear fugitivity envisioned in mainstream narratives of the Underground Railroad" (356) by making constant mobility a necessary means toward freedom, even though the places Cora travels through are "'indifferent' to her desire to be free" (Dischinger 216). When Cora encounters the three wagons, the first one, driven by a white man accompanied by his wife, passes her with indifference. The second wagon, driven by an Irish American man, offers assistance but Cora rejects it. She accepts help only from the third wagon, driven by a Black man with a Southern accent and "a horseshoe brand on his neck", which he "pulled up his collar to hide…when Cora's eyes lingered" (259). He was heading west to California. Ironically, Cora's final act of mobility westward toward California deconstructs Ridgeway's white supremacist logics of Manifest Destiny by its very negation, as the novel exposes westward expansion as another itinerary of slave mobility for freedom. As Ridgeway's earlier discourse makes clear, national expansion depends on the displacement and elimination of racialized populations. In "The North," Cora's continued movement represents an alternative entry into the nation; one guided by survival. Mobility thus distances itself from the states of possibility, that is, "the possibility of arriving in a more just place and the near impossibility of such an endeavor across US history" (Dischinger 96). In summary, Cora realizes real freedom in the US "was a ghost in the Darkness, like her" (Whitehead 180).

Conclusion

In this article, I argued that *The Underground Railroad* can also be read as a narrative structured by forced mobility, complementing the usual categorization of the book as speculative fiction or a neo-slave narrative. By tracing Cora's movement across Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, and finally "The North," I proposed that Whitehead constructs an alternative cartography of the United States in which freedom is never secured by geographic progression but always deferred. Each state operates as a distinct racial regime that reorganizes violence, containment, and racism rather than abolishing them. Mobility, far from functioning as emancipation, repeatedly exposes Cora to new configurations of racial power. In this sense, the novel deconstructs traditional abolitionist texts, such as classical slave narratives, that equate northward movement with freedom. I argued that Whitehead's novel instead reveals how racial domination is spatially redistributed across the nation.

Drawing on mobility studies, I demonstrated that movement in Whitehead's novel is never neutral or voluntary. As Peter Adey (2010) reminds us, mobility must be understood as a political process and "[u]nderstanding mobility within the geometries of power . . . allows us to begin to visualize the often-convoluted political relations it is involved in" (131). Whitehead dramatizes this principle by showing that Black mobility under slavery is always forced, precarious, and violent. Even moments that appear progressive, such as South Carolina's education programs or Indiana's Valentine Farm, in the end reproduce systems of control that rely on experimentation or spectacular violence. As Dischinger notes, the novel's speculative "states of possibility" invite readers into alternative worlds only to reveal that these spaces remain "all too familiar" (96). Mobility thus becomes a pedagogical tool through which the novel exposes the continuity of racial domination rather than its historical abolition.

Moreover, the novel reimagines movement as a site of historical possibilities and resistance. This is most evident in the final chapter, where Cora's journey "into northness" (Whitehead 256) abandons the logic of arrival altogether. The underground tunnel that "led nowhere" (256) becomes a space where movement is no longer oriented toward capture or incorporation into the nation, but toward endurance and continuous movement. As Madhu Dubey argues, Whitehead's paratactic and asynchronous history resists the tendency to "quarantine slavery to a premodern past" (15), insisting instead on its persistence across time and space. By ending the novel with continued motion rather than settlement, Whitehead refuses narrative closure and exposes forced mobility as a foundational condition of African American life.

Furthermore, Whitehead reveals a nation held together by what I have described as a unifying racist logic in which movement, confinement, and dispossession remain central to governance. Cora's final refusal to keep "running" (Whitehead 252), without ever becoming immobile, captures the novel's central paradox: mobility persists, but it is no longer defined by flight from slavery toward freedom. In this way, *The Underground Railroad* compels us to rethink mobility itself, not as liberation promised by geography, but as a contested terrain where racial power is continuously produced, resisted, and exposed. By reading forced mobility as a foundational condition rather than an exceptional episode, the novel speaks not only to U.S. history, but to broader inter-American trajectories of slavery, displacement, and colonial expansion. I hope this article contributes not only to mobility studies but also to literary criticism by reframing movement itself as a primary mechanism of racial governance in the Americas.

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