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## **Racial Capitalism in Colson Whitehead's The Underground Railroad**

Daniel Paul Marx

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## Abstract

In this thesis I examine how Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* attempts to denounce a system of racial capitalism, but the various tactics used to achieve this are often clouded in an inadvertent participation in this system regardless. I contend that this participation is indicative of a particular reading's predominance in our current American social context that nevertheless reinforces the racial capitalism the novel attempts to denounce. This inescapable reading is explored in the sections devoted to the various states the protagonist Cora travels to on her journey toward supposed freedom from bondage, as each state represents various iterations of racism she endures. Before that, I explore the debate surrounding the role race plays in American society, as the way in which a reader understands this role deeply impacts how specific moments in the novel are read. I then track the dominant treatment of the neo-slave narrative, where even Whitehead's potential subversion of it goes easily unnoticed because of the aforementioned reading's predominance. Lastly, I conclude by arguing that the novel is most richly read when the reader adopts both a sympathy for and awareness beyond racial categories.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Racial Capitalism in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

by

Daniel Paul Marx

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

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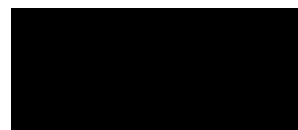
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RACIAL CAPITALISM IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*

A THESIS

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Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

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## 1. Whitehead and the Race-Reductionist Debate

In Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer-winning novel *The Underground Railroad*, he tells the story of his protagonist, Cora, who at various points travels on a literal, underground railroad as she attempts to escape antebellum bondage in the American South. The advent of the literal railroad is one of the novel's many uses of anachronism, or the insertion of post-emancipation technologies and historical events within the era of chattel slavery. In doing this, Whitehead challenges the perception of slavery as a relic of the distant past and uses anachronism to explain its legibility in the present. In other words, the novel seems to ask: how much can we relish in "racial progress" when racial inequality remains so pervasive?

Despite the rhetorical nature of this question, answering it is nevertheless bound to be influenced by the way in which a reader comes to understand the role of race in contemporary American society; Whitehead attempts to synthesize, albeit unevenly, the liveliness of the two major (and contentious) understandings that form this debate. The first is that the legal racial hierarchy of slavery and Jim Crow can explain the primary inequalities Black Americans continue to face today (a race-reductionist<sup>1</sup>, Afro-pessimist reading); the second is that a class hierarchy in a neoliberal<sup>2</sup> and contemporary America more adequately explains how these same inequalities are reproduced (a class-reductionist<sup>3</sup> reading). What the novel's vacillation between these two poles makes clear is that special attention to intersectionality and the various forms of racism that Cora endures is useful in theorizing exactly how race interacts in contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Adolph Reed Jr. describes race reductionism as the belief that "race as a category can explain social phenomena" (qtd. in Reese 3). He also defines it as the belief that "every grievance, injustice, beef that in any way affects a person of color, or a person of non-color . . . can be reduced casually to race and racism" (3).

<sup>2</sup> In this context, neoliberalism is "rising inequality. . . including conjoint crises of overproduction and stagnant growth, the breaking of organized labor, and diminution of the welfare state . . ." that has occurred after the overturning of formal segregation in the United States and affects an interracial working class (Singh 28).

<sup>3</sup> Reed describes class reductionism as "the supposed view that inequalities apparently attributable to race, gender, or other categories of group identification are either secondary in importance or reducible to generic economic inequality" ("Race Reductionism" 37).



American society, but it also obfuscates the class consciousness needed to overhaul the inequalities that give intersectionality its name and place in our national discourse; in exploring the undercurrent of class dynamics that both precede and surpass the inception of race that generates slavery and racial inequality's endurance, Whitehead challenges many common constructions of race. Thus, *The Underground Railroad* is most richly read and understood through both race- and class-reductionist readings; harmonizing both more wholly explains the greater themes Whitehead develops and their critique of the systems that enforce inequality today. Likewise, these two readings harmonize the two extremes of unavoidable victimization and blind hopefulness for marginalized Black communities today in the United States.

Firstly, this synthesized reading is not particularly dominant among readers and critics; as neo-slave expert Madhu Dubey argues, Whitehead does not necessarily insist that the horrors of slavery and racial segregation are clearly identifiable today, but that the backdrop of slavery is a tool to conceive of how current racial injustices have evolved or even diluted ("Museumizing Slavery" 112). Despite the careful hand with which Dubey says he writes, reviews of the novel seem to be caught up in what she argues Whitehead is hesitant to fully embrace: "*The Underground Railroad* is a book both timeless and timely. It is a book for now; it is a book that is necessary" (BuzzFeed); "Whitehead's masterwork summons terrors and insights palpable enough to be recognized in our present-day world[. . .] [It] poses beautifully shaped questions that speak not just to history, or to the present day, but to eternity itself" (Newsday). A review in *The Guardian* aligns more with Dubey's analysis, writing that "[i]t's to Whitehead's credit that he never strikes too hard on the parallels between America's current racial crisis and the material of his story (although the reader can often think of nothing else)" (Preston).

The reading that is enforced by this social context as evidenced by these reviews can be considered Afro-pessimist. According to the Oxford Bibliographies, Afro-pessimism is “a lens of interpretation that accounts for civil society’s dependence on antiblack violence—a regime of violence that positions black people as internal enemies of civil society, and cannot be analogized with [other] regimes of violence . . .” (Douglass et al.). Put another way, Afro-pessimism avers that the oppression of Black Americans, from slavery through to the present, never parallels that of other disparate groups because American civil society is fundamentally dependent upon anti-Black violence. Moreover, because the novel unfurls the phases of American racial history through anachronism—from slavery to Jim Crow and beyond—the Afro-pessimist reading considers Black suffering to be eternal and endemic, regardless of the so-called “racial progress” the novel challenges; it positions Cora as an allegorical, anachronistic slave who may as well be navigating an eerily parallel twenty-first century.

A closer, alternative reading of the novel challenges how quickly we can give into this perception and questions these supposedly clear set of links between past and present. Dubey writes that the novel creates “economic links between nineteenth-century chattel slavery and twentieth-century debt peonage or convict-leasing systems,” despite convict-leasing systems not being mentioned or depicted in the novel at all (“Museumizing Slavery” 124). As Dubey notes, convict-leasing was predominant in the twentieth century; it was widely abolished in 1955, lastly in North Carolina in the 70s, even though it was revived in the form of chain gangs in a few states in 1995 for one year until it was abolished again except in Maricopa County, Arizona (though inmates can still volunteer to participate in this convict-leasing system for credit towards a GED program [Anderson Cooper 360]). The depiction of anachronistic yet largely obsolete convict-leasing systems recalls Preston’s belief that Whitehead hesitates to embrace very clear

links between past and present. Even though Dubey makes this same argument, the insistence that convict-leasing is present in the novel perhaps classifies her as the “reader [who] can often think of nothing else” that Preston describes; the anachronism forges a connection in her mind that cannot be clearly made in the novel, which alludes to how a reader may be induced to neatly align the context of past horrors with more current injustices.

### 1.1 Contemporary Understandings of Race, Racism, and Class

Considering this inducement, and because the novel depicts slavery’s afterlife beyond its abolition, it appears to be urging readers to *feel* racism—both coded and coldblooded—and to be deeply aware of its pervasive nature. The way race reductionism as an ideology tends to impose this belief is through what John McWhorter calls “Third Wave Antiracism.” He writes that “Third Wave Antiracism, becoming mainstream in the 2010s, teaches us that because racism is baked into the structure of society, whites’ ‘complicity’ in living within it constitutes racism itself, while for black people, grappling with the racism surrounding them is the totality of experience and must condition exquisite sensitivity toward them . . .” (5). The racism to which Cora is subjected by whites makes this dynamic inevitable by circumstance. However, Afro-pessimism avers that these same currents of Cora’s time flow into the present, offering much of the same dynamic of whites, by their mere existence, forcing Black people to think only of “the racism surrounding them,” which McWhorter suggests is a false premise and an unnecessary self-imposed indulgence in victimhood. He writes that “[t]he revelation of racism is, itself and alone, the point, the intention, of this curriculum” (10). The necessary work the novel does—to a race-reductionist, Afro-pessimist, antiracist<sup>4</sup> audience—is to make racism so apparent to whites and so visceral to Black people that the language to expunge it can be generated. This recalls the

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<sup>4</sup> Any use of the term “antiracist” from here on out is not simply meant to indicate someone who is *against* racism, but someone who adheres very closely to the framework McWhorter describes.

effectiveness of the crucial Voting Rights, Civil Rights, and Fair Housing Acts of the late 1960s, which were passed in a far *less* diverse and *more* segregated America; this era of sweeping legislation came about when *fewer* whites perceived their privilege or guilt, proving that this antiracist framework is not a necessary prelude for undoing racial inequality, and is perhaps even distracting.<sup>5</sup> In these terms, positing that racism will be undone once whites feel guilty *enough* and Black Americans confront racism *enough* on individual bases is surely futile.

The novel's depiction of racism from slavery and beyond seems to align with this framework McWhorter contests. Third Wave Antiracism, acting on race-reductionist instinct, begins this work with propagating the belief that white supremacy and racism more generally are the primary hindrances Black Americans continue to face today. For one thing, this belief is smoothly bolstered by American statistics which are misguidedly conveyed along racial lines; Adolph L. Reed Jr. and Walter Benn Michaels write that researchers "use other variables that appear to move along with the one they're interested in but for which they don't have direct data to try to *infer* the significance of the category they're interested in accounting for. Researchers commonly acknowledge using *race* as a proxy for *class*" ("Disparity" 7-8). This is how current inequality continues to be mistakenly tied to the past of racial hierarchy in a supposedly similar way. To this point, Ian F. Haney Lopez lists instances of racial inequality in employment, banking, insurance, and law enforcement, among others, to insist that "race [still] mediates every aspect of our lives" (965). Reed, however, argues that "disparity is an outcome, not an explanation, and deducing cause simplistically from outcome (e.g., treating racially disparate outcomes as ipso facto evidence of racially invidious causation) seems sufficient only if one has already stacked the interpretive deck in favor of a particular causal account ("A Neoliberal

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that these legislations put an end to racism, but certainly history confirms that lobbying Congress and engaging in civil disobedience are far more effective strategies than teaching people to "feel" racism or guilt.

Alternative” 107). Instead, Reed argues that race is at most secondary to class, which he considers the primary driver of inequality in the United States.<sup>6</sup> So, Lopez’s insistence that race as a category can explain how inequalities continue to be reproduced is challenged by Reed’s distinction between “phenomena and patterns drawn from regimes—slavery, the southern Jim Crow order—in which racial hierarchy was codified explicitly and enforced by law and widespread custom . . .” and “inequalities or disparities occurring in the current historical regime of inequality that is not grounded explicitly on racial hierarchy” but remains dominated by a class hierarchy (“Race Reductionism” 38).

Part of what makes *Underground Railroad* so interesting in this context is because these two parameters lend themselves appositely to various readings of the novel. This is largely because it is exceedingly difficult to succinctly locate the intersection of race and class in society, as evidenced by Cedric Robinson’s Marxist concept of racial capitalism; Jodi Melamed defines it as follows:

Capital can only be capital when it is accumulating, and it can only accumulate by producing and moving through relations of severe inequality among human groups . . . These antinomies of accumulation require loss, disposability, and the unequal differentiation of human value, and racism enshrines the inequalities that capitalism requires. (77)

As I will argue, the novel rightfully cannot conceive of a nonracial capitalism, nor does it shy away from all that Melamed describes. However, it also seems to relish and participate in the

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<sup>6</sup> Reed makes this argument in various ways, one of which is through the research of Matthew Bruenig, whose findings show that “close to 75% of so-called White wealth and close to 75% of so-called Black wealth . . . are held by the top 10% of each group, and that 97% of the racial wealth gap exists above the median” (qtd. in Reese 5). Through this, Reed argues that “[w]hat looks like an overall racial income gap that’s not closing, that’s persistent, turns out to be more an effect of rich people getting richer than the rest of us” (5).

very system it criticizes; Matthew Dischinger aptly points out that “[t]he novel was selected by Oprah’s Book Club, an enterprise Trysh Travis rightfully calls a ‘hypercapitalist’ endeavor that commodifies literariness under the rubric of therapeutic religiosity” (qtd. in Dischinger 87).

Dischinger brings this forward “to suggest that the novel’s speculative satire cloaks a critique that is incompatible with that institution’s mission as Travis defines it. Whitehead’s novel levies a critique against not just the past but a present in which police brutality and anti-black violence are seen as immutable parts of a capitalist system” (87).

How, then, does such a distinctly anticapitalist novel come to be embraced by such a distinctly capitalist institution? Because the novel “mock[s] a cultural obsession with moving beyond the category of race,” it likewise embraces what Dischinger calls Winfrey’s “pedagogy,” which essentially advocates for the elimination of racial disparity (and promotion of racial diversity) *within* an oppressive neoliberal apparatus, and not the abolition of the apparatus itself (84, 87). Operating under the assumption that systemic racism is incontestably arrayed against Black Americans, this pedagogy offers that eliminating the racial disparities Lopez describes will inevitably eliminate disparity itself, because disparity is conceived through anti-Black racism.

However, the novel also gestures towards instances where abandoning racial categories illustrates exactly *how* this neoliberal apparatus reproduces these same inequalities. The novel at times concurs with Reed, who argues that under a capitalist system, the elimination of economic and opportunity disparity among one group is only a *reallocation* of it among other populations; it also gives us the language to perceive this as an illusory tactic employed by a capitalist class to convince us of this premise. Reed argues, however, that analogizing current inequality with regimes of explicit racial hierarchy cannot “make sense of the relation of race and socialism in contemporary politics or current political debate, nor does it help us to get to the roots of, let

alone challenge, inequality no matter how it is understood” (“Race Reductionism” 38). Instead, he says this exercise only “sustain[s] an interpretive framework that enables identifying an abstract racism or white supremacy as the definitive source of any contemporary inequalities affecting African-Americans” (38). Through this, it is evident how the novel’s use of historical analogy to *challenge* this interpretive framework alternately lends itself to the very reading it attempts to undermine; the novel’s primary insistence that we cannot wholly move beyond race and the tool of historical analogy itself are considered default techniques deployed to uphold classism, regardless of intent. This vacillation throws into relief again the limitation of a solely race-reductionist reading, in which attention to race is important, but the language to challenge the capitalist systems the novel depicts is hindered by the neoliberal apathy a class-reductionist reading is devoted to exposing.

## 2. Anachronism

Because the novel is a neo-slave narrative, this might explain its proneness to an Afro-pessimist and antiracist frame of reference among readers. Yogita Goyal generally defines the neo-slave narrative as an exercise in “probing the meaning of black identity by insisting on a link between past and present” through the scene of slavery, which the novel does through its use of anachronism (231). Insisting on a link between past and present is seemingly an innately Afro-pessimist exercise, especially if this link is meant to be explicitly racial in the way Lopez tends to see it, which Afro-pessimism avers is unavoidable. When considered in these terms, how could the novel *not* be perceived in a pessimistic way? If the text extends slavery’s legacy into the present, as Dubey and others note, and our understanding of slavery is only racialized, then this offers the belief that the structures of racial hierarchy in the antebellum or Jim Crow eras are iteratively, if only less harshly, operable in this same way.

## 2.1 North Carolina: The Economics of Slavery and its Modernization

When Dubey writes that Whitehead “situate[s] slavery squarely within a modernizing capitalist trajectory that continues beyond its abolition,” she is referring to slavery in the way most of us are familiar with: a system conceived by anti-Black racism and white supremacy (“Museumizing Slavery” 126). She argues this in part through her citation of one of Whitehead’s influences Edward Baptist, who writes that slavery is a “‘modernizing and modern’ institution rather than ‘an old, static system that belonged to an earlier time’” (qtd. in “Museumizing Slavery” 126). Through this, Dubey insists that like racial inequality more broadly, the racialized history of slavery explains the economic marginalization Black Americans face today. However, the belief that anti-Black racism was foundational to the introduction of slavery in the United States is not only ahistorical, but also caught up in an obfuscating antiracist discourse; this is a common cultural position challenged by Barbara Fields in her seminal book *Racecraft*, in which she argues that chattel slavery was *not* “primarily a system of race relations—as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco” (117). She questions, rather plainly, why Europeans would import African slaves for the primary purpose of segregation “when they could have achieved the same end so much more simply by leaving the Africans in Africa” (117). Fields confirms her argument in part through her mentioning of the three-fifths clause, in which “the terms *black* and *white*—or for that matter, *Negro* and *Caucasian*—do not appear anywhere in the Constitution” (118). Instead, she writes that “the three-fifths clause distinguishes between *free Persons*—who might be of European or African descent—and *other Persons*, a euphemism for *slaves*” (118). She later writes that “[r]ace as a coherent ideology did not spring into being simultaneously with slavery, but took even more time than slavery did to become systematic” (128).



In the novel, the ideological coherence of race is undermined at its outset. On the very first page, Whitehead tells the story of Cora's grandmother Ajarry, who along with "eighty-eight human souls" was kidnapped by "Dahomeyan riders" and sold "for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder" (3); this is referencing the common practice of African kingdoms selling their own people into the slave trade for profit. Whitehead develops this further through his intentional verbiage; he uses words like "chattel," "merchandise," "slaves," and the neutral term "Africans" to describe Ajarry and the group she is sold off with, instead of the more general "Black" or any epithet designed to imply inferiority on the basis of race. In the way Whitehead presents it, even if only gently, the enslavement of Africans by Europeans (and later Americans) was a matter of convenience and developed in commerce with presumably Black Africans. To this point, Eric Williams once argued that "[the planter] would have gone to the moon, if necessary, for labor . . . Africa was nearer than the moon, nearer too than the more populous countries of India and China. But their turn was to come" (qtd. in Singh 27).

After Ajarry spends years at various plantations all over Europe, she is transferred to the United States, where the racial hierarchy now contingent upon slavery's ongoing success catches up to its economic foundations. Through this, the requisite racial agnosticism driving the slave trade in Africa endures into "[f]ree negroes who supplemented their living catching runaways combed through the woods and wormed information from likely accomplices" (40); the seeming coherence of race also presents itself, for example, through the slavecatcher Ridgeway and his cronies who "stopped [known freemen], for their amusement but also to remind the Africans of the forces arrayed against them, whether they were owned by a white man or not" (77).

With that being said, Whitehead did not set out to write a historical novel about how race as a category became coherent; he set out to find links between past and present. However, it is

important to consider Fields' thesis when reading the novel because it unlocks a greater political potential; when we consider slavery a "modernizing and modern' institution" in the vein of Dubey's argument, we sacrifice the novel's anachronistic depiction of slavery's abolition in which labor extortion is continued and opens itself up to a larger, interracial subaltern. As E. Franklin Frazier argued as early as 1935, "the status of the Negro is losing its purely racial character and becoming tied up with the struggle of white and Black workers against the white landlords and capitalists" (qtd. in Singh 24-25). Whitehead depicts this loss of "purely racial character" in part through his creation of the Irish servant Fiona, whose disenfranchisement positions her as a pseudoslave in the novel's North Carolina chapter. In North Carolina, Black people themselves have been abolished entirely; any Black person found within the state's borders—fugitive or free—is apprehended, lynched, and hung from a miles-long, tree-lined street called the "Freedom Trail." However, North Carolina's abolition of Black people does not in any way imply its abolition of slavery or slave-like labor; in a meeting with prominent North Carolinian policymakers and leaders led by an Oney Garrison, they discuss how banning Black people did not mean they abolished slavery: "On the contrary . . . [w]e abolished n\*\*\*\*rs" (168).

Preceding this, the novel explains the intricacies of how this policy came about, which was largely a way to bypass "slave uprisings and northern influence in Congress" so North Carolina could remain devoted to its principal concern: "who was going to pick all this goddamned cotton?" (167). As the novel depicts, "Europeans—Irish and Germans mostly, fleeing famine and political unpleasantness" now work North Carolina's cotton fields (167). Garrison explains how "you couldn't treat an Irishman like an African, white n\*\*\*\*r or no. There was the cost of buying slaves and their upkeep on one hand and paying white workers meager but livable wages on the other. The reality of slave violence versus stability in the long

term” (167). Frazier’s insistence of a waning racial character seems naive in “a white separatist, supremacist state” like North Carolina (Whitehead qtd. in Dischinger 83). However, as we know through Garrison’s closed-door meeting, the Irish, at least as instruments of economic output, serve the same purpose as Black slaves, and his use of racialized language towards them makes this unavoidably clear. Thus, the dissolving of a “purely racial character” is echoed by what George Streater once argued: “the Negro is nine-tenths a laborer” (qtd. in Singh 25); as Whitehead depicts it, so, too, are the Irish.

Through this, the depiction of slavery’s evolution beyond explicit racial hierarchy challenges what Dubey calls “progressive teleology” (“Museumizing Slavery” 112); it shatters the belief in no uncertain terms that “[h]umanitarian high-mindedness and moral purpose . . . guided the abolition of the slave trade and slavery itself, [which] was beside the point. What was at stake was a new iteration of capitalist production and worldwide imperial expansion” (Singh 27). Through North Carolina’s abolition of Black people *but not slavery*, the reader considers that for the capitalist class, outlawing the chattel slavery associated with Black people (and with it, its abuses) was only to amend its unsustainability; they learn that in not treating the Irish “*like*” slaves, they achieve far more “stability in the long term” for the profits determining these amendments.

To that point, this restructuring was doubly effective for these white capitalists; it didn’t just unlock a new population to exploit, but it created an explicit racial hierarchy *within* an interracial oppressed class. Thus, when Cora and the couple hiding her in their attic are exposed by Fiona, her justification for doing this is: “A girl’s got to look after her interests if she’s going to get ahead in this country . . .” (192). Fiona’s inability to perceive herself as a modern slave recalls a point made by even someone as deeply invested in capitalism as Lyndon B. Johnson: “If

you can convince the lowest white man that he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll even empty his pockets for you" (qtd. in Emery). The novel adheres very closely to his statement:

Once the [Irish and German] immigrants finished their contracts (having paid back travel, tools, and lodging) and took their place in American society, they would be allies of the southern system that had nurtured them. On Election Day when they took their turn at the ballot box, theirs would be a full vote, not three-fifths. A financial reckoning was inevitable, but come the approaching conflict over the race question, North Carolina would emerge in the most advantageous position of all the slave states. (167-68)

For one thing, immigrants having to pay back "travel, tools, and lodging" expenses recalls an instance of debt peonage that does not neatly fit within the commonplace racial assumptions that Fields challenges. Furthermore, this passage recalls Fields' point about the three-fifths clause, in that white laborers were fully represented by the law, benefiting the capitalist class that largely considers them slaves in all but name. But more importantly, in North Carolina "emerg[ing] in the most advantageous position," the abolition of Black people entirely encourages *loyal* white psuedoslaves to uphold racial hierarchy; in considering race the most rigid division in North Carolina, they are distracted from the inevitability of their own exploitation. The propagation of this division remains to be the work a dogmatic capitalism does to have a class reinforce *itself* through racism; it is, as Stuart Hall once argued, "a class divided against itself, face to face with capital" (qtd. in Singh 31).

Through this, Whitehead seems to be poking at a kind of hypocrisy among poor whites—both those fleeing political turmoil in the novel and their descendants living in the United States today—who look down on, or are racist to, poor minorities who share their plight of

disenfranchisement.<sup>7</sup> This is a common sentiment of “timeliness” among modern antiracists that is worth exploring; much like North Carolina’s manhunt for any Black person within its borders, the modern right-wing ruling class crusades against “transgenderism,” the teaching of so-called “critical race theory” in schools, immigration, and the likely imminent passage of a Jim Crow-adjacent law in Mississippi<sup>8</sup> are all successful efforts to convince poor whites that their privilege (which they don’t actually have) is persistently under attack. This is how Whitehead depicts the reproduction of racism through what Nikhil Pal Singh calls “a valuable resource” for a capitalist class; North Carolina’s abolition of Black people and subsequent implementation of Irish pseudoslavery is “a site for field-testing new forms of social discipline and value extraction” (27). Through this observation, it is not so much that racism is endemic, but that racism is actively and intentionally regenerated; it is, as Malcolm X once aptly described it, “like a Cadillac: they bring out a new model every year” (qtd. in Singh 23). For all the ways the novel criticizes the ruling class represented by Garrison for actively imposing racial divisions among us (a class-reductionist emphasis), it also criticizes the hypocrisy of poor whites represented by Fiona, whose perpetuation of racism is that which capitalism is partially contingent upon and is a distraction from their own disenfranchisement (a race-reductionist emphasis).

The belief that slavery was initiated by anti-Black racism, and thus explains the economic marginalization Black Americans face today, is fractured by the ease with which North Carolina shifts its labor exploitation among populations; when Cora states that she has “[n]ever seen a

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<sup>7</sup> Robinson once argued that “[f]rom its very beginnings, European civilization [. . .] was constructed on antagonistic differences.’ The conquests and uneven development of European peoples, exemplified by the colonization of Ireland, seeded the ‘uneven development of national capitalisms’ and secreted racialism as ‘an enduring principle of European social order’ and its settler colonial offshoots” (qtd. in Singh 25).

<sup>8</sup> The Mississippi state House recently passed a bill to “establish a separate court system for part of the state’s capital city with judges appointed by the state chief justice and the area under the system’s jurisdiction patrolled by a state-run police force. Most of the areas impacted are the more predominately white neighborhoods of the city” (Gans). The proposal is headed to the state Senate next for likely passage.

white person pick cotton . . . ,” Martin, the man sheltering her, says: “Before I came back to North Carolina, I’d never seen a mob rip a man limb from limb . . . See that, you stop saying what folks will do and what they won’t” (167). This statement emphasizes that eliminating racial inequality is only the minimum requirement for social justice and cannot serve as a final solution to the problem of labor exploitation under capitalism; through this, it seems to gesture towards the need for interracial class solidarity. If we are meant to consider slavery a modernizing institution and thus tied up in the present, then Fiona and the working-class whites she represents are also victims of its modernization.

However, a race-reductionist and Afro-pessimist reading is not only concerned with how Whitehead satirizes the fundamentality of marginalized labor through the eyes of the ruling class; it can also be argued that the fate of Black people in North Carolina compares contemporary Black identity to “ontological death” (“Race Reductionism” 40). The *literal* death of any Black person in North Carolina is a policy so extreme that it confirms the belief that Black Americans are the most degraded faction of the population, irrespective of how pervasive and common white economic disenfranchisement is. The novel takes special cause to point this out, for example, with white abettors sheltering any Black refugee being “merely hung, not put on display,” unlike their Black counterparts who face a far more undignified fate (169); even in death there is disparity.

While the novel urges readers to consider current economic marginalization as driven by class and not race, it simultaneously challenges the simplicity of an interracial class solidarity that a class-reductionist consciousness deems requisite for social change. After all, the modern crusades stoking these culture war issues *are* successful and they *are* working. Hall and his co-authors once argued that it’s not so simple “to pose the relationship of class struggles against

capitalism in societies structured by (racial) domination . . . the famous call for ‘black and white to unite and fight’ was too abstract, because it did not adequately represent the structural differentiation of white and black labor in relation to capital” (qtd. in Singh 30). Whitehead magnifies the impossibility of interracial class solidarity through such severe structural differences between white and Black labor; the Black relation to capital in North Carolina is essentially a *non*-relation, in which being spared from economic disparity is only made possible through death. The white relation to capital is the instilled requirement of ensuring the “other” is denied access to the slave-like labor they are exploited by; this distinction may be plastic in the eyes of the capitalist class, but it is plexiglass to its victims.

Although the novel intricately details the subtle class dynamics driving North Carolina’s economy, its depiction of racial hierarchy is frankly so obtrusive that it can’t help but indulge in a race-reductionist reading, in which race is distinguished from class in being key to economic marginalization. This reading considers the most confounding and thus memorable aspect of North Carolina not to be the ruling-class fundamentality of Black and white labor, but the abolition of Black people entirely and the unevenly prominent working-class racism that ensures Black death—one that is so deeply entrenched that it cannot be overcome. If the primary takeaway is that class solidarity is too naive because poor whites are too devoted to their racism and the benefit it fallaciously offers, then the race-reductionist (and more broadly standard American) alternative would be, evidently, the need to organize around race, which has already been described as an engine of neoliberal apathy toward class concerns. Much like how Afro-pessimism *needs* Black people to self-identify as the nation’s most degraded faction, by that same measure capitalism *needs* working-class whites to *not* feel similarly degraded, and to

believe these modern mechanisms of slavery somehow *don't* affect them in similarly egregious ways;<sup>9</sup> this is unintentionally the framework Afro-pessimism works to uphold.

However, the class-reductionist reading considers this to be precisely what Whitehead depicts; there is no way to avoid how these mechanisms affect working-class whites. After all, and as already made evident, North Carolina's severe racial distinction is not simply meant to imply that Fiona's position is one that Cora is particularly deprived of. If anything, the description of Fiona's wage as "meager but livable" only because it neutralizes "the cost of buying slaves and their upkeep" surely should not have readers too caught up in the disparity *between* Cora and Fiona. However, and as Whitehead accurately depicts it, the exploitation of Irish workers is nevertheless contingent upon racial hierarchy; as Hall and his co-authors once argued, "[r]ace is the modality in which class is lived' . . . the medium through which class relationships are formed, managed, and fought over" (qtd. in Singh 30). Through this, it may very well be true, as Singh posits, that something more than "capitalism's characteristic economic exploitation of wage workers" is at work here (24). This is all getting at the balancing act the novel attempts to handle, but it is worth asking exactly what we are supposed to do about this as we move forward, and the novel's contemplation of an answer.

## 2.2 Indiana: When Race Supersedes Class

Late in the novel, Cora lives and works on the Black-run Valentine Farm in Indiana, a microcosm of American ingenuity without its signature racial hierarchy. The farm, as Dubey

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<sup>9</sup> Reed makes this argument in part through the pervasive nature of police brutality. He says that the function of policing under neoliberalism is "basically protecting property and the suppression of the unruly classes" (qtd. in Reese 8). He goes on to say that "[i]n areas where there are a lot of Black and Brown people, they are overrepresented among the class of people who make people with property feel uncomfortable. . . . [I]n places like Wyoming, and Montana, and the Dakotas . . . there are White people who disproportionately make up [the unruly class]. Guess what? Police treat them exactly the same way as they treat Blacks and Hispanics" (8).



notes, is “above all . . . a place for cultivating black aspirations to modernity” as evidenced through the “spectacle of rhetoric” between the characters Lander and Mingo, modeled on W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington respectively (“Museumizing Slavery” 127; Whitehead 281). Lander’s “elegant but opaque appeals” and Mingo’s “schemes for the next stage in the progress of the colored tribe” frame the primary question of their debate, which is whether Valentine should move westward to avoid mounting tensions with neighboring hostile whites, or if the farm can broker a peaceable agreement with them for mutual benefit (271).

Mingo argues that in order for Valentine to eventually achieve the latter, they must concede the farm’s fugitives whose minds “[s]lavery has twisted” beyond repair: “We need to slow things down. Reach an accommodation with our neighbors and, most of all, stop activities that will force their wrath upon us” (289). When posed with this same question, Lander is uncertain: “I don’t have an answer for you. I don’t know what we should do” (291). What he is certain of, however, is that the thought of truly escaping slavery is delusional:

“We can’t. Its scars will never fade. . . . In some ways, the only thing we have in common is the color of our skin. . . . [Our African ancestors] had different ways of subsistence, different customs, spoke a hundred different languages. . . . We are not one people but many different people. How can one person speak for this great, beautiful race—which is not one race but many, with a million desires and hopes and wishes for ourselves and our children? . . . Color must suffice. It has brought us to this night, this discussion, and it will take us into the future.” (290-91)

Any hope the reader has that Valentine can circumvent its most pressing threats or that Lander may be too pessimistic turns out to be a grave fallacy: by the chapter’s end, and only 15 pages until the novel’s conclusion, nearly everyone is massacred by white supremacists, the farm is

subsequently destroyed, and Cora is recaptured again by Ridgeway. As the novel pointedly states: “The whites meant to rout the entirety of colored settlers” (305).

The racially motivated massacre at Valentine recalls mass shootings at the hands of white supremacists like at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 or at a supermarket in Buffalo, New York in 2022, in which all ten victims were Black. However, linking the fate of Valentine with these acts of white supremacist violence seems to present a race-reductionist, Afro-pessimist principle that Black Americans have legitimate racial concerns that override class ones, or that the inevitability of racism and white supremacy have “take[n] us into the future” along a color line in the way Lander regrettably argues it must; it also mistakes correlation (white supremacist violence) for causation (this violence presently operating exactly as it did in these past periods and circumstances). Carra Glatt writes that in other neo-slave narratives, “Valentine . . . might have been a logical endpoint for [Cora’s] story” (42-43). After the massacre, however, she writes that the novel “mock[s] the efforts of the farm’s burgeoning black intelligentsia to reimagine African American identity” (43). Through this observation, the rich and varied perspectives on Black progress are bound to be disrupted by racism and white supremacy, perpetuating the inability to move beyond race.

If fearing a racial hate crime is the *one* thing that binds together all Black Americans, then this is not something to dismiss. Considering the Department of Homeland Security deems white supremacist violence “the most persistent and lethal threat in the Homeland,” the massacre at Valentine Farm, coupled with uneven labor relations in North Carolina, seems to confirm a belief Reed resoundingly rejects, that “[today’s] working-class whites are more deeply committed to their racial privilege than to interracial class solidarity” (Homeland Threat Assessment—October 2020; “Race Reductionism” 36); it is also worth considering that the rise

of white supremacist violence occurs alongside the rise of the strain of antiracism that McWhorter denounces. Through this, Valentine's violent end, especially considering its placement right towards the end of the novel, can be interpreted as a tremendous overruling of the optimistic leftism of a class-reductionist reading. In turn, the novel seems to indulge in the manipulative Winfreyian pedagogy; confrontation with the threat of white supremacist violence and propagation of a racial binding as more fundamental than a class one achieves "therapeutic religiosity"; even Winfrey, the richest Black woman in the history of the world, can be understood as sharing the supposedly *most* fundamental racial binding with her Black working-class counterparts against the threat of white supremacist violence.<sup>10</sup>

To a class-reductionist consciousness, however, what is white supremacist violence if not the byproduct of a centuries-long, dogmatic capitalism? Through all the ways the novel contextualizes capitalism—in both mild and savage iterations—as not conceivable without racism, it posits that this country would rather cease to exist before it would become anything *other* than the sturdy capitalist state it has always been. Conversely, the novel's ability to propagate racial concerns as more fundamental than class ones is exactly the work antiracist discourse does to achieve racial justice *within* the very capitalist framework the novel rejects. Antiracism without attention to class, which encourages the sort of defeatism that an Afro-pessimist reading provokes, is anachronistically engaged in the work Mingo argues the farm must do—integrate itself into the capitalist economy—which is precisely the sort of class politics the novel considers deluded. If anything, a class-reductionist reading positions antiracist class politics as the vehicle driving the defeatism of an Afro-pessimist attitude in the first place. Even

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that Winfrey is not at risk for succumbing to white supremacist violence; if anything, her massive and visible wealth situates her as a prime target. However, that same wealth insulates her from, and implicates her in, the primary issue of classism that many Black Americans continue to face.

then, though, class reductionism believes that “the race line . . . is only significant insofar as it is a class line” (Reed qtd. in Singh 33). This is what the novel deeply wrestles with: for all that we can understand the true economics of slavery and its afterlife as proof of much-needed interracial class solidarity, it is not like simply acknowledging this will make racism go away or make capitalism’s days somehow numbered. So, Whitehead’s perpetuation of a fundamental racial binding does not appear to *intentionally* lend itself to a procapitalist sentiment, but it ends up having the effect of delegitimizing the requisite interracial class solidarity to bring about its end, or serious reform.

### **2.3 South Carolina: The Left-Wing Alternative**

It's worth asking exactly *why* it's so difficult to perceive the end of capitalism beyond what the novel already makes clear to us, which are of course the ruling class piety of racism and the ravenous working-class whites who are encouraged to uphold it. Consider Melamed’s further development of Robinson’s theory, in which she argues that racial capitalism is not only associated with “the central features of white supremacist capitalist development, including slavery, colonialism, genocide, incarceration regimes, migrant exploitation, and contemporary racial warfare”; she also argues that “contemporary racial capitalism deploys liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion to value and devalue forms of humanity differentially to fit the needs of reigning state-capital orders” (77). In other words, Melamed argues that racial capitalism continues to thrive not just through all the ways the novel intricately describes it to do so, but also through the insistence that because race remains the most rigid division in the country, it consequently must continue to be reproduced through “liberal and multicultural terms of inclusion,” which the novel indulges in. As Fields argues, it is not just “the mob that killed a young Afro-American man on a street in Brooklyn or the people who join the Klan and the

White Order” who continue to reproduce race (146). It is also “the academic ‘liberals’ and ‘progressives’ in whose version of race the neutral shibboleths *difference* and *diversity* replace words like *slavery*, *injustice*, *oppression*, and *exploitation*, diverting attention from the anything-but-neutral history these words denote” (147). Although the novel attempts to use race to accentuate capitalism’s irredeemable fabric of normalizing exploitation, race is likewise used to promote diversity *within* neoliberalism; this point is further made evident by the praise printed on the novel’s front cover: a brief but prominent “Terrific” from former president Barack Obama. Like Winfrey, Obama *embodies* American capitalism; his election as the first Black president essentially offered to many young Black Americans that they, too, could rise to the nation’s highest seat of government *that enforces the neoliberal apathy ensuring their marginalization*.

I mentioned earlier the right-wing crusades *against* diversity of any sort that are not only periodized within the novel, but also contextualized in the present; this is how Whitehead shows capitalism’s aforementioned reworking of “prior racist differentiations deriving from slavery” to maintain classism across generations. However, the devotion to “diversity” among modern liberals is an alternative “differentiation” that the novel only clearly relegates to the past, and it cannot even be identified with modern liberal politics. This is most evident in the novel’s South Carolina chapter, prior to Cora’s stay in North Carolina. In South Carolina, Cora and her friend Caesar (with whom she escapes her plantation) arrive in the fictional town of Griffin—a partially integrated, bustling city with a skyscraper too tall and a mechanical elevator too advanced to have existed in the antebellum era, not to mention there were no integrated communities in South Carolina during this time, either. Upon arriving, Cora and Caesar rightfully begin to indulge in all the progressive town has to offer, such as receiving an education and earning a wage. Eventually, however, Cora is asked by her doctor to consider being sterilized: “South Carolina

was in the midst of a large public health program, Dr. Stevens explained” (115). He argues that the “gift” of this surgery would allow Cora “to take control over [her] own destiny,” while also mentioning that this procedure “is mandatory for . . . [c]olored women who have already birthed more than two children in the name of population control. Imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit, for obvious reasons. Habitual criminals” (116). Through this, Cora is deeply disturbed: “Then there was the matter of *mandatory*, which sounded as if the women . . . had no say. Like they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased. [Cora’s white employer] suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit? Was her doctor offering her the same proposal? No” (116). This is only further exacerbated when Cora learns that the medicine that has been given to Griffin’s Black population was not treatment “for blood ailments” but instead that “[they] were participants in a study of the latent and tertiary stages of syphilis” which was “one of many studies and experiments underway at the colored wing of the hospital” (124-125); this section is, of course, a direct reference to the Tuskegee experiment.

Whitehead presents the stripping of bodily autonomy in slavery and now in Griffin as two sides of the same coin: two vastly different purposes, one for upholding enslavement and one for perpetuating supposed freedom, nevertheless produce the same result of bodily control by a white ruling class, even when it’s voluntary. Much like how Whitehead’s North Carolina makes special effort to challenge progressive teleology, South Carolina, too, achieves this; the way progressive politics come about in Griffin is through the promotion of diversity and supposed “uplift,” but only that which is contingent upon the benefit it serves those who run it. Griffin does not offer Cora and Caesar a higher quality of life out of kindness; it is all conditional on medical experimentation and eugenics meant to legitimize and maintain a further reproduction of race and racism, and by that same measure white superiority.

However, these explicitly race-based eugenic experiments are officially *over* in our actual present, despite the utility in conceiving these horrors as inextricably tied to the logic of slavery. Through this, the novel limits the commentary it can make on the weaponization and reproduction of “diversity” by a contemporary left-wing ruling class in the way it achieves this from the right-wing alternative. In mentioning this, I am in no way attempting to argue that contemporary diversity initiatives are analogous with eugenic campaigns. I also am not arguing that these initiatives are intrinsically *bad* or somehow *worse* than any right-wing alternative; there are far worse things than a devotion to diversity within neoliberalism. I am, however, arguing that there is a certain logic of “diversity” among modern liberals that legitimizes the very capitalist structure the novel rejects (such as counting the number of Black CEOs as a measure of progress or stagnation); there is a left-wing (and deeply coded) “solution” to a right-wing polemic against it, which is only a mutually reinforcing exercise in classism itself. However, readers are not offered the context to fully understand this, which is also how the novel undermines the reading it attempts to perpetuate; without language to contemplate left-wing complicity, the novel allows liberal capitalists to prop it up as a criticism of the racial capitalism that supposedly *only* a right-wing ruling class engages in.

### **3. The Antiracism Industry**

Considering the contentions the novel vacillates between, what exactly is this novel’s political payoff? McWhorter might read this book and deduce that Whitehead is “pretend[ing] that America never makes any real progress on racism and privately almost hop[ing] that it doesn’t, because it would deprive [him] of a sense of purpose” (22). As Glatt writes, “the ‘post-racial’ label, along with the associated term ‘post-black’, has been applied to Whitehead’s [earlier] novels, several of which feature stereotype-defying, middle-class black protagonists for

whom race, or at least the most common constructions of it, seems a comparatively minor factor in the directions of their lives or senses of identity” (41). As America has increasingly embraced Third Wave Antiracist principles, however, and as Whitehead has enjoyed increasing success, he has pivoted to writing more explicitly about race and racism; most notably he has won the Pulitzer Prize twice for novels that do so, with *The Underground Railroad* being the first. His second Pulitzer winner, *The Nickel Boys*, is about a high school student who has an idealistic perception of racial progress through his admiration for Martin Luther King Jr., only to then get convicted of a crime he didn’t commit and sent to a juvenile reformatory to perform hard labor. As Alexander Manshel aptly points out, “it is more than a little ironic that an author who once lampooned the ubiquity of the ‘Southern Novel of Black Misery’ can now count his own experiment in that quadrant of the genre ‘dartboard’ as a literary blockbuster” (35).

Manshel is getting at the intense (and perhaps intensifying) duty a Black writer feels to write of race and racism in the contemporary period, writing that “the Pulitzer and the National Book Award, and fundamental transformations in the scholarship and syllabi of university English departments . . . have either expressly or implicitly promoted historical fiction as contemporary literature’s most prestigious and politically potent genre” (23); through this, the dominant literary culture creates an expectation and incentive structure for writers to follow. Under this paradigm, Black American writers can be easily pigeonholed into writing about slavery and segregation, provoking an inevitable confrontation with a horrific past. To this frustration, McWhorter writes the following:

But the fact that the [nonfiction books by Black authors] most readers could name are such a small set is indicative—namely, of the tacit sense among black American writers *as well as our white supporters* that our job is to write only in service to the Struggle. We



are to write on the basis of our fundamental “identity” as victims of whiteness . . . That assumption regularly drives who the (white) publishing industry gives decent book advances to, and that has only become more the case since 2020. (115-116)

In McWhorter’s frustration with these literary trends among Black writers, he alludes to a politics of representation. Dubey cites Saidiya Hartman who “suggests that the contemporary preoccupation with slavery is primarily ‘a way of lamenting current circumstance,’ of debunking the idea that the Civil Rights Movement brought a decisive end to the long history of racial oppression that originated in slavery” (qtd. in “Neo-Slave Narratives” 344). Furthermore, Dubey writes that “[s]uch impure racial origins imply that return to the history of slavery will not yield easy answers to questions of black identity in the post-Civil Rights period” (337). In this analysis, she essentially argues that the neo-slave narrative tasks the Black reader (and writer) with perceiving their positioning in society as a result of slavery and the festering, ongoing racism it derives from. By doing this, the neo-slave narrative’s goal in “debunking the idea that the Civil Rights Movement brought a decisive end to the long history of racial oppression” can simultaneously teach Black Americans “to build their identities around a studied sense of victimhood” (McWhorter 18). In other words, Dubey considers reckoning with the painful past as unable to neatly conceive of one’s Black identity, whereas McWhorter considers this a distracting exercise in victimhood, and thus a futile effort to effectively deal with the nation’s pervading racial issues.

The novel very much provokes this dichotomy in its South Carolina chapter; after Cora’s brief stint babysitting for a white family, she is assigned a new job at the town’s Museum of Natural Wonders. At the museum, Cora is forced to reenact a slave’s journey from “Darkest Africa” to “Life on the Slave Ship” to “Typical Day on the Plantation” from behind a glass

window. The novel expresses how demeaned Cora feels doing this for the “white monsters . . . pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting” (119). This, too, is a further rejection of the “progressive” attitude Griffin has towards Black people, but it also ushers in a commentary on the necessity of feeling Black pain. For one thing, the Afro-pessimist reading may interpret Cora’s experience at the museum as one inevitable to the Black experience; an inability to escape the painful reminder that the past of slavery never leaves you. Dubey writes that “Whitehead’s novel . . . literalizes the encounter with the past, but it does so in order to elicit and then thwart the desire for experiential immediacy, for hands-on contact with the past” (“Museumizing Slavery” 133). In this vein, she argues that the novel “vests little faith in the transformative force of a cathartic approach to the history of slavery” (133). If the novel does not produce catharsis, then by the logic of the Afro-pessimist reading, it produces a stalemate: a resignation to the inescapable plight of Black identity.

In a non-Afro-pessimist or race-reductionist reading, it is agreed that while the novel rejects the immediacy of catharsis when confronting the past, perhaps even *attempting* to achieve catharsis itself is unnecessary. Manshel cites Stephen Best, who criticizes the “‘primacy [of slavery] in black critical thought’ and the ‘unassailable truth that the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present’” (qtd. in Manshel 35). Likewise, Aida Levy-Hussen “‘interrogate[s] the premise that reexperiencing historical pain is transformative and necessary’ and investigate[s] ‘how therapeutic reading’s claim to moral urgency may inadvertently produce rote habits of canon construction and interpretation, binding us to contemporaneous works of African American fiction that expressly disavow an orientation toward the past’” (qtd. in Manshel 35). Perhaps, then, confrontation with America’s slave past

not only hinges on ahistorical constructions of history, but it also reinforces race in its most alienating and harmful construction, which Cora actively attempts to unshackle herself from.

Through this, rejecting the need for feeling historical pain at all would render the stalemate conclusion of an Afro-pessimist interpretation unnecessary, and perhaps even actively harmful. Manshel writes that “[w]hile the ‘therapeutic reading’ of ‘black literary studies’ historical turn’ suggests that Cora’s fictive simulation is necessary in order to heal, Whitehead argues here that slavery’s reenactment—unavoidably mediated by a racialized marketplace and white spectators . . . can be injurious to the individual and to the collective” (38). Through this, Manshel argues that in coercing Cora “into repeatedly reperforming the trauma of slavery,” Whitehead is criticizing the “present ‘state of display’” of the neo-slave narrative itself and the dominant literary trends that McWhorter problematizes, all of which heavily rely on excessive confrontation with the past to no conclusive benefit (37, 38). It is worth considering, however, how this reading requires some heavy lifting; the dominance of antiracism places this novel in easy alignment with a reading devoted to a stalemate conclusion, which is bound to be an injurious exercise masked as empowerment. For all that Whitehead may slyly critique the current state of the neo-slave narrative, confrontation with the American slave past in the present is an exercise that is bound to limit and perhaps distract from the intention of his criticism.

#### **4. The “Post-Black Neo-Slave” Narrative**

Consider Goyal’s analysis of neo-slave novels that seem to vacillate like *Underground Railroad* does:

[I]t is still difficult to understand the challenges posed by post-black literature, both to conventional genealogies of African American literature rooted in slavery and to those that argue for seeing the past as a closed book. In fact, post-black neo-slave fictions (an

awkward and oxymoronic phrase, to be sure) reveal the impossibility of drawing neat boundaries across distinct approaches to the past. (235)

A hybridized reading considers the novel to be both “post-black” and “neo-slave”; we can perhaps see Whitehead’s confrontation with the present through analogy to the past, despite what may be ahistorical about this, but we also see him refusing to “strike too hard on the parallels between America’s current racial crisis and the material of his story.” He does this, for example, in his ability to confine debt peonage, convict-leasing, and medical experimentation to the past—not as *distinct* from the logic of slavery—but an evolution of slavery that has nevertheless dissipated. Through this, Whitehead does seem to at least try to offer instances where while we cannot think of the past as a closed book, we also cannot consider the past as too caught up in the present; although, of course, the most fundamental way he also contradicts this is in presenting racial hierarchy in slavery and segregation as fundamentally similar today.

The agency he infuses in Cora all throughout the text gives way to a certain hopefulness as we move forward, especially upon the novel’s conclusion. In a moment of triumph, Cora escapes one final time from Ridgeway by pushing him down a flight of stairs, paralyzing him so she can get away. She then finds herself in an unfamiliar location, but once she is picked up by an older Black gentleman in a wagon, Cora gets in and learns from him that they’re headed west to California, and the novel leaves the impression that Cora and he will share their stories of bondage. By the novel’s conclusion, we are not necessarily told “a modern narrative of escape from bondage to freedom” in the vein of earlier neo-slave narratives (“Neo-Slave Narratives” 332); Cora’s journey is far more complex than that. Her ability to overcome the tragic history of her bondage and the journey beyond it is an instance where Whitehead doesn’t strike too hard on the past; if the novel were *more* pessimistic, and thus more aligned with the past, it would mimic

“Stanley Elkin’s influential account of the American slave as a ‘Sambo’-like figure whose personality was wholly shaped by the crushing victimage imposed by slavery” (333). In this final moment, especially coming off the massacre at Valentine, Cora refuses at all costs to allow the victimage of slavery and its afterlife to crush her.

As this translates into the present, and as Goyal notes, perhaps Black identity today in the United States is far more nuanced than either conceiving it as similar to a slave *or* insisting that the past is “a closed book”; the answer likely lies somewhere in between. This is precisely why it is crucial to import various readings of the text; it is not particularly beneficial to think of the Civil Rights Movement as a decisive end to racism, nor is it beneficial to insist that “the black guy having problems in 2020 is shackled by racism just as his great-grandfather was under Jim Crow, or his great-great-great-great-grandfather was under slavery” (McWhorter 120). Likewise, it is not beneficial to ignore the differentiation of Black and white labor in relation to capital, nor is it beneficial to adopt a fatalistic, Afro-pessimist belief that interracial class solidarity is impossible; a synthesis of these ideas more adequately unlocks the novel’s political potential, and the complexities of contemporary American society.

As for the contentious understandings of race and class, Singh rightfully points out that “[h]owever the historical origins of racism are understood, it is beyond dispute that racism has retained its power and efficacy by infusing capitalism’s characteristic forms of wage and market discipline, value extraction, and fragmentation of subaltern collectivity and agency over the long twentieth century and into the twenty-first” (34). As already proven, the way in which a reader comes to understand the role of race in society deeply affects how the novel is read; if anything, the novel’s inability to tactfully locate the intersection of race and class is only a reflection of even well-intentioned American intellectuals of all stripes who also cannot make much sense of

it. For all that it agrees with Reed's insistence of capitalism as reliantly racial, the novel can't *not* prop up racial categories, which is also worth considering; Reed, among others, actively deny the level of importance we impose upon race, but then simultaneously argue that racism itself is an invention of capitalism. So, then, how can Whitehead give his readers the tools to understand capitalism's ongoing reliance on racism *without* depicting ongoing racism? If anything, being abundantly aware of racism's pervasive nature, and understanding how capitalism is the system which recreates it, is exactly the sort of recognition Reed should hope readers would come to. With that in mind, the novel *does* make a special effort to situate racism as driven by capitalistic intention. To name only a few examples: "A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities" (7); "Eli Whitney had run [Ridgeway's] father into the ground, the old man coughing soot on his deathbed, and kept Ridgeway on the hunt" (83); "Oney grew up surrounded by the profits of cotton, and its necessary evil, n\*\*\*\*\*s" (166-67).

Through this, a contemplation of systemic racism should not be totally avoided, even if it can lead to the unintended consequence of overplaying the role of race in contemporary American society; colorblindness is intellectually dishonest, and the novel rightfully highlights how race is an immutable component of the American experience. However, conceiving of race as the foremost division in the country is precisely the work a dogmatic capitalism does to divide an interracial working class, and it's worth considering how this outlook can be antithetical to the anticapitalist sentiment the novel attempts to perpetuate. Through this, it is not the novel's exploration of anachronistic racism that is innately problematic; it is *how* the anachronistic racism lends itself to a dominant race-reductionist reading that indirectly stifles our solutions to deeper forms of inequality beyond racial categories.

Special attention to race is only useful insofar as it does not come at the expense of class. Through this, the seemingly polar opposite race- and class-reductionist readings should be understood *in relation* to one another, and not as distinctive wholes. The greatest takeaway from the novel's depiction of anachronistic racism should not only be racism and white supremacy's very real and pervasive threat, as race reductionism rightfully points out, but *also* how the underlying class dynamics of capitalism actively work to enforce this violence *and* situate race as fundamentally important, as class reductionism points out. We cannot sacrifice the imperativeness of *class* for the spectacle of *race*, because these categories are indivisible and mutually reinforcing.

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