

# Narrative Structure and the Unnarrated in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

## La estructura narrativa y lo no-narrado en *The Underground Railroad*, de Colson Whitehead

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**Abstract:** This paper analyses the narrative structure of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* against the grain of traditional slave narrative conventions. The novel may be categorized as a neo-slave narrative, telling the story of a slave girl, Cora, and her escape from a Georgia plantation using the "underground railroad" mentioned in the title. The main working hypothesis takes cue from the explicit, literal rendering of the underground railroad in the text, which may be considered as symptomatic of Whitehead's approach to the slave narrative convention, in that his novel discloses or makes visible aspects which, in slave narratives, were left unnarrated.

**Keywords:** Slave narrative; underground railroad;unnarrated; linearity; secrecy.

**Summary:** Introduction: *The Underground Railroad* as Neo-slave Narrative. The Unnarrated in Slave Narratives. The Unveiling of Underground Secrets. Forking Paths and Narrative Linearity. Branching out, or Narrating the Unnarrated. Conclusions: The Final Gap, or Whitehead's Right to Non-response.

**Resumen:** Este ensayo analiza la estructura narrativa de *The Underground Railroad* de Colson Whitehead, en contraposición con las convenciones de las narraciones de esclavos tradicionales. La novela puede incluirse dentro de las nuevas narrativas de esclavos, pues cuenta la historia de una esclava, Cora, que escapa de una plantación de Georgia usando utilizando el "ferrocarril clandestino" al que alude el título. La principal hipótesis de trabajo parte de la representación explícita y literal del ferrocarril subterráneo en el texto, al considerarlo como una característica del enfoque de Whitehead a la hora de abordar la narración de esclavitud, puesto que su novela revela o visibiliza aspectos que, en las narraciones de esclavos, permanecían silenciadas.

**Palabras clave:** Narrativas de esclavos; ferrocarril clandestino; no-narrado; linealidad; secreto.

**Sumario:** Introducción: *The Underground Railroad* como nueva narrativa de esclavos. Lo no-narrado en las narraciones de esclavos. La revelación de secretos. Bifurcación y linealidad



narrativa. Ramificaciones, o narrar lo no-narrado. Conclusiones: El lapso final, o el derecho de Whitehead a no responder.

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## INTRODUCTION: *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* AS NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVE

Upon its publication, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) was recurrently placed by reviewers in the lineage of the slave narrative: Alex Preston claimed Whitehead's novel "draws on traditional slave testimonies by the likes of Solomon Northup and Harriet Jacobs" (n. pag.); Vasquez observes that "it touches on the historical novel and the slave story, but what it does with those genres is striking and imaginative" (n. pag.), and Michiko Kakutani invoked the dual traditions of "the chilling, matter-of-fact power of the slave narratives collected by the Federal Writers' Project in the 1930s, with echoes of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (n. pag.). The novel may indeed be depicted as a neo-slave narrative. The term, coined by Ishmael Reed (in an interview in 1984) but codified as a literary category by Bernard W. Bell in *The Afro-American Novel and its Tradition* (1989), identifies "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions" of the slave narratives (Rushdy 3).<sup>1</sup>

Several aspects of the text contribute to this generic adscription. First and foremost, plot and character, as the story focuses on a teenage slave, Cora, who escapes from the Georgia plantation where she was born and raised. Although it is not told in the first person, the narrator focalizes her point of view and adopts many of the motifs and kernel events typical in conventional slave narratives: the "I was born" section narrating her (scant because mostly unknown) family and personal history; the depiction of the violence and cruelty exerted by slave-owners and

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<sup>1</sup> Ashraf H. Rushdy, who has written a monograph on the genre entitled *Neo-Slave Narratives* (1999), is stricter in his definition by limiting it to texts which "take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Bernard W. Bell, on the other hand, focuses on novels which "combine elements of fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people" (285). It is my contention that Whitehead's novel fits perfectly into Bell's description, through its combination of references and structures invoking antebellum slave narratives with elements from speculative fiction or magical realism.

overseers on plantation slaves; the failed attempts to escape by other slaves, and the subsequent punishments inflicted on them; the moment of enlightenment through confrontation with a slave-owner, and the resolution to escape; the different stages in the process, involving betrayal, persecution, selfless help on the part of perfect strangers, long periods of waiting and hiding, and, finally, the arrival to the North.

Furthermore, the novel contains many references to later African-American history: sterilization of women and experiments on men are said to be conducted by health institutions in South Carolina (117, 121–22), anticipating the eugenic laws of the early and mid-twentieth century and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, while the abolitionist orators Lander and Mingo who visit Valentine's farm in Indiana seem to be inspired in historical figures like Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington.<sup>2</sup>

These may prove a threat to the verisimilitude of the novel's chronotope, as many of the references point to a later historical period. Yet, they introduce into the text the speculative, not simply historical, element that is Colson Whitehead's trademark, according to scholars like Fain (xi, 31). Matthew Dischinger has coined the term "speculative satire" to describe the poetics deployed by Whitehead in the novel (84). His connection to speculative fiction was already noted by reviewers like Vásquez, who wrote about the "slight departures from historical fact, places where *The Underground Railroad* becomes something much more interesting than a historical novel. It doesn't merely tell us about what happened; it also tells us what *might* have happened" (n. pag.).<sup>3</sup> Leise has claimed that the combination of history and fantasy is Whitehead's most salient feature as a novelist: "Openness, particularly regarding the 'meaning' of the past, is what makes Whitehead's engagement with history so vibrant, if somewhat diffuse" (289). Maus, describing the critical difficulties of assigning strict genre categories to Whitehead's fiction, has noted how he is "using genre as a form of 'drag'" (7, 10).

The novel fits perfectly into the depiction of Underground Railroad lore as paraphrased by Gara in *The Liberty Line*:

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<sup>2</sup> This is noted by Alan Singer in a short review of the novel. See Dischinger (83) and Kelly (18) for an analysis of these elements as part of the novel's alternate history.

<sup>3</sup> Other reviewers like La Melle (936) or Brockes (n. pag.) have alluded to magical realism in depicting the novel's style.

The legend of the Underground Railroad tells of intrepid abolitionists sending multitudes of passengers over a well-organized transportation system to the Promised Land of freedom. The fugitives often were hotly pursued by cruel slave hunters, and nearly always they eluded capture because of the ingenuity and daring of the conductors. All was carried on with the utmost secrecy. (2)

Like other recent fictional renderings of the institution, including Ben H. Winter's novel *Underground Airlines* (2016) or Misha Green and Joe Pokaski's television series *Underground* (2016), Whitehead's relates to traditional lore but modifies an essential aspect of it, the re-focalization on the escaped slaves themselves rather than on the white abolitionists who operated the system.<sup>4</sup>

In doing this, Whitehead inscribes *The Underground Railroad* within the debates on the status and scope of this cultural construction. Recently, Kathryn Schulz wrote in a review of *The Underground Railroad*: "That story, like so many that we tell about our nation's past, has a tricky relationship to the truth: not quite wrong, but simplified; not quite a myth, but mythologized" (n. pag.). Regarded by many historians as the most beloved of American myths ever since Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line* (1961) exposed its legendary character, it may work as illustration of the combination of the historical and the mythical: "Although the underground railroad was a reality, much of the material relating to it belongs in the realm of folklore rather than history" (2). The novel's most openly speculative element is precisely its rendering of the Underground Railroad into a real network of subterranean rail tracks on which actual boxcars ride, operated by a clandestine system of operators and conductors. Thus, while recent historical accounts insist that "the picture that emerges from recent studies is not of the highly organized system with tunnels, codes, and clearly defined routes and stations of popular lore" (Foner 15), Colson Whitehead's novel makes it precisely that.

Considering the critical appreciation of Whitehead's *oeuvre*, as well as the complex layering of fact and fancy existent in popular imaginings of the Underground Railroad (Gara 17), the working hypothesis for this essay takes cue from this explicit, literal rendering of the Underground Railroad in Whitehead's novel. In a way that seems symptomatic of Whitehead's general approach to the slave narrative convention, his

<sup>4</sup> This mirrors a parallel refocalization in scholarly work on the *Underground Railroad* by Blight or Foner, among others.

novel discloses or makes visible aspects which, in many slave narratives, were left untold. This could be said to work as a *very* explicit rendering of details which, as Gara mentions, were most of the time elusive: “Few people can provide details when asked about the institution. Specific information is usually crowded out by vague generalizations” (2; Foner 8). In this sense, the structure of Whitehead’s novel may be understood as a filling in of textual gaps often found in historical texts. The continuous textual dialogue between *The Underground Railroad* and the slave narrative tradition, thus, makes the former work a sort of imprint of former narratives of fugitive slaves.

This essay uses the narratological concept of the “unnarrated” (Warhol) as the central category for analysis, and explores the interplay between the explicitly narrated and the existing gaps in the narration, in the textual context of slave narratives. Additionally, attention to the logics of narrative linearity is paid through the exploration of two metaphorical fields which seem central to the text: the opposition between surface-underground, often rendered in the rhetorical language of unveiling what is hidden, and the vegetable metaphors suggesting the branching out of a single storyline into many.

## 1. THE UNNARRATED IN SLAVE NARRATIVES

Before addressing the peculiar presence of the Underground Railroad in Colson Whitehead’s text, the fundamental issue of the unnarrated in historical slave narratives should be addressed, as well as the tensions deriving from the contradictory impulses to narrate one’s individual story and to preserve particular information from public knowledge.

The slave narrative convention stands on the frail balance between what can be told and what cannot. The reasons why some parts, or some details, from escaped slaves’ narratives are left out of their narrations are varied. Among these, we may mention the rule of decorum which would have prevented them from being too explicit in their depiction of particulars, or the literary convention that would make them claim the insufficiency of language to describe an emotionally loaded aspect of their experience.<sup>5</sup> Most interesting, however, are the kind of omissions

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<sup>5</sup> Instances of these omissions appear in Henry Bibb’s or Solomon Northup’s narratives: “I despair in finding decent language to describe the bloody act of cruelty” (249); “But I draw a veil over a scene which can be better imagined than described” (Northup 189).

that affect information deliberately kept by the narrators. In the account of her escape from slavery in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs includes moments when she deliberately subtracts relevant information from her narrative: “I was to escape in a vessel, but *I forbear to mention any further particulars*” (896; emphasis added). In cases like this, we may speak about a sort of self-censorship, as she deliberately withdraws information directly connected to her story.<sup>6</sup> *The Confessions of Nat Turner* also includes a moment when the narration is interrupted and a gap in the account of events is opened: “During the time I was pursued, I had many hair breadth escapes, which your time will not permit you to relate” (260–61). At this point, Thomas R. Gray, who has been acting as confessor, takes over the narrative and proceeds to make further inquiries on what he perceives as an organized, large-scale revolt including uprisings in North Carolina. But Turner refuses to go any further in his confession, and he claims (twice) not to know anything about it (261).

These examples belong to the category of theunnarrated (Warhol 221), defined as “the lack of narration about something that did happen; it can be found in those passages in a narrative ‘that explicitly do not tell what is supposed to have happened, foregrounding the narrator’s refusal to narrate’” (Phelan and Rabinowitz 7). These instances of theunnarrated contribute to what Eric Foner describes, in his attempt to recreate the history of the Underground Railroad, as “a jigsaw puzzle many of whose pieces have been irretrievably lost, or a gripping detective story where the evidence is murky and incomplete” (9). Warhol’s taxonomy of theunnarrated may be relevant in helping to distinguish between different motivations for withholding parts of a narration as found in slave narratives (222). In particular, her category of the *antinarratable* or “what shouldn’t be told” (222) points to situations in which external circumstances may prevent a narrator from telling something.

As for the reason why authors of slave narratives may have felt compelled to leave out essential fragments from their stories, Frederick Douglass is perhaps the most explicit in stating his. He famously wrote in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* about the need “not to

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<sup>6</sup> The problem of self-censorship seems an intrinsic part of the slave narrative genre, and it is also quite noticeable in connection to the narratives collected in the Federal Writers’ Project during the 1930s. See Schwartz “The WPA narratives as historical sources” (94).

state all the facts connected with the transaction" of his escape from slavery, and criticized "the very public manner in which some of our western friends have conducted what they call the *underground railroad*" (85).<sup>7</sup> As Gilmore observes, Douglass was conscious of "the hidden power of saying nothing" (124): ". . . discursivity has its limits for Douglass, as long as slavery continues in the United States, speech cannot be wholly free" (126).

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass opens the chapter devoted to his escape with the following admonition:

I will now make the kind reader acquainted with the closing incidents of my "Life as a Slave," having already trenched upon the limit allotted to my "Life as a Freeman." Before, however, proceeding with this narration, it is, perhaps, proper that I should frankly state, in advance, *my intention to withhold a part of the facts connected with my escape from slavery*. There are reasons for this suppression, which I trust the reader will deem altogether valid. It may be easily conceived, that a full and complete statement of all the facts pertaining to the flight of a bondman, might implicate and embarrass some who may have, wittingly or unwittingly, assisted him; and no one can wish me to involve any man or woman who has befriended me, even in the liability of embarrassment or trouble. (338; emphasis added)

He goes on to explain, along the same lines already sketched in *The Narrative*, that his silence responds to the need to protect those who have helped him, but specially to leave the channels of escape open for others to use. That is to say, he states the need to keep those channels clandestine for further (successful) use (339).

For Douglass, the Underground Railroad, as a *shibboleth* term signifying methods of escape, helping agents and routes followed, belongs to the category of the unnarratable, or what should not be told because it would put others at risk. The same problem is exposed in a warning notice launched by the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* regarding "the frequent exposure through the public prints, of the modes

<sup>7</sup> The problem identified by Douglass, as to the contradictory impulses of bearing witness and keeping others' secrets, is acknowledged by Eric Foner, who explains how the Underground Railroad "was a quasi-public institution" (21) and mentions instance of how "Underground Railroad activists frequently reported their accomplishments in local newspapers" (22).

of escape of fugitives, and of the expedients employed to prevent recapture" (qtd. in Foner 22). This is explicitly addressed in *The Underground Railroad*, as Royal tells Cora: "We're not supposed to talk about what we do down here . . . And our passengers aren't supposed to talk about how the railroad operates —it'd put a lot of good people in danger. They could talk if they wanted to, but they don't" (266).

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass insists on his right to keep silent about certain parts of his story that may affect the safety of others: "No anti-slavery man can wish me to do anything favoring such results, and no slaveholding reader has any right to expect the impartation of such information" (339). Douglass is, in passages like this, exerting what Jacques Derrida would call his "right to absolute non-response" (29), that is, his authority, within the institution of literature and the limits of his literary text, not to be held accountable for what is written in it (28).

Douglass' denunciation of publicity given to the escape stories of a reduced number of slaves evinces an essential tension which is intrinsic to the form of the slave narrative: the one existing between the commonality of the experience undergone by the narrator and the exceptionality of survival, an aspect recently emphasized by Schulz (n. pag.). This is acknowledged by Olaudah Equiano in the opening chapter of his *Interesting Life*: "I believe there are few events in my life, which have not happened to many . . . but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*" (49). It is echoed as well in Whitehead's text, as Cora and Caesar share their experience at the Randall plantation with other former slaves: "one might think one's misfortunes distinct, but *the true horror lay in their universality*" (102; emphasis added).

My reading of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* is guided by the key question of how the novel, as a neo-slave narrative, interacts with the textual conventions governing the historical slave narratives, and specifically with the problem of theunnarrated in them. I coincide with Vasquez's claim that this is a characteristic feature of Whitehead's fiction: ". . . taking advantage of conventions while subverting them for the novel's own purposes" (n. pag.). This happens mainly through the deployment of two textual strategies in this novel: one is the obvious, spectacular narrative premise of making the Underground Railroad a literal reality; the other, less evident, is articulated through a narrative structure that defies the linearity, narrative

and topographical, characteristic of slave narratives in their depiction of escape to the North.

## 2. THE UNVEILING OF UNDERGROUND SECRETS

According to Eric Foner, the origin of the expression “underground railroad” is to be found in a newspaper article published in Washington in 1939, which quoted a slave “who said he hoped to escape on a railroad that ‘went underground all the way to Boston’” (6). As is well known, Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* makes literal what, in slave catcher Ridgeway’s words, “most people think [is] a figure of speech” (300). This is an aspect which critics like Dischinger (83) and most reviewers have relished on, starting with Michiko Kakutani’s observation of how Whitehead “turns it from a metaphor into an actual train that ferries fugitives northward” (n. pag.). Connecting the narrative premise of *The Underground Railroad* to Whitehead’s *oeuvre* in general, Schuessler writes about his recurrent concern for “the metaphoric possibilities of mechanized modes of transport” (n. pag.), including the references to the elevators in *The Intuitionist*. Preston, on the other hand, describes it as a “steampunk reality,” “the great secret undertaking that is the underground railroad” (n. pag.), emphasizing the ‘secret’ dimension of the concept. Finally, Vasquez provides a detailed account:

The central conceit of the novel is as simple as it is bold. The underground railroad is not, in Whitehead’s novel, the secret network of passageways and safe houses used by runaway slaves to reach the free North from their slaveholding states. Or rather it is that, but it is something else, too: You open a trap door in the safe house or find the entrance to a hidden cave, and you reach an actual railroad, with actual locomotives and boxcars and conductors, sometimes complete with benches on the platform. (n. pag.)

Whitehead’s account of the Underground Railroad is inscribed within the ongoing debates on the historical status and cultural significance of such institution. Rather than taking sides in terms of whether the Underground Railroad was a systematically organized network operating at national level (as Siebert traditionally claimed), a limited but real enterprise carried out by a few volunteers and activists working in relative isolation (Foner), or a cultural construction, mostly

legendary (Gara), Whitehead offers a twist to the concept by making it not only real, but literal.

The first references to the railroad in the text appear in the chapters entitled “Ajarry” (8) and “Georgia” (42), but no details are offered beyond the “rumors of a new branch of the Underground Railroad said to be operating in the southern part of the state” (42). At this stage, the reader is led to think this is a conventional reference to the historical escape routes, in which the railroad is meant as a metaphor. Information begins to accumulate in the succeeding pages, as we read how Caesar came to know about it, and references to “secret trunk lines and mysterious routes” and the existence of “a station” (53) in Southern Georgia begin to distort the conventional, metaphorical understanding of the concept. The moments before Caesar and Cora first step into a tunnel contain more references that point to a real railroad, as the dialogue with Lumbly includes the terms “conductor,” “steam,” and “station agent” (66).

The language used by the narrator in the subsequent passages fosters the sense of marvel in the readers as well as the characters: “Then they reached the tunnel, and appreciation became too mealy a word to contain what lay before her” (67); “The steel run south and north presumably, springing from some *inconceivable* source and shooting toward a *miraculous* terminus” (67; emphasis added). Caesar’s and Cora’s questions become then our own, as to how far the tunnel extends, who built it or how they did it. Their “astonishment” (67) at discovering an actual railroad system evinces how its underground nature should be understood in several senses: on the one hand, because it is obviously and literally beneath the ground; on the other, because its clandestine nature is established on the basis of a double secret logics, that relies on slave hunters’ inability to find its tracks, but also on their belief that this is a metaphor rather than a real, physical infrastructure.<sup>8</sup> This is also articulated in the text in terms of the incommunicable nature of such a secret: “When she told of her escape, she omitted the tunnels and kept to the main contours. It was private, a secret about yourself it never occurred to you to share. Not a bad secret, but an intimacy so much a part

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<sup>8</sup> On the relevance of secrecy in the cultural construction of the Underground Railroad, see Gara (9–11). Gara quotes from texts depicting it which emphasize this idea: “All the work had to be done under the cover of utmost secrecy” (10).

of who you were that it could not be made separate. It would die in the sharing" (266).

Whitehead devotes quite a lot of attention to describing each of the stations depicted in the novel, but as regards the journey itself, it is normally narrated through ellipsis. Expectations are created as to how each new station will look like: "By now a station meant a descent down impossibly deep steps and the revelation of the next station's character" (259). This, combined with the idea of characters stepping out into new locations, evokes the idea of emerging magically into a new world.

Most interestingly, the fact that the journey itself is obscure and remainsunnarrated is pointed out by Lumbly in the first station, in Georgia, as he tells Cora: "If you want to see what this nation is all about, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (69). Ironically, as Cora looks through the slats of the boxcar taking her out of Georgia, she can see only pitch-black darkness: "There was only darkness, mile after mile" (70). The joke will be recalled later, once the experience of riding the railroad has become habit: "There was only darkness outside the windows on her journeys, and only ever would be darkness" (263).

Although the darkness mentioned in these passages could be related to a metaphorical frame of reference (of Conradian lineage) established in connection to violence in America—"This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are" (285)—the darkness is also a narrative one, in the sense that it prevents a full disclosure of the trajectories followed by Cora in each of her rides. Moreover, as a narrative strategy, Whitehead uses these intermissions as mirror image of the effect the journeys are said to have on the travelers, never knowing where they will emerge at the next station.

In detailing the particulars of Cora's journey northward, Whitehead is obviously disobeying Douglass' command to keep the Underground Railroad *underground*, that is, secret. The narrative discloses relevant information as to the routes followed, the help received by Cora and the locations and characteristics of each stage of her journey. It seems evident that the fictional nature of Whitehead's narration makes this possible, and harmless, as his characters do not exist beyond the superficiality of their literary phenomenality (Derrida, *Given* 153). The real Underground Railroad in this novel evinces the vantage point of its historical revision of the biographical, authentic slave narratives, a

narrative device meant to conceptualize Whitehead's freedom to tell. It is precisely by telling what could not or should not be narrated in slave narratives that he is able to articulate a second textual strategy meant to foreground the problems of theunnarrated and the exceptionality of traditional slave narratives.

### 3. FORKING PATHS AND NARRATIVE LINEARITY

As noted by Schulz, the compelling nature of the Underground Railroad as cultural myth is related to how it articulated a narrative pattern of escape northward in which the linearity of the story mirrored the actual linearity of a topographical trajectory along the map the North America:

While in real life fugitives ran in every imaginable direction and were often caught or forced to turn back or died en route, in our stories the direction of travel is more nearly uniform. On the Underground Railroad, geography is plot: the South represents iniquity and bondage, the North enlightenment and freedom." (n. pag.).

This understanding of storytelling may be explained by borrowing J. Hillis Miller's claim in *Topographies* that "a novel is a figurative mapping" (19), the text arising from the landscape in which the action takes place. This seems clear in the case of *The Underground Railroad* as the text is organized through a succession of stages in Cora's journey starting in the Georgia plantation from which she escapes and ending in "the North." As noted by Miller, topography is not just a representation of place in words (*Topographies* 3), but an ideological construction in which the landscape is inscribed with meanings (20). Furthermore, the understanding that topography provides a narrative pattern to the text finds a further dimension in how the linearity of the journey as a narrative motif determines the linearity of the plot. In Miller's words:

. . . Narrative event follows narrative event in a purely metonymic line, but the series tends to organize itself or to be organized into a causal chain. . . . The image of the line tends always to imply the norm of a single continuous unified structure determined by one external organizing principle. (*Ariadne's Thread* 18)

In this case, Cora's striving for freedom could be considered the organizing principle of the narrative, again complying with a staple of Underground Railroad narratives.

The "straightforward linearity" (17) of the journey northward as a narrative pattern, however, is manipulated in significant ways by Colson Whitehead. On the one hand, it may be said to be reinforced as the story is articulated through a series of nodal points in which one path is chosen over other potential trajectories, thus emphasizing the idea that, of the many possible developments, only one is actually realized in the text. On the other hand, the text recurrently resorts to metaphors related to the ramifications of the story into complementary developments, and how these are interrupted or closed so as to respect the linearity of the main story. The metaphors used, moreover, are dramatized in the novel through a complex narrative structure that will be analysed in detail in the next section.

The plot of *The Underground Railroad* is organized through a series of turning points often articulated in terms of decisions or choices made by characters. The chain of plot events is thus dependent on characters' decision-making process, an aspect that emphasizes causality as well as their agency in determining the narrative trajectory. Two metaphorical fields are repeatedly used to express this idea in the text: the forking path metaphor provided within the logics of the Underground Railroad itself, and the vegetal metaphor related to branching out and ramifications of the main storyline.

The first time Cora enters the Underground Railroad, she is told by Lumbly, the station agent, that several trains pass through the station, but not all of them lead to the same place: "One's going one way and the other..." (67). Though organized as a genuine railroad system, an essential difference exists between this and others: passengers in the underground trains cannot always know in advance what their destination will be: "You won't know what waits above until you pull in" (68), Lumbly says. This situation is repeated in the novel as Cora moves across the United States: "She could continue on to a connection in Indiana, or stay on the Valentine farm" (263). The narrative is articulated therefore as a series of forking paths, and at each juncture Cora's decisions decide one storyline over the others. Much later in the narrative, Cora

remembers Lumbly's words describing each new destination as "a state of possibility" (205).<sup>9</sup>

The continuity of the narrative path, however, is interrupted through ellipsis every time Cora rides the rails. No reference is ever made to how long the journey takes, but there is a reference to Cora's own disorientation as she emerges from the darkness of the tunnels: "When she next stepped into the sunlight, they were in South Carolina. She looked up at the skyscraper and reeled, wondering how far she had traveled" (70).

The second metaphor used to depict narrative development and character's trajectory in the text is a vegetal one. Each of the locations where Cora stays for a while brings with it a potential narrative development which is abruptly interrupted by the main storyline (Cora's escape and Ridgeway's attempts to recapture her), so as ramifications springing from the main trunk they are uprooted. This is precisely the metaphor used repeatedly by the narrator through the novel:

From the trunk of their scheme, choices and decisions *sprouted like branches and shoots*. If they had turned the girl back at the swamp. If they had taken a deeper route around the farms. If Cora had taken the rear and been the one grabbed by the two men. If they had never left at all.<sup>10</sup> (60; emphasis added)

The sense of inevitability of the path taken, of the trajectory adopted, is reinforced every time one of the potential ramifications is taken to its narrative end, normally with the death of the character involved in it. Near the end of the novel, the vegetal metaphor reappears as the narrator focalizes Cora's thoughts: "She though they had time enough. *Another thing that might have been, snipped at the roots*" (300; emphasis added).

In what follows, the implications of these metaphors are explored in terms of narrative structure and the logics of theunnarrated, on the assumption that the text may be understood as an interplay between the

<sup>9</sup> See Dischinger (93) for an analysis of how each stage in Cora's journey is conceived as a different speculative articulation of slavery, following the logics of Whitehead's own words: "What if every state our hero went through as he or she ran north was a different state of American possibility?" (Whitehead, *Literal* n. pag.).

<sup>10</sup> Kelly connects this passage to the idea of the "decision tree, a neoliberal figure that imagines the chooser as abstractly responsible for all the consequences of their actions" (25).

inevitable linearity of the Underground Railroad narrative (determined by the dynamics of escape and persecution) and the ramifications or forking paths emerging from it, devoted to the narration of the unnarrated, of what normally remains beyond the scope of autobiographical slave narratives.

#### 4. BRANCHING OUT, OR NARRATING THE UNNARRATED

In order to understand how Whitehead manages plot development in connection to ideas of secrecy and disclosure, and how his text establishes a dialogue with the previous narrative conventions established in the slave narrative tradition, a descriptive analysis of the narrative structure of *The Underground Railroad* is in order. The text is organized in twelve chapters, each of them bearing a proper noun as a title. These names alternate between those referring to individual characters in the novel in the even number chapters —perhaps taking cue from the technique used by Toni Morrison in *Paradise* and William Faulkner in *As I Lay Dying*— and those referring to places in the uneven number chapters —from the story's original setting in Georgia to the vague reference to “The North” that closes the novel. Each of these series of chapters plays a different role within the general narrative structure.

The “place chapters” designate the different locations that serve as setting for the succeeding episodes in Cora’s story. As Vásquez notes, “the novel uses the architecture of an episodic tale, each episode corresponding to a new stop in the journey” (n. pag.). Making an explicit use of topographical denominations, these chapter titles help the readers keep a visual record of Cora’s trajectory across the United States, emphasizing the way in which plot emerges from topography, as mentioned before. It is perhaps this episodic structure organized around the journey motif that justifies the references to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* mentioned in the book’s flap blurb and in Michiko Kakutani’s review for *The New York Times*.<sup>11</sup>

Considering their relevance to narrative structure, the “place chapters” also establish narrative continuity in terms of third person narration focalized on Cora as a character, and determine a sense of

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<sup>11</sup> There is an actual reference to *Gulliver’s Travels* in page 235, as Caesar is shown to read the book and reflect on how Gulliver’s journey is structured: “. . . each new island a predicament to solve before he could return home” (235).

linearity that makes the reading process one explicitly connected to geographical mobility. Like many slave narratives, this story is organized as a passage northward. This is something that can be observed with particular clarity in Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* or Frederick Douglass' *Narrative*, both of which establish the North as arrival point of their journeys and of their narratives, making textual and topographical linearity coincide. The main linearity of the story in Whitehead's case, however, is cut across by the alternating series of chapters entitled after some of the characters that appear in it.

The "character chapters" focus on secondary characters from the novel, all of them connected to Cora. They include her grandmother (opening) and her mother (closing), but also some of the people she meets on her journey, like her persecutor Ridgeway, her fellow fugitive Caesar, and the people who help her along the way, like Stevens or Ethel. These sections provide a wider overview of the sufferings undergone by slaves and abolitionists, and work as ramifications of the main storyline, following Cora in her Northward journey. Furthermore, they establish the possibility for the narrative to fill in the gaps in the story for the reader, by providing information that is not accessible to Cora herself.

This narrative series cuts across the other one, offering detours from the one following Cora. The content of these is unknown to Cora herself, and this is another way in which *The Underground Railroad* relates to the slave narrative tradition, in which the narrators often wondered about the destinies of those who had helped them on their way, the relatives and loved ones they had left behind and never saw again.

In most cases, what these chapters narrate is the end of the life story for each of the characters that serve as their focus.<sup>12</sup> The feeling that Cora is actually the only survivor in the novel, that everyone else connected to her dies while she strives to survive, is relevant in several senses: from a historical perspective, it bears witness to the exceptionality of successful escape and survival. Rather than normalizing it as something recurrent, it places Cora's story in the wider perspective of the many failed attempts, like Caesar's or Mabel's. In strictly narrative terms, it provides closure: it proves that each of the alternative narratives that the character chapters open is literally a 'dead end,' as most of them end with the death of the character who has been the focus of attention in the corresponding

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<sup>12</sup> For Cora, Harriet Jacobs's words seem to apply: "It seemed as if I were born to bring sorrow on all who befriended me" (850).

chapter. Finally, in connection to the slave narrative tradition, it justifies the idea of 'storyline' by offering closure when normally none was provided in other slave narratives. Unlike what happens when we read Northup's, Douglass' or Jacobs' autobiographies, in which the first person narration keeps some information from being known, simply because the author him/herself does not know what became of X or Y, Whitehead does 'fill in the gaps' which were usual in the slave narrative convention by allowing readers to know what became of each of the characters Cora encounters in her journey. The quotation from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* in the section devoted to Caesar is most relevant from this perspective: "What became of my companions in the boat, as well as those who escaped on the rock, or were left in the vessel, I cannot tell; but conclude they were all lost" (235).<sup>13</sup> The same thing could be said by many of the slaves who lived to tell their own stories.

Most importantly, the narrative articulation described above allows us to know the full story of Mabel, whose alleged success in escaping the plantation, at the expense of leaving her child behind, constitutes the psychological trigger for Cora's decision to escape herself.<sup>14</sup> As it has been mentioned, Cora is regarded as a "lucky charm" by fellow slaves by a sort of metonymic transference with her mother (46), who is thought to be the only slave to have ever escaped both from the Randall Plantation and from the slave catcher Ridgeway (41).

The Indiana chapter evinces her mother has never been absent from Cora's mind, as she asks other escaped slaves living in Valentine's farm whether they have ever met her (244–45). The indeterminacy in her story, its lack of narrative closure, is precisely what signals Mabel's success in escaping, as there is no record of her whereabouts. This is established very early in the text: "Of Mabel there was no sign" (41). And this is also what makes Cora special—"He thinks I'm good luck, because my mother was the only one" (57)—as she takes on her mother's character to accept Caesar's invitation to escape (8).

Commenting on the relationship between both characters, Whitehead states: "I wanted to address the gap between what we know of our

<sup>13</sup> The quotation is from Part 1, chapter 1 of *Gulliver's Travels* (11).

<sup>14</sup> Harriet Jacobs writes in her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "Stand by your children, and suffer with them till death. Nobody respects a mother who forsakes her children; and if you leave them, you will never have a happy moment" (837). On the issue of mothers running away leaving their children behind, see Franklin and Schweninger (72–73).

parents and who they really are" (Brockes n. pag.). Resorting once more to the logics of theunnarrated, Whitehead fills in that gap, by offering the readers the story of Mabel's escape. Mabel's story works as a correction regarding the main trajectory followed by the novel. This chapter of the novel comes to provide narrative closure to Mabel's story, but in doing so it also reinterprets Cora's personal myth of origins as a fake one. In Kelly's analysis of this episode, Mabel's moment of freedom is rendered "ironic," yet not in rhetorical or postmodern sense, but as "structural, dramatic, and tragic" irony produced by its belated narration (20).

As we read, we discover that, just upon reaching a point when she could have been safe, Mabel decided to return to her child:

She was free.  
This moment.  
She had to go back. The girl was waiting on her. (294)

It is after she takes the path back to the plantation that she is bitten by a cottonmouth snake and dies in the swamp. As she never gets to reunite with her daughter, her story remains open for Cora, and keeps its luring effect as inspiration to run away. What the reader learns, however, is not just the truth about one of the branching out storylines the novel proposes, but about the meaning of freedom.

This is anticipated in the Caesar section of the novel, as the character reflects on his reading of *Gulliver's Travels* and comes to the conclusion that the problem with the character is his incapacity to realize the value of what he has left behind. The episodic, forward-advancing character of the plot is described through Caesar's perspective as an impossible return home: "The white man in the book, Gulliver, roved from peril to peril, each new island a new predicament to solve before he could return home" (235). As for himself, it seems clear that a sense of home, guided by an attachment to Cora, works as guiding principle: "If Caesar figured the route home, he'd never travel again. Otherwise he was liable to go from one troublesome island to the next, never recognizing where he was . . . With Cora, he'd find the way home" (235).

Perhaps on a sentimental note, we could conclude that Whitehead's novel indicates that characters cannot escape into places, but into people. Thus, Mabel's U-turn at the crucial moment when she has achieved freedom amounts to a revelation: it is precisely because she is free now that she can realize she can only flee toward Cora, and not away from

her.<sup>15</sup> The clearest echo from Toni Morrison's poetics of slavery in *Beloved* may be perceived here, as Mabel's conclusion can be said to equal Sethe's, that you are only free when you are free to love: "to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that was freedom*" (Morrison 162).

### CONCLUSIONS: THE FINAL GAP, OR WHITEHEAD'S RIGHT TO NON-RESPONSE

The novel's final chapter is entitled "The North." Unlike slave narratives like Equiano's, Jacobs' or Douglass', Cora's story ends when she reaches the North, but does not offer any insight as to her life after this happens. While others told profusely about their new lives in the North in almost utopian terms (see Douglass), the end of *The Underground Railroad* glimpses at hope but never fulfills it.

Rather, the final lines redirect the readers' attention to another potential story that remains to be told. As Cora joins a caravan heading West (to St. Louis and from there to California),<sup>16</sup> she notices "an older negro man": "She wondered where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him" (306). Once more, Whitehead emphasizes the multiple stories that remain untold above the exceptionality of the one he has chosen to tell (Cora's) by proposing further ramifications of this story.

Furthermore, the silence as to the potential 'happy ending' of Cora's story may work as a reminder that Cora's safe passage north does not really provide closure to the historical consequences of slavery. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy's approach to the neo-slave narrative form perceives this kind of fiction as originating in the "social, intellectual, and racial formations of the sixties" (3), and explains it as a product of the "debates over the significance of race" (3) in political and literary contexts. It seems legitimate, then, to ask what may be the *milieu* that is producing a

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<sup>15</sup> Henry Bibbs' constant returns to Kentucky and attempts to get back to his wife as told in his *Narrative* may be invoked here as evidence of how "the line contains the possibility of turning back on itself. In this turning it subverts its own linearity and becomes repetition" (Miller, *Ariadne's Thread* 19).

<sup>16</sup> It seems significant that at the end of the novel an alternative route westward is mentioned, considering how scholarly work on the Underground Railroad had traditionally concentrated on the route northward and turned it into a cultural myth (Schulz).

new wave of such neo-slave narratives, including Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* as well as other fictional works like Green and Pokaski's *Underground* or Winters' *Underground Airlines*. In part, the answer has already been provided by reviewers, in making explicit the link with violence against African-American citizens and the persistence of racism within the United States. This is accounted for by Kakutani:

Such passages resonate today: the police killings of unarmed black men and boys, the stop-and-frisk policies that often target minorities, and the anti-immigrant language used by politicians to ramp up prejudice and fear. Mr. Whitehead does not italicize such parallels. He does not need to. The harrowing tale he tells here is the back story to the injustices African-Americans and immigrants continue to suffer. (n. pag.)

It is also observed by La Melle when claiming that "there is nothing 'past' about *The Underground Railroad*" (n. pag.) and by Singer, who argues that "at a time when police violence against Black men seems to be almost a daily occurrence, this book is a statement that Black Lives Matter" (n. pag.). Kelly (17) provides a detailed scholarly account of the socio-political context for the writing of this novel, in which the Black Lives Matter movement features prominently.

From this perspective, the open end of *The Underground Railroad* acquires a greater significance, in refusing to bring closure to Cora's story, keeping a potential thread that would link the later developments in her life trajectory to subsequent historical circumstances.<sup>17</sup> If the readers were to be asked whether we expect Cora to be finally safe or subject to further racist violence, our knowledge about America's racial history would necessarily lead us to choose the second line of development as the most probable one. That Whitehead refuses to confirm or dismiss that hypothetical development stands as the expression of his right to non-response, to restrict his attention to the realm of speculation.

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<sup>17</sup> On the "radical tendency toward openness, not fixity" as characteristic of Whitehead's writing, see Ramsey (783).

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