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**“ONE MIGHT THINK ONE'S MISFORTUNES DISTINCT  
BUT THE TRUE HORROR LAY IN THEIR UNIVERSALITY”:  
REPRESENTATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORICAL  
MEMORY IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE  
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*  
MA thesis**

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the centuries of cultural erasure African Americans have not had the traditional tools available for recording their history. Thus they have had to rely on memory over history for accurate historical representations. Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* offers a great basis for studying African American historical memory. This thesis aims to analyse how *The Underground Railroad* uses and represents African American historical memory.

The introduction gives the necessary context for discussing *The Underground Railroad*. The literature review will give an overview of necessary aspects of African American history and the African American literary tradition and representation of African Americans in literature written by white authors. The literature review also shows the use of African American memory in literature and the concept of 'parting the veil' proposed by Toni Morrison. This is followed by demonstrating the importance of slave narratives in African American literature and collective memory. Lastly the literature view introduces the general concept of collective memory and how it can be used in relation to African American historical memory. The second chapter focuses on the literary analysis of the novel. The chapter first gives an overview of the novel and in the next four sections the novel will be analysed through close reading. The analysis follows four narrative characteristics of slave narratives: life as an enslaved person, lack of bodily autonomy, seeking freedom and barriers faced in freedom.

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## INTRODUCTION

Colson Whitehead's sixth novel *The Underground Railroad* was published in 2016 and it has been very successful. In 2016 the novel won the National Book Award for Fiction and in 2017 the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. Additionally to those awards, the novel was included in Oprah's book club and in Barack Obama's 2016 summer reading list and Amazon Prime has made an original TV show based on the novel. Colson Whitehead himself has stated in multiple interviews that it took 15 years for him to complete the novel. The initial idea dates back to the 2000s but at the time he was very unsure if he would ever actually complete the project as he found writing on the topic of slavery scary as he did not want to do any disservice to a topic of such gravity (Brookes 2017).

The plot of the novel follows its main character's journey of seeking freedom from enslavement via the underground railroad, which was historically a network of routes and safe houses that was used to help enslaved people escape to free states or Canada. Thus it is clear that the events in the novel are inspired by African American history which has been confirmed by Whitehead himself. He has stated in interviews that in order to write the novel he worked through different archival materials with the main source being *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Projects, 1936-1938* (Brookes 2017). In addition to archival materials, he used slave narratives, which play a crucial role in African American literature and in constructing African American identity (Morrison 2019c: 233).

While the novel has a historical premise, it is striking that no dates are mentioned in the text. Whitehead has said in an interview that he did not want to write a strictly historical novel and instead told the story using fantasy elements, changed historical facts and focused more on what could have happened rather than on what actually happened (Parham 2016). Thus the novel includes events and elements that do not fit the period of slavery (an actual railroad under the ground, skyscrapers, syphilis experiments that actually took place in the

1930s). Yet, the choice of using these historical images, especially that of the underground railway, in a defamiliarised manner is a part of the author's project. Whitehead may be returning to this motif to not just reimagine African American history but also their self-making.

Taking all of that into consideration it is not surprising that while the events in the novel are happening in the past, the reviews do not consider the novel to be historical. Reviews often point out different genre elements but rarely categorise the novel itself. For example, *Times Literary Supplement* points out how Whitehead has chosen to steer away from reality with the depiction of the underground railroad. Instead of remaining true to historical records, he has depicted the underground railroad as a literal railroad under the ground instead of as an informal network of safe houses. The portrayal of the underground railroad is something that historical novels usually do not change (Field 2016). On the other hand, *The New Yorker's* essay points out that stories of seeking freedom from slavery are in a way travel narratives and *The Underground Railroad* fits in that category because the story follows the hero and her journey (Schultz 2016). The question regarding the categorisation of the novel is best addressed in *The Guardian's* review: "Here, it's as if he's attempting to cram as many genres into one novel as possible, with science fiction meeting fantasy and a picaresque adventure tale, all against the backdrop of a reimagined 19th-century America" (Preston 2016). In turn, this choice to not stick to a specific genre poses a question of why the author has decided to take this unusual route to portray tragic historical events and to play with important themes and genres in African American literature.

In the context of African American literature enslavement and seeking freedom have remained relevant across centuries. This experience is especially central to slave narratives, autobiographical accounts of previously enslaved people's experiences, either written by themselves or dictated, published from the early 18th century up to the 1940s (Dixon 1985:

299). Slave narratives play a crucial role in African American literary tradition as those narratives for the first time gave African Americans a chance to tell their own stories to a wider audience. Out of the 19th-century slave narratives, the best-known ones are Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Written by Herself* (1861). The stories, though, have a complex function, depending on the audience. While the slave narratives gave the self-narration opportunity to previously enslaved people, they were mainly targeted towards the white upper middle class to show the horrors of slavery and that enslaved people are also humans. Thus, they were not only a means of self-making but also parts of anti-slavery campaigns seeking to change the hearts and minds of people outside of the African-American community.

Slave narratives have remained an important part of African American literature even after the 19th century in the form of neo-slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives are contemporary writings that tell the story of an enslaved person and convey different aspects of the period and institution of slavery and thus provide an alternative angle to the accepted wisdom of slave experience (Babb 2017: 218). Most famously, the impact of slave narratives can be seen in the work of Toni Morrison, the author of the best-known African American neo/slave narrative *Beloved*. Morrison (2019a: 280) in her essay "On *Beloved*" states that her reasoning behind writing *Beloved* was her difficult relationship with history and literature as people who look like her are often erased from the historical narrative. Morrison aimed to fill the gap. Morrison's comment indicates that in African American culture literature plays an important role in the creation of identity and historical memory. Literature has given African Americans a chance to tell their own stories that have generally been excluded from history books in their own voices.

With *The Underground Railroad* Whitehead aims to do the same as Morrison. The underground railroad was one of the least often used means of seeking freedom for enslaved people. Despite that, it is a very popular motive in literature as it is one of the few slave narratives that portray African Americans as heroes (Schultz 2016). Thus choosing to write about the underground railroad Whitehead makes the freedom seeker a hero, not a white person.

The questions that Whitehead covers also address the position of African American literature within American literature. African American slave narratives were uniquely American prose genres (Hill 1998: 223). Yet, they have not always been considered part of the larger body of American literature, similarly to Chicano, Asian American and Native American literatures (Morrison 2019d: 162). For centuries it was believed that American literature is somehow free from the African American presence and influence despite the number of texts written by African Americans in the United States (Morrison 1992: 5). Additionally there are both casual readers and literary critics who have never read an African American text and they see no problem in that (Morrison 1992: 13), which can further perpetuate the idea that African American literature is for African American community only. This parallels the treatment of African Americans in other aspects of American culture, like film or theatre.

It is important to note that in the context of this thesis, the terms ‘African American’ and ‘Black’ are being used interchangeably. The latter word is capitalised when referring to African Americans. The practice has been adopted by academic publications and also by an increasing number of news organisations such as *The New York Times* which as of 2020 changed their style guide to include the capitalisation of Black; *The Seattle Times* has done this since 2019 (Tharps 2014, Coleman 2020, Seattle Times Staff 2019). However, this is not the first time there has been a discussion around the capitalisation of words that were used to

refer to people of African ancestry. W.E.B Du Bois started a campaign in mid 1920s to ask publications to start capitalising “Negro” (Coleman 2020). As a result of Du Bois’s campaign, *The New York Times* changed their rules regarding the capitalisation of words used for minority identities (Coleman 2020). Nowadays “Negro” is considered an offensive term that should be avoided. Black with a lowercase b refers to the colour while Black with uppercase B refers to a group of people with a collective identity. This is in line with the way other cultures and groups of people have been capitalised such as Latinx, Asians, and Native Americans (Tharps 2014). Different publications that have made statements about using ‘Black’ instead of ‘black’ have also stressed the identity aspect: “Black (adj.): Belonging to people who are part of the African diaspora. Capitalise Black because it is a reflection of shared cultures and experiences” (Seattle Times Staff 2019), “Black reflects a shared sense of identity and community” (Laws 2020) and “We believe this style best conveys elements of shared history and identity, and reflects our goal to be respectful of all the people and communities we cover” (Coleman 2020). Black is also considered to be more accurate than African American as it refers to all people with an African ancestry regardless of their place of birth while African-American is generally used to refer to people who are descendants of enslaved people of African ancestry who lived in the territory of what is today the USA (Coleman 2020).

The aim of this thesis is to analyse how *The Underground Railroad* uses and represents African American historical memory. In order to do that the first chapter introduces African American history, African American literary tradition and representations of African Americans within the larger American literary tradition. The chapter also shows how African American authors’ use memory in their writing by using Toni Morrison as an example and introduces general approaches to collective memory and contextualises them for using them in the case of African American historical experience. The empirical analysis will

look at how African American historical memory is represented in the novel through the common themes and characteristics of slave narratives: life as an enslaved person, lack of bodily autonomy, seeking freedom and barriers faced in freedom.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY AND MEMORY**

### **Erasure of African American Voices**

African Americans have historically been one of the biggest minorities in North America and, more specifically, they have been very closely tied to the history of the territory that is today the United States of America. Essentially Black people have been in North America for almost as long as European colonists. On August 1619, only 12 years after founding the English colony in Jamestown, Virginia a ship named *White Lion* arrived at Point Comfort and, in addition to Europeans, it carried 20–30 enslaved Africans who became the first enslaved people of African descent in a North-American English colony (Hannah-Jones 2021: 10). Those 20–30 Africans were not the first people of African descent to be brought to the territory of what would become the United States. Nevertheless, the year 1619 is still considered a turning point because of the central role English colonies played in American history and in the transatlantic slave trade (Waxman 2019). The African American presence is deeply rooted in everything in American colonies - what it meant to be free and American was defined through what it meant to be not free and American.

The Africans brought to America were initially indentured servants whose servitude had a time limit after which they would become free. That did not last for very long, as slavery became tied to skin colour soon after the first Black people were brought to the English colonies. The laws and regulations concerning slavery were reflected in slave codes, sets of laws concerning all aspects of slavery. The first law regarding slavery in the South dates back to Virginia in 1660, followed by the Virginia Slave Code of 1705 (Wunder 2008: 128) and similar laws in other colonies, all of them from the period before the American Revolutionary War and the formation of the United States. In the original thirteen British

colonies in North America, there was a need for a legal system to regulate slavery because there no such regulations in England (Finkelman 2010: 427).

Although each colony had its own slave code, they had common characteristics and they evolved with the political changes to cement the system of slavery and white supremacy, especially in the South (Finkelman 2010: 424). The biggest changes in slavery and consequently in slave laws happened after the American Revolution because of the ending of the transatlantic slave trade and the abolition of slavery in the North and its expansion in the South (Finkelman 2010: 434). In the pre-Civil War South, the laws still differed at the state level but some common elements dated back to before the American Revolutionary War.

According to the Antebellum Era slave codes, enslaved people were considered property meaning they could be sold, gifted and given away, and enslaved people could not testify in court and against whites. This law also included free Black people who in most cases could not testify against white people. Enslaved people could not move freely, have private property or enter into any contracts, interracial sex was illegal but only in cases where it was between a white woman and a Black man, as enslavers benefited from raping enslaved women as the child followed the condition of the mother. Additionally, slave codes also prohibited white people from teaching enslaved people how to read and write and owning anti-slavery literature or speaking out against it (Finkelman 2010: 437).

Slave codes positioned African Americans in American society but also contributed to the erasure of African American voices. Some parts of slave codes are more obvious in that regard than others, for example, the anti-literacy laws but also being considered property, and not being able to enter contracts and testify in court.

It is important to note that not all the laws in the slave codes applied to free Black people meaning that there is historical documentation about African Americans that does not align with the slave codes but this is not representative of the majority of African American

experience as free Black were a minority within the African American community, especially in the South. As enslaved African Americans were considered property, the vast majority of their recorded history comes through the lens of the enslaver which positions them as chattel and offers information about the enslaved population that was important in regard to the economy. In addition to that, the law about not being able to enter into contracts goes hand in hand with buying property and legal marriage. This is one of those areas where there is documentation about free Black people but not enslaved populations. The lack of documentation does not mean that enslaved African Americans did not have a form of shelter that they regarded as their home or that they did not enter relationships that were in every sense equivalent to marriage but that there was nothing legally binding about those arrangements (Finkelman 2010: 439).

While there is court documentation of enslaved Black people in multiple areas the perspective is still skewed and misses the voices of Black people. The 1855 court case between an enslaved woman named Celia and the state of Missouri is a great example of that. Due to Celia's status as an enslaved person, she was not able to testify but a white man named Jefferson Jones testified on her behalf based on a conversation he had with Celia. Through Jones' testimony, Celia's story and perspective are known but not in her own voice (Brown 2017). While this is a good example of how there is court documentation of enslaved African Americans but without their voice often the matters in court regarding African Americans were decided without them and just based on the testimonies of white people.

Anti-literacy laws are one of the more obvious contributors to the erasure of African American voices. South Carolina was one of the first colonies to enact such laws with the Negro Act of 1740 but soon other colonies followed. While South Carolina banned slave literacy, the city of Savannah in 1818 prohibited teaching any person of colour to read and write (Rasmussen 2010: 202). These laws rendered a large group of people illiterate and

unable to record their own history. This is why literacy is an important aspect of African American history. Most slave narratives in their titles have “written by himself” or “herself” because an illiterate enslaved African American was supposed to be a contradiction and the ability to write in a way humanised them (Morrison 2019c: 236). The importance of literacy is addressed by Frederick Douglass in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). In Douglass’ narrative literacy is viewed as key to his freedom, something he realises when he sees that his enslaver was terrified of the idea of his slaves being able to read and thus Douglass made a conscious effort to learn to read because of this ban, to get access to the power that slave society was depriving him of.

### **African American Representation in Literature and Use of Memory**

As African Americans have been through history often erased from the historical narrative and they have had very few means to record their history, the history that is most readily available is “the master’s story” and not their own. African Americans have taken steps throughout history to tell their own stories. However, those attempts often have been met with backlashes from the majority of the society. The slave narratives were often called “biased”, “inflammatory” and “improbable” on publication by white reviewers (Morrison 2019c: 235). More recent examples of such a backlash include the negative commentary that has accompanied *The New York Times’* The 1619 Project which re-examines the legacy of slavery in the United States and aims to reframe the history of the United States by putting slavery and the Black American population in the centre of the narrative (The New York Times Magazine 2019). The 1619 Project has received criticism from both historians and conservatives: historians are concerned about the accuracy of the facts presented in the project but conservatives oppose the “villainization” of white people (Serwer 2019). However, the core of the criticism addressed the way The 1619 Project centralises the African

American presence and, by that, changes the American narrative and how the history of the United States has traditionally been perceived (Serwer 2019; Serwer 2021). Due to the history of slavery and racism, there is a very large disparity between the promises of America and its practices, especially towards minorities. Hence what is usually presented to be in the past more often than not for African Americans “has never really passed” (O’Meally and Fabre 1994: 3).

However, historical records and the work of historians are not the only way to preserve history and memory. It can also be achieved through other more creative means like literature. Fiction makes it possible to tell the stories that are missing from historical records and to show the experiences of Black people in a manner that permits readers to understand life under slavery. This is why fiction has played an important role in the creation of African American identity. Fictional portrayals of history are used as means of self-determination for minority groups to write their “own” history (DeGroot 2010: 94-95). That is an especially powerful tool for minority groups as they have not historically had the same tools for self-determination as majority groups. This is why attempts to write the minority history from outside of the community are problematic as the authors often resort to fetishisation and stereotyping (DeDroot 2010: 96). That is also evident in portrayals of African Americans in fiction by white authors.

The origins of African American literature are rooted in the period of slavery. Behind the creation of the tradition is the need to prove that people of African descent were rational and sentient beings capable of creating literature (Gates and Smith 2014: xxxvi). However, before the written tradition of African American literature there was the oral tradition which is equally important because written traditions develop from oral traditions and in the case of African American literature oral and written traditions are very closely related (Gates and Smith 2014: xlv). The vernacular tradition is also rooted in the community and usually is not

aimed to circulate outside of the African American community (Gates and Smith 2014: 3). It was passed on orally within the community and was thus an important place for preserving memories that were otherwise erased from history.

In the context of African American literature, the vernacular consists of forms such as church and work songs, blues, ballads, sermons and stories but it also has more recent additions such as hip hop and rap music songs which showcase the importance of the vernacular tradition even after the rise of written forms (Gates and Smith 2014: 3-4). When it comes to African American oral and folk traditions their origins are largely unknown as they were not formally documented until after the Civil War in the 19th century. Based on the content of the oral traditions, accounts of European travellers and slave narratives the forms are a combination of elements from African cultures, biblical and Christian symbolism, European and Euro-American elements and enslaved peoples' own creativity (Hill 1998: 11). While the different oral traditions had different origins, purpose and contents, they all had one recurring theme of "the weak must assert themselves against the strong because, while the latter may have controlled the slave's outer world, that power was neither permanent nor irrevocable" (Hill 1998: 18).

While the best-known genre of published African American literature from the period of slavery is slave narratives, it is not the earliest genre. The print origins of African American literature started in the 18th century with poetry. The first published African American author was Phillis Wheatley whose first poem was published in 1760 and her first collection of poems, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*, was published in 1773. Wheatley was also a woman thus also contributing to women's literary tradition (Hill 1998: 20). The oral and written tradition also had different cultural origins. While the oral tradition had a lot of African influences the written tradition often followed European literary styles. There was no written African tradition to follow and, more importantly, the white

target audience was used to and expecting a European style of writing. However, it would be false to assume that mimicking Eurocentric tradition was the extent of early African American writing (Hill 1998: 19). However, those earliest African American authors who were writing while enslaved had to deal with a lot of limitations due to their status. They could not openly write about their social status and identity struggles as they depended on the white reading public. There also at that time was no robust African-American reading public, because of the laws banned a large proportion of the community to learn to read.

Thus, it is understandable that the main focus and themes of African American literature have changed throughout its history. The late 1960s is the period of heightened interest in African American history and recovering the history that had been lost or erased. That heightened interest can also be seen in literature as it shifted from the focus on the present to (re) constructing the past. The earlier authors' focus on the present was partially due to the widespread idea that the main aim of Black writing was to serve as means to "advance the race", to show the challenges that Black people had in integrating into white society and to demonstrate the artistic skills of the African-American community (Byerman 2005: 1-2). This shift can also suggest a change in the intended audience of those post-late 1960s authors. The earlier authors used the past only to show the sources of present problems (Byerman 2005: 2). The intended target audience was not only African Americans but also white people, to make them recognise the importance of race. From the 1960s onwards, African Americans started to write primarily for their own people, among other things to create a shared sense of historical memory.

Due to centuries of erasure and racism, writers of African American descent faced much more complex tasks than their white American or European counterparts. African American authors tend to be very aware that they are writing in a racialised society, which can restrict their imagination. Unlike white authors, Black authors cannot choose to believe

that their writing is “race-free” because they are the Other who is constantly being raced (Morrison 2019b: 322). For African American authors to write “race-free” would further erase their identity (Morrison 2019b: 323). If they were to do that they would be contributing to the erasure of African American voices and lived experiences (Morrison 1992: 10).

Because of the problems described above, instead of history, African American authors rely on memory. African American collective memory consists of such things as slave narratives, passed down stories and cultural practices (Morrison 2019b: 323). Toni Morrison has reflected a lot on the uses of memory in her fiction and nonfiction. Morrison uses the term ‘parting the veil’ for writing fictional stories based on memory. This idea is rooted in slave narratives that were written to a specific audience with the aim to humanise enslaved people and to show that slavery is cruel. As a result, often stories and incidents that were deemed too terrible or vulgar were omitted to make the narratives palatable. In addition to that slave narratives offered no insight into the ‘interior life’ of enslaved people (Morrison 2019: 237). Mainly what is recounted in the slave narratives is the realities of slavery and the institution and the growth of the narrator is secondary (Olney 1985: 154). Hence the ‘parting the veil’ is to reveal those stories that were omitted from slave narratives.

According to Morrison in order to do that an author has to rely on their own memory and recollections of others and their “memories within” (Morrison 2019: 238). While memories and recollections are important they do not give the author full access to the parts that have been omitted so those gaps have to be filled by the author's imagination (Morrison 2019c: 238). The process of gaining access to “interior life” is what Morrison calls literary archaeology “on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply” (Morrison 201c: 238). Thus Morrison aims to show the interior life of the people who were not able to do it themselves. She distinguishes truth from fact as truth requires the

aspect of human intelligence while facts do not need it to exist. Thus in her writing, she is “looking to find and expose a truth about the interior life of people who didn’t write it” (Morrison 2019c: 239). Her approach is to rely on the image and from that recollection move to the text as the image tells her what the memory is about (Morrison 2019c: 239-240). By ‘parting the veil’ by relying on memories, recollections and acts of imagination African American authors are filling in the blanks of centuries-long erasure.

However, this need to fill in the blanks left behind by lack of historical information is not only an issue for writers but also a problem that historians face. Saidiya Hartman (2008) addresses it by exploring how to tell the stories of those who have been mentioned in passing in archives while staying within the confines of history. She uses the figure of Venus as a representation of enslaved women and relies on archival records of transatlantic slave trade involving women. What is known about Venus in archives comes from her captors and is steeped in violence. Archives tell us nothing about Venus herself other than the violence she experienced (Hartman 2008: 2). But Venus existed outside of the violence portrayed and thus the archives do not capture the full extent of her story (Hartman 2008: 6). In order to give fuller understanding of those women’s lives Hartman (2008: 11-12) introduces a writing practice called critical fabulation which entails using both the available archival material and fictional narrative. This method has similarities to Morrison’s method of ‘parting the veil’ as both methods rely on already available information but Hartman’s method requires staying within the confines of available historical sources while Morrison’s allows for more creative liberty as it is used in fictional writing.

African Americans, similarly to other minority cultures that have faced some kind of erasure use literature to construct their cultural memory. They rely on memory over history, as the latter is not reliable as they have often been left out of it and have yet to be able to

write down their own account. African American authors use memory to help them construct narratives that tell their history as they experienced it.

While African Americans have their own distinctive body of literature, there is an even more extensive number of representations in the larger body of American literature by white authors but these representations differ significantly from the way Black authors have represented their own people. These representations have been counteracted by African American authors such as Toni Morrison who quoted the reasoning behind writing her novel *The Bluest Eyes* as the lack of representation of vulnerable Black girls. When they were represented, they were there to be jokes or to be pitied (Morrison 2019a: 281). This reasoning sheds light on not only the erasure of Black people in American literature but more specifically to the erasure of Black women. However, this erasure creates an illusion that American literature is free from the African and then later African American presence and that the “Americanness” of the literature has no space for Black people, making American literature centre around white male views and ideas (Morrison 1992: 5).

As a response to this ignorance Morrison (1992: 5) proposes that the characteristics of American literature such as individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus history, acute and ambiguous moral problematics, and the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of hell are actually responses to the Africanist presence, which is a term Morrison uses to refer to use of Black characters or signs of non-whiteness as a plot device (Morrison 1992: x), in America. Morrison shifts the focus from racial objects to racial subjects and analyses how this presence has shaped American literature. Morrison shows how this Africanist presence is evident in the writing of many of the great American writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, Willa Cather and Ernest Hemingway. Some of the authors are more explicit in their use of heavily stereotyped Black characters while others are more implicit with the use of language which is associated with Black

people. This use of Black attributes illustrates the extent of the influence and the role African American presence plays in American literature.

A lot of the features that are associated with being American such as freedom are for Morrison built upon the Black presence on the territory of the United States. This freedom is defined through what it means to be not free and in America as “nothing highlighted freedom – if it did not create it – like slavery” and hence blackness (Morrison 1992: 38). This contrast of light and dark can also be seen in literature where there is first a darkness or dark presence which is then followed by a lightness that overshadows the darkness. thus there would be no lightness without the darkness. For example in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* a human figure with snow white skin appears after the characters have come into contact with darkness (Morrison 1992: 32-33).

In contrast to the more abstract Africanist presence in American literature, there are many more explicit ones. One of those examples is the portrayal of Jim in Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. The characterisation of Jim is crucial for the ending of the novel. Jim is portrayed as being very loving and compassionate towards his masters and white friends and also accepting the social hierarchy in which white people are placed above Blacks. This portrayal makes it possible for the book to make Jim seem inferior to whites and allows Tom and Huck to play with his life (Morrison 1992: 56-57). For Morrison, thus, the novel, despite providing us with a sympathetic Black character, still reinforces the idea of white superiority and the thankfulness of enslaved people are supposed to have for white kindness, old elements of pro-slavery narratives. Taking into consideration the historical context of the USA, such portrayals of Black people that relay and play into stereotypes are very common across American literature of non-African American origin.

While African American presence and influence have been represented in American literature in both direct and indirect ways, the portrayals have often been rooted in negative

stereotypes. These inaccurate portrayals have been created with the help of literary strategies such as stereotyping, metonymic displacement meaning that skin colour or other physical racial markers “displace rather than signify the Africanist character”, metaphysical condensation which enable the author to show social or historical differences as universal by portraying people as animals or using grunts or animal sounds instead of speech cutting away human contact and speech, fetishisation which is used to “evoke erotic fears or desires”, dehistoricizing allegory and use of explosive, disjointed and repetitive language which are used to showcase loss of control (Morrison 1992: 67-69). Use of those literary strategies allows for the skewed portrayals but also knowing them helps to recognise the issues with those portrayals and get better insight and understanding of African American presence in white American literature.

When it comes to African American representation in American literature there are two different origins of those portrayals and they have historically varied significantly depending on the origin. The portrayals by white authors have historically been distorted and steeped in negative stereotypes and thus not giving an accurate representation of Black people. Portrayals by African American authors are more accurate. However, there is also a certain complexity to their portrayals as historically they have been determined and influenced by the context of the time period. For example slave narratives gave a truthful portrayal of enslavement but because of the abolitionist purpose and target audience some elements had to be omitted. Contemporary authors have more freedom. The period of slavery and freedom seeking are very popular themes in African American literature and contemporary authors still face challenges due to American racist history which has erased Black people from American history. To combat that Toni Morrison uses the practice of ‘parting the veil’ which entails using the combination of available factual knowledge and

imagination to gain access to the 'interior life' of people in history. This practice gives Black authors a tool to explore their own history and fill the blanks left behind in fictional writing.

### **Importance of Slave Narratives**

The earlier slave narratives by Black authors date back to the 18th century. The few narratives written during that time played a crucial role in the popularisation of slave narratives but their popularity hit its peak during the 19th century, during the abolitionist movement, when hundreds were published (Hill 1998: 4). Through slave narratives, for the first time, African Americans were able to tell their own story (Morrison 2019c: 234). Thus they are also very important when it comes to African American historical memory. Slave narratives are even more significant when taking into consideration that, across states, there were anti-literacy laws which prohibited teaching enslaved African Americans and in some states or areas also free Black people to read and write (Rasmussen 2010: 202). Thus an enslaved person who could write was seen as a contradiction in terms (Morrison 2019c: 236) and slave narratives served as proof that Black people had the intelligence to write (Hill 1998: 4). Thus the ability to read and write meant power for enslaved people but it also humanised them as it brought them closer to white people since literacy was something that was largely reserved for white people.

Slave narratives were at the same time also written for a white audience to convince them that slavery was inhumane (Morrison 2019c: 234). That set some limitations to how those narratives were written and what was included in them. There were in a way two tactics used by the authors to achieve the aim of those narratives. Firstly, the author persuaded the reader that slavery was bad and complemented the readers on their big hearts and high-mindedness and encouraged them to employ them to make a difference (Morrison 2019c: 237). The second tactic employed was the way the horrors of slavery were written

about. To achieve the aim of the narratives they had to be appealing to the 19th-century reader and adhere to popular taste (Morrison 2019c: 237). That means that nothing written down in those narratives was accidental and they were meticulously planned out.

This rigid form of rules set for slave narratives sets them apart from other autobiographical works. In both autobiographies and slave narratives memory is the key aspect of the stories, but in autobiographical work, memory is subjective and used as an active shaper in the story. In slave narratives, because they needed to be as objective as possible, memory is presented as something that is objective, with little creative licence. The authors of the slave narrative try to show “slavery as it is” and present memory as something that makes slavery present to his or her readers (Olney 1985: 149-150).

Because of that the slave narratives by different authors are very similar both in the form and content of the narrative. Slave narratives have the following format: an engraved portrait signed by the author, a variant of “Written by Himself/Herself”, testimonials by a white abolitionist friend or white editor to authenticate the narrative, a poetic epigraph, the actual narrative and appendix containing documentary material. The narrative also has specific characteristics: beginning with “I was born...” but no specification of birth date, no account or unclear account of parentage, description of a cruel master and descriptions of punishments received by enslaved people, and an account of an extraordinarily strong, hardworking and defiant slave, a barrier against slave literacy and difficult of learning to read and write, description of “Christian” slaveholder, description of what was given to the enslaved, the work required and the pattern it followed, an account of slave auctions and families being separated, descriptions of slave patrols and unsuccessful attempts of escape, successful escape, reflections of slavery (Olney 1985: 152-153).

While slave narratives were significant during the antebellum period their significance for African American literature goes way past that time period. African American slave

narratives have inspired a whole literary genre called neo-slave narratives. Neo-slave narratives showcase the impact of a period of slavery left not only on African Americans but in general on the United States (Smith 2007: 168). Neo-slave narratives differ from slave narratives because their authors are able to take creative liberties and with the help of imagination fill in the parts that were left out of the slave narratives (Smith 2007: 169). One of the best-known African American authors, Toni Morrison, has written *Beloved* (1987), one of the best-known neo-slave narratives, inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner (Smith 2007: 174). Drawing inspiration from true stories are common among different African American slave narratives.

The origins of the term ‘neo-slave narrative’ remain unclear but Bernard W. Bell has been credited with coining the term and starting scholarship on it in his 1987 study. He defined it as “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (Smith 2007: 168), but today the genre of neo-slave narratives includes a much wider set of works (Babb 2017: 218, Smith 2007: 168). Neo-slave narratives portray the institution of slavery and the escape from multiple different perspectives and genres and what is especially valuable about them is that the authors have significantly more freedom than the authors of slave narratives and can include contemporary knowledge and attitudes regarding the historical period portrayed (Smith 2007: 168-169).

African Americans have historically used writing as a means of resistance. In the case of slave narratives that can be seen in more ways than one as these narratives gave previously enslaved individuals a chance to tell their own stories about their experiences and bring to light to the horrors of slavery. However, slave narratives also aimed to convince white readers that slavery was bad and show that enslaved African Americans are also humans. Neoslave narratives shift the perspective. Thus slave narratives and neo slave narratives have a lot of

historical significance and play a crucial role in African American literary tradition and the shaping of collective memory.

### **Collective Memory**

Maurice Halbwachs is regarded as the creator of the term collective memory (*mémoire collective*) in his book *On Collective Memory* (1950). Halbwachs defined collective memory as “the result, or sum, or combination of individual recollections of many members of the same society” (Halbwachs 1980: 39). He also addresses the social aspect as others and their memory helps one to recall memories (Halbwachs 1980: 38). While Halbwachs can be credited for the terminology and a new way of thinking about memory, ideas about a collective memory have existed for centuries and can be traced back to Archaic Greek culture (Russell 2006: 792). The main differences come from the types of memory they discuss. The two types of memory relevant here are semantic and episodic memory. Semantic memory is objective, involves abstract information and facts and preserves them separately from the past time or experiences while episodic memory is very personal and subjective and allows remembering past personal experiences and constructing past time (Russell 2006: 708). Pre-halbwachsian collective memory is described as dependent on what is remembered rather than who remembers it and its content is primarily about people and their endeavours. This model of collective memory does not attribute those memories to a specific group (Russell 2006: 793-794). Thus early modern collective memory resembles semantic memory while Halbwachs’ collective memory draws attention to the importance of episodic memory (Russell 2006: 798).

Halbwachs (1980: 78) also draws attention to the differences between history and collective memory: “history is a collection of the most notable facts in the memory” of people and the events that are written in history books and taught in schools go through a

different selection process than a collective memory of a specific group. The selection that is made for preserving history does not follow the interests of specific groups but focuses on the large-scale narrative; collective memory, however, allows specific groups to preserve aspects of history that are relevant to them (Halbwachs 1980: 78). This is especially significant when taking into consideration that there is no universal collective memory and a person can be part of more than one group with its own collective memory. However, not all social groups have the same historically significant events or are even portrayed in history to the same extent (Halbwachs 1980: 83). That is especially significant when it comes to minority cultures as elements of their collective memory often do not make it to history and thus collective memory plays a much more central role in remembering their past as a basis of present-day identity.

The term of cultural memory has been developed on the basis of Halbwachs' collective memory by Jan and Aleida Assmann. Cultural memory has been defined as "a collective concept for all knowledge that directs the behaviour and experience in the interactive framework of society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation" (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995: 126). Assmann (2008) points out that cultural memory is made up of two different parts: canon, which keeps the past present and archive, which preserves the past.

According to Assmann (2008: 97), forgetting is a very important aspect of memory as memory capacity is limited and memory consists of both remembering and forgetting and the interactions between the two. In regard to cultural practices, she distinguished between two forms of forgetting: passive and active. Passive forgetting is non-intentional such as losing, hiding, dispersing, neglecting, abandoning and leaving something behind. Thus the object of passive forgetting is not materially destroyed and can be rediscovered later. In the case of active, intentional forgetting the object is being destroyed for example through censorship.

While forgetting is completely normal it is also very dangerous and destructive when it comes to minority cultures (Assmann 2008: 98).

Similarly to forgetting, remembering has a passive and an active side, with the canon being active and archive being passive remembering. Canon is made up of texts, places, people, myths and other such things that hold significance for that specific group. These objects have gone through a selection process called canonisation (Assmann 2008: 100). However, canons are not fixed and some elements of the canon can be demoted to the archive while the objects of the archive can become a part of the canon (Assmann 2008: 104). In the context of cultural memory archive is similar to a historical archive as it contains the parts of collective memory that are not currently in use (Assmann 2008: 103). In regards to African American collective memory, it can be said that in the larger context of the history of the United States, it has been going through a canonisation process as their history has come to be included in American history.

The term of cultural memory expands collective memory and adds depth to it. The term is distinguished from communicative/everyday memory. Assmann and Czaplicka (1995: 126) define communicative memory as parts of collective memory that deal with exclusively everyday communication which is what Halbwachs analysed under the term of collective memory. Cultural memory differs from communicative memory by what Assmann calls “fixed points” that do not change with time passing. These fixed points are important events from the past that have been preserved through physical things such as texts or monuments or forms of communication such as recitation and practices (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995: 129). Cultural memory has the following characteristics: “the concretion of identity” which is the knowledge and elements that signal who belongs and who does not, “capacity to reconstruct”, “formation”, “organization”, “obligation” and “reflexivity” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995: 130-132).

Morrison's concept of 'parting the veil' gives African Americans a concept of their own origin for exploring their collective memory. The elements discussed in this section complement Morrison's method as memory plays a central part in it. As African Americans have often been erased from history their collective memory differs significantly from what is known as the canon of American history. That is in line with Halbwachs ideas surrounding the differences between history and memory and how there is no universal collective memory and its interpretation differs depending on the group an individual belongs to. For example, the pre-Civil War period in the United States is in African American collective memory directly linked to the horrors of enslavement while this has not been the case for white Americans. It is also evident that the memories of that period are preserved in different objects, for African Americans in slave narratives. Slave narratives are for the African-American community a part of an active canon that is being kept alive, for example, in neo-slave narratives, not just an example of the passive archive. However it can be said that in the larger context of American history is also shifting at least to an extent as the African American experience is making the white majority revise their archive and to bring a critical awareness of race and African American presence into the broader national collective memory and American history.

## EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* AND COLLECTIVE MEMORY

### *The Underground Railroad*

*The Underground Railroad* follows an enslaved girl, Cora, and her freedom-seeking journey via the underground railroad. The novel is told in the third person and split into 12 chapters. Chapters 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11 focus on people important to Cora's story and give background information and are titled with their names. Chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, 10 and 12 focus on Cora's experiences in the states she passes during her journey and the titles of those chapters are names of the states, with the exception of the last chapter that is titled The North. The novel begins with Cora's family history through her grandmother Ajarry's story from the moment she was sold into slavery to the moment she died. After that, the novel switches to the present moment of Cora's life on the plantation where she is approached by an enslaved man called Caesar with a proposition to escape which Cora accepts after the death of the plantation owner and his especially cruel brother taking over. This starts Cora's journey across different states where she sees and experiences different approaches to Black people. One of the conductors of the underground railroad Lumbly says "Each state is different. /.../ Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and a way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop." (Whitehead 2016: 82). All through her travels she is being chased by a slave catcher called Ridgeway who has an obsession with Cora and her mother Mabel, who is the only escaped enslaved person Ridgeway has not managed to catch during his career.

For the analysis of the novel, I have turned to the previously mentioned narrative characteristics of slave narratives which have been grouped together. Those groupings are lack of bodily autonomy, life as an enslaved person, seeking freedom, and barriers faced in

freedom. Some of the aspects overlap across the categories and thus they have been categorised or split in ways that make the most sense contextually. For example the consequences and punishments of escaping have been analysed under the category of escaping from slavery, not as lack of bodily autonomy. Analysing the novel through those four more general characteristics allows me to show the ways in which Whitehead has included elements from African American historical memory in *The Underground Railroad*.

### **Life as an Enslaved Person**

Throughout the novel, Whitehead shows different aspects of life in slavery through the life of enslaved people. This includes different ways one could end up enslaved, a lack of control over their life, and being at the mercy of their enslaver who could sell them and break up their family. Whitehead also shows the everyday life of enslaved people such as the different types of work they did, the living conditions, the relationships between enslaved and the different kinds of enslavers there were.

Cora's grandmother Ajarry is the only character whose whole life in slavery is described. The description of her whole life is very brief and not very detailed but it gives very important insight into multiple aspects of life as an enslaved person. What sets Ajarry apart from most of the other enslaved people in the novel is that she was not born into slavery but kidnapped as "Dahomeyn raiders kidnapped the men first, then returned to her village the next moon for the woman and children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two" (Whitehead 2016: 3). She "was sold a few times on the trek to the fort" (Whitehead 2016: 3) while still in Africa and, after the journey through the Middle Passage, "the next time Cora's grandmother was sold was after a month in the pest house on Sullivan's Island" (Whitehead 2016: 5) when she had already made it to American territory. This sets Ajarry apart from her children who were born into slavery at Randall's plantation, "each delivered in the same spot

on the planks of the cabin” (Whitehead 2016: 3) or characters such as Caesar who “had been born on a small farm in Virginia owned by a petite old widow” (Whitehead 2016: 58).

Most other characters in the novel were born into slavery which can be seen as a reference to *Partus sequitur ventrem* (offspring follows belly) which was a law that dictated that any child born to enslaved women would follow the status of the mother (Morgan 2018: 4). However, the full motivation of that law does not come through in the case of Ajarry’s five children who were all fathered by enslaved men and thus both of their parents were enslaved. This was also the case for Caesar: while still at the small plantation in Virginia “Caesar and his father took care of the planting and the stables, his mother the domestic affairs” (Whitehead 2016: 58). The significance and the true motivation of the law becomes obvious with cases such as Nag’s who had a sexual servitude relationship with the overseer of the plantation and had a child out of that relationship. Due to that law Nag’s child is also enslaved because their mother was enslaved and the condition of the father plays no role. This law was crucial in making sure that even after the end of the transatlantic slave trade there were still new generations of enslaved people being born and that the children would have no claim to freedom or their father’s wealth.

Not necessarily every enslaved person experienced slave auctions both in real life and in the novel. For example, Cora never experienced one as she was born on Randall’s plantation and no other character besides Ajarry is shown in detail to have experienced slave auctions. However, slave auctions, through the surviving historical documentation such as bills of sale, offer insight into the monetary value that was placed on enslaved people and how it varied. The depictions of the auctions in the novel do the same. The chapter focusing on Ajarry gives an account of multiple auctions both on American soil and still in Africa, different ways and means of purchasing enslaved people and price fluctuations.

The first auction described in the novel happens still on African soil after Ajarry was kidnapped and then sold where “she was part of bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder” (Whitehead 2016: 3). The enslaved were bought in bulk as the ships needed to be filled to make the journey worth it and to account for the losses on the way as the conditions when crossing the Middle Passage were awful. This auction also shows how bulk purchases made it difficult to determine the individual value of each enslaved person as “It was hard to say how much they paid for her in Ouidah as she was part of a bulk purchase /.../. Able-bodied men and childbearing women fetched more than juveniles, making individual accounting difficult” (Whitehead 2016: 3-4). However, this further highlights which types of people were seen as valuable. Able-bodied men were deemed more valuable for their ability to withstand physical work and childbearing women because, in addition to regular labour, they could be used for reproductive labour. The ability to exploit enslaved women and use them for reproductive labour gained a lot of importance after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade as it helped to keep the existing system alive.

The other auctions depicted in the novel happened on US soil and in those cases, Ajarry was sold individually. The first American auction was in Charleston where “just before sunset an agent bought her for two hundred and twenty-six dollars. She would have fetched more but for that season’s glut of young girls” (Whitehead 2016: 5). Ajarry’s price is determined by the number of girls her age who were for sale showing how the market affected her price. When Ajarry was sold again “she went for two hundred and eighteen dollars in a hasty exchange, a drop in price occasioned by the realities of the local market” (Whitehead 2016: 6). In general the auctions and selling of Ajarry offers a lot of insight into the value of enslaved people. For example, Ajarry’s price fluctuated between “two hundred and forty-eight, two hundred and sixty, two hundred and seventy dollars” (Whitehead 2016:

7) depending on the market. Gender, health or any other desirable quality affected the price of the enslaved. For example, “The trade called upon the tobacco plantation looking for slaves of breeding age, preferably with all their teeth and pliable disposition. She was a woman now. Off she went.” (Whitehead 2016: 7) Ajarry made a more general observation: “A young buck from strong tribal stock got customers into a froth. A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money” (Whitehead 2016: 7). There is also an example from the first American auction Ajarry experienced: “there was a bidding war over a group of Ashanti studs, those Africans of renowned industry and musculature” (Whitehead 2026: 5). Enslaved people who were healthy and strong were more expensive but also more wanted as they were less likely to succumb to illnesses and more likely to be able to bear the workload and bad conditions. Women who were able to have children and men who were deemed to have qualities that the enslavers wanted to see in their offspring were valued more as they were “money that bred money” (Whitehead 2016:7).

In the novel, Whitehead demonstrates that there was also a difference between slave owners and their cruelty. This is not done to justify slavery or to imply that there was a good or moral way of owning slaves but to show the different realities. That is also in line with the representations of enslavers in 19th-century slave narratives where the descriptions of slave owners varied, but the greatest criticism was targeted to enslavers who were presenting themselves as devout Christians. The differentiation in enslavers is displayed through the two owners of Randall’s plantation. The plantation is split into two halves, the southern half being Terrance Randall’s domain and the northern James Randall’s. The two halves are represented as having very different climates. Referring to Jockey’s birthday celebration in the northern half, the novel states: “Feasts like this didn’t happen in Terrance’s domain, for the younger brother was stingy with slave amusements” (Whitehead 2016: 27). A similar point is made in the following quote:

The northern half had always relished their easier climate. James was as ruthless and brutal as any white man but he was the portrait of moderation compared to his younger brother. The stories from the southern half were chilling; in magnitude if not in particulars. (Whitehead 2016: 52).

The last quote specifically highlights how while in comparison to others, James could be seen as more moderate just because he did not resort to cruelty but this does not mean that his ownership of slaves was somehow better or justified.

There are a few other aspects in the novel that illustrate the extreme cruelty of Terrance. The novel stresses that Terrance was born cruel and only got worse as he aged.

#### Comparatively to James

Terrance, was a different sort. The cook still had a knot next to her ear where Master Terrance expressed his displeasure over one of her broths. He had been ten years old. The signs had been there since he could walk, and he perfected the more distasteful aspects of his personality as he launched into manhood and assumed his responsibilities. James had a nautilus disposition, burrowing into his private appetites, but Terrance inflicted every fleeting and deep seated fancy on all in his power. As was his right. (Whitehead 2016: 27)

This brings attention to how even if Terrance's cruelty was recognised by others, nothing could be done as he had unlimited and unrestricted power over the enslaved people under his jurisdiction. By law they were viewed as his property but the slave codes also dictated that he could not exercise power over enslaved people he did not own. Terrance is deemed to be cruel even by white people and even a slave catcher, Ridgeway. The latter's stance on slavery is the following: "If niggers were supposed to have their freedom, they wouldn't be in chains. If the red man was supposed to keep hold of his land, it'd still be his. If the white man wasn't destined to take this new world, he wouldn't own it now" (Whitehead 2016: 95). The big part of Ridgeway's distaste for Terrance was rooted in his lifestyle: "It was tragic, Ridgeway said, to see the degeneration that can happen in just one generation, but money does that to a family sometimes. Brings out the impurities" (Whitehead 2016: 251). Ridgeway also comments on Terrance's personality as "One minute with Terrance and the cause for this terrible atmosphere was evident. The son was mean, and it was the kind of meanness that infected everything around" (Whitehead 2016: 250-251). While those aspects come across as main reasons for his dislike it is also explicitly stated that "Ridgeway didn't hide his disdain

for Terrance Randall; the man had what he called an “ornate” imagination when it came to nigger discipline” (Whitehead 2016: 250).

Another example of a “good” slave owner is Mrs. Garner, the previous enslaver of Caesar before he was sold to Randall’s plantation. Caesar’s and his family’s situation is an example of one of those cases where enslaved people lived as close to free as possible under their circumstances. Caesar’s family was doing easier jobs and they had a separate income and their own family cottage as highlighted by this quote: “They grew a modest crop of vegetables to sell in town. His family lived in their own two-room cottage at the rear end of the property.” (Whitehead 2016: 58). Mrs. Garner is depicted to be more lenient and liberal than her counterparts in the novel as “She didn’t agree with the popular arguments for slavery but saw it as a necessary evil given the obvious intellectual deficiencies of the African tribe” (Whitehead 2016: 58). That is, while Mrs. Garner was a racist who believed in the racial inferiority of slaves, she did not exercise cruelty towards them. Due to that Mrs. Garner also approached Caesar’s family differently, even “teaching her slaves their letters so they could receive the word of God with their own eyes” (Whitehead 2016: 59). This shows that she decides to grant literacy to the slaves not because of their humanity, but her hope that they will find religion. She also gave her slaves more freedom of movement: “She was liberal with passes, allowing Caesar and his family to range across the country as they pleased” (Whitehead 2016: 59).

This approach was different from the way enslaved people were usually treated by their enslavers and it was also obvious by the reaction from people around Mrs. Garner as her behaviour “rankled her neighbours” (Whitehead 2016: 59). Mrs. Garner’s actions had a specific goal as “she prepared them for liberation that awaited them, for she had pledged to set them free upon her death” (Whitehead 2016: 59) which unfortunately did not happen. While Mrs. Garner had promised to manumit Caesar’s family, there was no written record of

this wish. This shows how unless there was written documentation by white people to back up Black people's claims their words had no weight and value due to their position.

Caesar and his family's story can be seen as parallels with the story of Harriet Jacobs and her family. Jacobs' had as fortunate childhood as possible in enslavement and even her narrative starts with the words: "I was born a slave; but I never knew it till six years of happy childhood had passed away" (Jacobs 2004) as the children of her family were raised together with the enslaver's children and Jacobs' grandmother had been promised freedom which was implied to have also been documented in the will of the enslaver. However, unlike Caesar's family, her grandmother was able to get the freedom promised because she was put up at an auction where an older woman purchased her with the intention to manumit her. Through Caesar, the novel gives a perspective of the enslaved person in that situation which adds a lot of depth. Without that perspective Mrs. Garner would seem like a good-willed woman but this perception is changed by Caesar's perspective. Caesar is justifiably angry and believes that his family was purposefully deceived by Mrs. Garner as

He should have been living with his mother and father in their cottage, rounding off barrels for the copper or apprenticed to another of town's craftsmen. /.../ But the old woman had lied and now his crossroad was reduced to one destination, a slow death in Georgia. For him, for his entire family. /.../ The old woman had destroyed his family so thoroughly it couldn't have been accidental. It wasn't her niece's greed—the old woman had played a trick on them the whole time. Tightening the knots every time she held Caesar in her lap and taught him a word. (Whitehead 2016: 208)

Outside of that quote Caesar referred to Mrs. Garner as "old white bitch" (Whitehead 2016: 279). In this example Whitehead is using the method of 'parting the veil' to give the reader a sense of the extent of the anger an enslaved person could have felt in such a situation. This is something slave narratives could not have done due to their target audience, especially as Mrs. Garner was comparatively more liberal than the stereotypical southern enslaver and had good intentions. However, it remains unclear in the novel if Mrs. Garner indeed intended to mislead Caesar's family but, as can be seen from the example of the experiences of Harriet

Jacobs' grandmother, it was not unheard of that enslaved people were promised freedom but then the promise was not granted.

While the central focus of the novel is not life in slavery, it still gives some insight into the living conditions, the type of work enslaved people do and how and the type of food and clothing they had access to. However, those aspects are not portrayed in immense detail. Descriptions of Randall's plantation mention 14 cabins in which enslaved people lived and "the strip between the cabins was a place to tie a goat, build a chicken coop, a spot to grow food to fill your belly on top of the mash doled out by the kitchen every morning" (Whitehead 2016: 16). This illustrates how the area around the cabins was also used by their inhabitants to make their life better. Already Cora's grandmother used the plot of land she had claimed as "hers" for growing crops and was therefore cherished. This piece of land was something for enslaved people to call their own and also a lifeline.

Whitehead also gives insight into different jobs assigned to the enslaved. When the reader is introduced to the Hob women they are also given examples of a variety of jobs the women did: "Mary worked in the milk house, with Margaret and Rida" (Whitehead 2016: 41) and "Lucy and Titania /.../. And they worked in the kitchen under Alice. /.../ That left Nag and Cora. They tended to cotton in all of its phases" (Whitehead 2016: 42). That shows how even on the plantation the jobs varied from domestic ones to fieldwork. As the main protagonist is a woman, the male-specific jobs are not discussed in the same manner. However, we know that men definitely participated in fieldwork. The novel also does not give insight into the jobs of urban slaves. However, the novel comments on the slaves' belief in the easier situation of the north. After being separated from her family, "for the rest of her life she [Ajarry] imagined her cousins worked for kind and generous masters up north, engaged in more forgiving trades than her own, weaving or spinning, nothing in the fields" (Whitehead 2016: 5).

Whitehead also mentions the work enslaved people in addition to the duties put on them by their master. It is pointed out that one could have a “pass to go into town to sell crafts or had hired yourself out for day labor” (Whitehead 2016: 13). The character in the novel who does that is Caesar as his first owner had “encouraged him to cultivate a skill, one that would serve him in good stead as a freeman. He became a woodworker /.../ Eventually he sold his handsomely crafted bowls on the square” (Whitehead 2016: 60-61). After being sold to the Randall plantation “he continued his enterprise, joining the Sunday caravan into town with the moss sellers, penny seamstresses, and day labourers” (Whitehead 2016: 61). That practice allowed enslaved people to earn an income, even if very little, and to leave the plantation. Such income could be then later used for purchasing one’s or their family members’ freedom.

The confines of slavery also dictated family dynamics as by law children did not belong to their parents and enslaved people could not get married as they were not able to enter into contracts, including marriage. In the novel, the types of romantic relationships between enslaved people are not explored. There are some parts of the novel that mention them such as how Ajarry “took a husband three times” (Whitehead 2016: 8) or that “by now, the husbands who lived on other plantations had come for their Sunday-night visits. Walking miles, time enough to fantasize. Some wives were happier at the prospect of marital relations than others” (Whitehead 2016: 32). These quotes illustrate how there were relationship structures among the enslaved people that were recognised as equivalent to a marriage even if there was no legal backing. The structure of those relationships depended on different factors such as if both parties had the same enslaver and were able to live together or not but also the seriousness of the relationship. Those different structures are not further explored in the novel.

However, the relationship between mothers and their children and the impacts that slavery had on it are explored. It is shown both through what a mother experiences after a loss of a child and how a child experiences the loss of their mother. While Cora herself does not have any children, these experiences are shown through other female characters, including Cora's mother Mabel. One of the worries enslaved mothers had regarding their children was that they and their child might be sold separately. Early on in the novel that is compared to losing children due to death. That is done through Ajarry's children as she "bore five children" (Whitehead 2016: 8) but only one of them, Mabel, made it to adulthood because

Two died miserably from fever. One boy cut his foot while playing on a rusted plow, which poisoned his blood. Her youngest never woke up after a boss hit him in the head with a wooden block. One after another. At least they were never sold off, an older woman told Ajarry. Which was true – back then Randall rarely sold the little ones. You knew where and how your children would die. (Whitehead 2016: 8-9)

This illustrates the different ways a mother could lose their child: some of them were universal and some specific to the condition of slavery. The effect this had on the mother is illustrated on the occasion when the Hob women are taking care of Cora and "they cradled her head and sang lullabies to their lost children through her" (Whitehead 2016: 45), indicating that the loss of the children weighs heavily on the mothers who are often unable to express their loss directly.

Cora's specific situation gives insight into the child's perspective. In Cora's case, her mother decided to run away on her own and was not sold. Cora resents Mabel for leaving her behind as

After landing in South Carolina, she realized that she had banished her mother not from sadness but from rage. She hated her. Having tasted freedom bounty, it was incomprehensible to Cora that Mabel had abandoned her to that hell. A child. Her company would have made the escape more difficult, but Cora hadn't been a baby. If she could pick cotton, she could run. (Whitehead 2016: 117)

The novel gives important people in Cora's life their own chapters and thus readers get Mabel's side of the story as well. Mabel escaped because she did not want to die on Randall's plantation and thus "one midnight she decided, up in the sweltering loft, *I am going to survive*

– and the next midnight she was in the swamp, tracking after the moon in stolen shoes” (Whitehead 2016: 251). Mabel did in fact escape but it did not last for long as her conscience kicked in:

She had to go back. The girl was waiting on her. This would have to do for now. Her hopelessness had gotten the best of her, speaking under her thoughts like a demon. She would keep this moment close, her own treasure. When she found the words to share with Cora, the girl would understand there was something beyond the plantation, past all that she knew. That one day if she stayed strong, the girl could have it for herself. (Whitehead 2016: 353)

Unfortunately, Mabel never made it back to Randall’s plantation. While the reader finds out what happened to her, Cora never does. Despite Cora’s resentment towards her mother she manages to fulfil what Mabel wished for her.

These complex parent-and-child relationships are present in different African American slave narratives, for example in both Harriet Jacobs’ narrative from the mother’s perspective and Frederick Douglass’ from the child’s perspective, but his story differed significantly from Cora’s. Jacobs’ quest for freedom was linked to her children and wanting a better life for her children. Thus she had the same motherly conscience as Mabel but Jacobs did not leave her children behind. This makes those stories different as in order for Mabel to want freedom for Cora, she had to experience it herself first but Jacobs wanted freedom only if her children could have it too. Douglass’ experience is significantly different from Cora’s as he did not really know his mother who was working on another plantation and he only met her a handful of times. Thus his emotions regarding his mother and her death are relatively subdued compared to Cora’s anger at knowing that her mother made the conscious decision to leave her behind. It is the use and knowledge of collective memory that allows Whitehead to display the complex parent-and-child relationships in the novel from both perspectives thus giving the reader a broader understanding of those relationships.

Whitehead not only portrays enslavement but also addresses the discrepancies in the portrayal of slavery. During her time in South Carolina Cora worked at the Museum of Natural Wonders at the the Living History exhibit specifically as an actor or type, as the

curator of the exhibit called them. The museum focused on American history and allowed the visitors “to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience from Florida to Maine to the western frontier. And to see its people” (Whitehead 2016: 130). Cora was one of the three Black people who worked in the three exhibits: Scenes from Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship and Typical Day on the Plantation. It is also important to note that there were no white actors. The white roles that would have required actors were filled with wax dummies. This highlights the discrepancies in the treatment of white people and Black people as in those exhibits Black people were displayed behind a glass like zoo animals.

The names of the exhibitions are quite self-explanatory but each had a story for the actors to play out. The exhibit Scenes of Africa contained a scene with a hut and fire to give an idea of Africans before being kidnapped and sold into slavery. The obvious inaccuracies come into play in the two other scenes. In Life of the Slave Ship Cora played the role of an African boy who after boarding the ship “helped out on deck with various small tasks, kind of apprentice” (Whitehead 2016: 132) and in The Typical Day on the Plantation Cora’s role was to sit at a spinning wheel. This type of portrayal of both plantation and slave ships was wildly inaccurate, as Cora recognises:

There had been no kidnapped boys swabbing the decks and earning pats on the head from white kidnapers. The enterprising African boy whose fine leather boots she wore would have been chained belowdecks, swabbing his body in his own filth. Slave work was sometimes spinning thread, yes; most times it was not. No slave had ever keeled over dead at spinning wheel or been butchered for a tangle. But nobody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it. (Whitehead 2016: 138)

Cora highlights how the true nature of enslavement was made palatable for white people and did not match up with the realities. Cora tried to even bring it up with Mr. Fields, the curator of the exhibit:

She had numerous suspicions about the accuracy of the African and ship scenes but was an authority in this room. She shared her critique. Mr. Fields did concede that spinning wheels were not often used outdoors, at the foot of a slave’s cabin, but countered that while authenticity was their watchword, the dimensions of the room forced certain concessions. Would that he could fit an entire field of cotton in the display and had the budget for a dozen actors to work it. (Whitehead 2016: 131)

It seems that Mr. Fields missed the whole point of Cora's criticism and while the aspect of the room size might be warranted, he had decided to portray an enslaved person behind a spinning wheel which fit the space of the room, instead of a little piece of the cotton field and one enslaved person picking cotton. This type of portrayal gives a wrong idea of the experiences of enslaved people, also showing how African American history has been portrayed in real life with parts of their history erased or distorted to suit the white narrative. Addressing this discrepancy adds an interesting dimension to the novel because Whitehead is directly addressing the difference between African American historical memory and romanticising portrayals of the period of slavery by white people.

### **Lack of Bodily Autonomy**

One of the central themes of the slave narratives is the lack of autonomy experienced by enslaved people, including the lack of bodily autonomy. This came in different forms such as the general premise of slavery but also through forms of punishment and lack of sexual autonomy. The lack of sexual autonomy was experienced by both enslaved men and women as their status put them in a position where they were more exposed to this type of exploitation, but it affected women most significantly. Additionally, it also came in different forms such as sexual assault and harassment, coercion, "concubinage", forced "marriages" and breeding. This form of lack of bodily autonomy is experienced by multiple female characters in *The Underground Railroad*.

The most obvious lack of bodily autonomy is the punishments the enslaved had to endure if their work was not up to the bar or if they did something that their overseer or owner did not like. There was no standard form or frequency of punishments as they fully depended on the owner but some forms were more common than others. For example, "the whip was the standard punishment for disobedience" (Whitehead 2016: 259). The aim of the

punishment was to discipline and to assert power but it also had to be done in a way that the enslaved person would be able to continue their work. However, the punishments varied by the severity of the perceived offence as one enslaved man on Randall plantation had his eyes put out as a punishment for reading which meant that he was unable to do the work he did previously but you “don’t need eyes to shuck corn” (Whitehead 2016: 115). One of the Hob women’s, Titiana’s, “tongue had been hacked out by a previous owner” (Whitehead 2016: 42) but it allowed her to continue working.

During the brief time in the novel that Cora is still at the plantation, she receives a whipping because she stepped between Terrance Randall and a young boy named Chester who accidentally bumped into Terrance and spilt wine on his shirt. Due to that both Cora and Chester were whipped as a punishment and “Connely peeled them open the following sunrise /.../ and called for their bloody backs to be scrubbed out with pepper water afterwards” (Whitehead 2016: 43). While this was not the first time for Cora to get punished by whipping, “Chester had never been beaten. Now he had been, and tomorrow he’d get his first hiding. No more children’s games for him, races and hide-and-seek, but the grim trials of slave men” (Whitehead 2016: 281). A child’s first punishment is portrayed as the end of their childhood and a rite of passage in the most negative way. While they were growing up in slavery, before getting punished for the first time they were still children and had not been subjected to the cruellest sides of the institution yet.

The change in Cora’s living situation is explained when she is forced to move from the cabin where she was born and had lived to a cabin called Hob. The Hob is explained as the cabin for the strays, the people who were either crippled by the punishments or labour or who had lost their wits. That included both men and women as “The damaged men, the half men, lived in Hob first. Then the women took up residence. White men and brown men had used the women’s bodies violently, their babies came out stunted and shrunken” (Whitehead

2016: 19). This shows how enslaved women experienced sexual assault at the hands of both Black and white men.

Cora also experienced sexual violence at the hands of Black men. In her specific case, it was done as a form of revenge. However, this situation brings to light additional aspects surrounding the sexual assault of enslaved women such as the increased risk of sexual exploitation after reaching adulthood and how it was ignored because “Not long after it became known that Cora’s womanhood had come into flower, Edward Pot, and two hands from the southern half dragged her behind the smokehouse. If anyone heard or saw, they did not intervene” (Whitehead 2016: 25). Those two descriptions also follow the tone set by slave narratives when it comes to portrayals of sexual exploitation as it is very clear what happened to the Hob women and Cora but it is not outright stated. It becomes obvious because of the context surrounding the situations.

Sexual servitude or “concubinage” was a form of a sexual relationship between white men and enslaved women which was in a way transactional. In exchange for a sexual relationship, those women received favours or better working and living conditions and there were even cases when those enslaved women were referred to as ladies of the house or wives. This is also shown in the novel in the relations the overseer of Randall’s plantation had: “Connelley, the overseer /.../ summoned whatever slave gal he’d made his wife that month” (Whitehead 2016: 30). However this quote also highlights the fleetingness of those relationships as there was nothing legally binding about them. This type of relationship between white men and enslaved women is further explored in the story of Nag, one of the women living in Hob. In the case of Nag “for years she had been Connelly’s preferred, spending most nights in his bed” (Whitehead 2016: 44) and he “bestowed his slim favours upon her” (Whitehead 2016: 44). This quote draws attention to the transactional nature of these relationships as sexual favours granted better conditions for Nag. As is evident those

types of relationships could be more long-term and last for years and even decades, but they never reach the full level of consent and can be severed.

Nag's situation also demonstrates that enslaved women were aware of how this type of servitude could be beneficial as "Her mother [Nag's] had consorted frequently with white men and tutored Nag in licentious practice" (Whitehead 2016: 44). Sexual servitude was something Nag's mother participated in but neither her nor Nag's specific reasons are further explained. There were multiple reasons why enslaved women could have taken part in that type of relationship such as better living and working conditions or a better life for their children. The latter was not the case for Nag as she remained dedicated to this relationship with Connelly "even as he swapped their offspring" (Whitehead 2016: 44). However this also raises the topic of consent in sexual servitude relationships and whether enslaved women were even able to consent due the imbalances in that type of relationship. Realistically there was very little enslaved women were able to do when put into such a situation because rejecting the advances by white men in positions of power would put themselves at risk.

Another incident in the novel that describes the lack of bodily autonomy specifically women experience is when Cora has already left the plantation along the first stop on the underground railroad in South Carolina. In South Carolina Cora was visiting a doctor and was asked if she has ever considered birth control by Dr Stevens as:

South Carolina was in the midst of a large public health program, Dr Stevens explained, to educate folks about a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent a growth of a baby. The procedure was simple, permanent, and without risk. The new hospital was specially equipped, and Dr. Stevens himself had studied under the man who pioneered the technique, which had been perfected on the coloured inmates of Boston asylum. (Whitehead 2016: 134)

While Cora was given a choice in the matter and the ability to exercise her right to her own body, this was not the case for all Black women, as the novel shows:

As of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state. Coloured 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. But that doesn't apply to you, Bessie. Those are women who already have enough burdens. This is just a chance for you to take control over your own destiny. (Whitehead 2016: 135)

Those two quotes contain references to the treatment of and lack of bodily autonomy Black women experienced both during the period of slavery and even as late as the end of the 20th century. Specifically, “the technique, which had been perfected on the coloured inmates of Boston asylum” (Whitehead 2016: 134) demonstrates the lack of bodily autonomy Black women experienced in medicine and in gynaecology. Due to slavery and Black bodies belonging to the enslaver, it was easier to experiment with their bodies than with white bodies. Thus Black women play an important role in the development of gynaecology but their role often goes unrecognised as they were viewed just as nameless test subjects.

However, here Whitehead steers away from the period of slavery by bringing in the aspect of controlling Black women’s fertility. There was no need to control Black women’s fertility during the period of slavery as their being fertile was viewed as a good thing, as it added to the slave population, especially after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and white men were able to profit from the Black women’s fertility. The need to control Black women’s bodies and fertility came later. One of the ways it has been done is by marketing birth control to Black women in predatory ways by using poverty as an excuse to hide racism and eugenics. The racially motivated sterilisation is also addressed by Cora in the novel and highlights the disparities in the treatment of white women’s bodies and Black women’s bodies:

Then there was the matter of mandatory, which sounded as if the women, these Hob women with different faces, had no say. Like they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased. Mrs. Anderson suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit?! Was her doctor offering her the same proposal? No. (Whitehead 2016: 135)

While under the same circumstances, white women’s fertility was not targeted, Black women could have some resemblance of autonomy over their fertility as long as it profited white men but as soon as it was no longer profitable it needed to be controlled and limited.

While with the lack of sexual autonomy Whitehead mainly focuses on the experiences of women, he refers to men’s lack of bodily autonomy when it comes to medicine:

A group of men, some of whom she recognized from socials and afternoons on the green, filled the adjacent room while they waited for their blood treatments. She hadn't heard of blood troubles before arriving in South Carolina, but it afflicted a great number of men in the dormitories and was the source of tremendous effort of the part of the town doctors. (Whitehead 2016: 133-134)

This displays that men also were victims of medical experimentation. The reference to “blood troubles” links this specific incident portrayed in the novel to one of the best-known medical experiments on Black people: the Tuskegee Syphilis Study. This is later confirmed in the novel when Cora and Caesar meet South Carolina’s station agent Sam to discuss their future plans. Sam advises them to stay away from Red’s Cafe, a saloon that served Black people, because of the conversation he had with Dr. Bertman, the person treating the men’s blood troubles:

Several of his male patients frequented the saloon, carrying on with the female patron. His patients believed they were being treated for blood ailments. The tonics the hospital administered, however, were merely sugar water. In fact, the niggers were participants in a study of the latent and tertiary stages of syphilis. (Whitehead 2016: 145)

This is another instance where Whitehead takes a 20th-century event and puts it in the framework of pre-Civil War America. By bringing that event into the past and then paralleling it with the medical experimentation on Black women Whitehead demonstrates that even after the abolition of slavery Black bodies were disposable and could be experimented on to benefit white people.

However, the conversation that reveals the syphilis study also brings attention to the eugenic ideas that were the reason for such medical experiments. The conversation directly following the revelation of the syphilis study gives insight into the real motivations behind these medical studies:

“They think you are helping them?” Sam asked the doctor. He kept his face natural, even as his face got hot.  
 “It’s important research,” Bertman informed him. “Discover how a disease spreads, the trajectory of infection, and we approach a cure.” /.../ The syphilis program was one of many studies and experiments under way at the at the colored wing of the hospital. Did Sam know that the Igbo tribe of African continent is predisposed to nervous disorders? Suicide and black moods? The doctor recounted the story of forty slaves, shackled together on a ship, who jumped overboard en masse rather than live in bondage. /.../ What if we performed adjustments to the niggers’ breeding patterns and removed those of melancholic tendency? Managed other attitudes, such as sexual aggression and violent natures. We could protect our women and daughters from their jungle urges, which Dr. Bertman understood to be a particular fear of southern white men. (Whitehead 2016: 145-146).

This passage highlights the eugenic ideas and their hypocrisy. This is not the first part in the novel where eugenic ideas have been applied to Black people in regard to their lineage. Similar ideas were employed to make sure that the offspring of the enslaved people had favourable traits for the work required of them. In this case, the favourable traits might not have been the same and the reasoning was different but the underlying idea remained the same: the traits Black people were allowed to have were the ones that would benefit white people in some way. Another side of the hypocrisy is that the same traits were not considered to require medical intervention or correction in white people as is clear from the previous example of Mrs. Andersson.

However, Bertman disguised the racist medical experimentation driven by ideas of eugenics with the ideas of abolition. He framed it as something that was necessary and beneficial to Black people as:

America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization – first women but both sexes in time – we could free them from bondage without fear that they’d butcher us in our sleep. (Whitehead 2016: 146)

Another form of lack of bodily autonomy portrayed in the novel is lynchings. While lynchings happened both before and after the Civil War they are mainly known as a post-Civil War phenomenon. The most cruel and graphic representation of them happens in the novel in the state of North Carolina which has laws that do not allow Black people in the state. This was accomplished in the novel by the North Carolina government buying all the enslaved people at favourable rates and then selling them on to other states. The punishment for Black people or white people who were hiding Black people in the state of North Carolina was hanging. This was turned into a whole spectacle called Friday Festival. The Friday Festival started with a minstrel show that portrays an enslaved person escaping to the North being disappointed and returning but by the time they made it back the laws in North Carolina had already changed. The festival ended with the lynching of this week’s “catch” by

the night riders, the name given to slave catchers. This festival happened every Friday and made the lynchings into a race of who can be the best citizen and catch the most Black people or abolitionists in the state. The novel states that “the patrollers’ diligence was a point of pride from county to county” (Whitehead 2016: 201).

The organised nature of the lynchings is directly addressed in the novel by the North Carolina station agent’s wife Ethel: “At least in Virginia lynch mobs maintained a pretext of spontaneity. They didn’t string up people practically on your front lawn, the same time every week like a church” (Whitehead 2016: 233). The victims of the North Carolina lynchings were also displayed as a long term tools to instill fear into people. In the novel there is a miles-long road called Freedom Trail that goes into the town and the bodies of the lynching victims are displayed on both sides of the road:

The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments. Some of them were naked, others partially clothed, the trousers black where their bowels emptied when their necks snapped. Gross wounds and injuries marked the flesh of those closest to her, the two caught by the station agent’s lantern. One had been castrated, an ugly mouth gaping where his manhood had been. The other was a woman. Her belly curved. Cora had never been good at knowing if a body was with a child. (Whitehead 2016: 182-183)

The novel also gives an example of a spontaneous, not cult-like, lynching. This also explains what happened to Caesar after Cora left South Carolina. After leaving the state they were wanted for murder as Cora had fatally injured a white boy while they were trying to escape after being caught. Caesar was put in jail after he was found to be a runaway and “then word spread that Caesar was wanted for the murder of a little boy” (Whitehead 2016: 264). After this “They broke into the jail. The sheriff opened the door to be honest, but that’s not as dramatic. They broke into the jail and ripped its body to pieces. The decent people of South Carolina with their schoolhouses and Friday credit” (Whitehead 2016: 264). This scene also illustrates the hypocrisy of white people. They supported the uplifting of Black people until they did not feel threatened by them. Both Caesar’s and North Carolina’s cases demonstrate the importance of the memory of lynchings for African Americans as in the vast majority of the cases they were targets of false accusations. White people used those accusations as

justifications for racist hate crimes and due to the racist society were able to get away with them.

### **Seeking Freedom**

*The Underground Railroad's* main plot focuses on the main character's escape from enslavement. However, Cora's escape is not the only described escape. Whitehead gives insight into other characters' freedom-seeking efforts too. In most cases in the novel, the escapes portrayed were unsuccessful and thus we see the consequences of failed escapes. Seeking freedom is an important aspect of African American cultural memory and it has been often represented in African American literature. Whitehead depicts the different aspects of escaping from slavery from planning, to the actual escape and the outcomes and consequences.

While the novel depicts more than one escape the main means of escape it focuses on is the underground railroad which for the purpose of the novel has been reimagined as a literal underground railway network simplifying the process of getting from one state to another. However, the simplified means of travel do not simplify the process in general. It still includes all the dangers one would face if it would have been portrayed historically accurately. Freedom seekers had to get to the station without being caught, the station agents had to hide them until the next train and hide the stations which could be seen as a network of safe houses. The simplified portrayal of the underground railroad in the novel does not overly simplify and belittle the experience of the escape.

The experience in the novel differs depending on the station. The state of the station, the locomotive and the experience were different on every departure. The departure from Tennessee to Indiana is portrayed to be as the most pleasant and comfortable with the station being described as having "a table covered with a white table cloth" and "heavy chairs

upholstered in crimson” (Whitehead 2016: 309). There were also fresh flowers in a vase and paintings on the wall. For the freedom seekers waiting for the train, “there was a cut-crystal pitcher full of water, a basket of fruit, and a big loaf of pumpernickel for them to eat” (Whitehead 2016: 309). The experience of the train journey was similarly comfortable as “it was the most splendid locomotive yet” with “a proper passenger car” and with “enough seats for thirty, lavish and soft” (Whitehead 2016: 313). That was a significant improvement from the last time Cora travelled via the underground railroad from South Carolina to North Carolina. Due to the unexpected nature of Cora’s departure from South Carolina, she spent multiple days alone at the station with no light, food, or water and no knowledge of when the next train would be along. The journey on the train was not any better as she was not allowed to ride in the cabin of the train:

“You can’t go up here!” The boy said. “It’s regulations.”

“You can’t expect me to ride on that,” Cora said.

“All passengers ride coach on this train, miss. They’re pretty strict about that.”

To call the flatcar a coach was an abuse of the word. It was a boxcar like the one she rode to South Carolina, but only in foundation. The plane of wooden planks was riveted to the undercarriage, without walls or ceiling. (Whitehead 2016: 175)

From the description of the locomotive it is clear that the journey between the stations was not enjoyable and easy as Cora had to strap herself to the flatcar and “the rushing air made the ride into a blustery ordeal” and “Cora had to turn her body to catch her breath” (Whitehead 2016: 176). The different natures of the travel via the underground railroad illustrate how escapes could be different and there were different challenges along the way, some easier than others.

The most important leg of the underground railroad portrayed in the novel is the last trip Cora takes from Indiana to the undefined North. Cora is taken to that station for the first time before she needs to use it and it is also not the station that is widely used in Indiana for arriving or leaving passengers. Cora is taken to that station by Royal, a conductor of the underground railroad. Similarly to other stations, it is hidden under an abandoned house.

However, out of all the stations Cora had been to “It was the sorriest, saddest station yet. There was no drop to the tracks – the rails started at the end of the steps and jetted into the dark tunnel. A small handcar rested on the tracks, its iron pump waiting for the human touch to animate it” (Whitehead 2016: 306). At the end of the novel Cora has to use this station to flee Indiana and Valentine’s farm after the massacre that happened there. Cora had to use the handcar and her own physical strength to get to what waited at the end of the tunnel:

She discovered a rhythm, pumping her arms, throwing all of herself into movement. Into northness. Was she travelling through the tunnel or digging it? Each time she brought her arms down on the lever, she drove a pickax into the rock, swung a sledge onto a railroad spike. She never got Royal to tell her about the men and women who made the underground railroad. The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them carried them north on their backs, died for them. The station masters and conductors and sympathizers. Who are you after you finish something this magnificent – in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the lights. The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart. (Whitehead 2016: 362-363).

In that passage, Cora recognises everyone involved in the process of helping enslaved people to get to freedom but she also ultimately understands that the reason she has made it that far is her own determination and resilience. This illustrates the reality of choosing to run away from enslavement. Although the escaped slaves also had outside help in a variety of different forms, it was still their determination that made the successful escape possible. While Cora makes it to the end of that railway to the unidentified North, this is where Cora’s story ends and the readers never find out if Cora does get to live as a free woman. By doing that Whitehead steers away from the usual form of slave and neo-slave narratives.

The aspect of hiding is very prevalent when it comes to escape. Early on in the novel when leaving the plantation for good Cora and Caesar are trying to figure out the details of how to go undetected as long as possible to increase their chances of success. They planned the time of the escape to give them the biggest possible lead but also to make detecting them in the darkness as difficult as possible as “Cora suggested they wait for the full moon. Caesar countered that after Big Anthony’s escape the overseers had increased their scrutiny and

would be extra vigilant on the full moon, the white beacon that so often agitated the slave with mind to run” (Whitehead 2016: 60). They also relied heavily on the landscape to disguise them and to make finding them more difficult by staying off the roads and white people’s land, going through the swamp and travelling during the night. Additionally, they also needed to hide on some occasions when travelling to or from the station. In South Carolina as Caesar and Cora were fugitives but needed to get from their meeting point to the station it was decided “that travelling right under their noses with slaves hidden beneath a Hessian blanket in the back of Mrs. Fletcher’s cart, was the most prudent” (Whitehead 2016: 76). Cora experiences something similar later in the novel when she is being taken from the station in North Carolina to the station agent’s house. Due to the laws in North Carolina, Cora could not be seen thus on the wagon “they repositioned the sacks of grain and seed to make a slim pocket” (Whitehead 2016: 182) to hide Cora. These are more of a general example of hiding that would be required during the escape.

However, the most significant hiding rooted in historical accounts also happened in North Carolina. Cora could not be seen there but also could not leave. As a result Cora had to spend months hiding in the attic in a space between the roof and face ceiling with very little space as the nook “came to a point three feet from the floor and ran fifteen feet in length” (Whitehead 2016: 184). In the wall of the hiding space, there was a hole through which one could watch what was happening in the park during the day. During the night Cora was able to come down to the attic and talk to the station agent Martin. That specific way of hiding is directly taken from Harriet Jacobs’s slave narrative. She spent 7 years hiding in a crawlspace above her grandmother’s house, carving a hole in a wall to look at her children playing and was able to come down at night. Jacobs’s narrative is one of the best-known narratives by an enslaved woman and plays a crucial role in African American collective memory. By referencing it in a way Whitehead illustrates the universality of that experience.

One of the potential outcomes of seeking freedom was being caught and taken back to the enslaver. Freedom seekers were aware of this. The novel portrays multiple unsuccessful escapes. During Cora's time at Randall's plantation, she recounts two unsuccessful escapes. The first is the escape of Blake, the man who went after Cora's plot of land to put his doghouse on it. Blake's escape lasted for a few weeks that he spent hiding in the swamp. Unfortunately for him "it was his mutt's barking that gave away his location to the patrollers" (Whitehead 2016: 25) and thus he was discovered. The consequences of Blake's escape have not been discussed, but only referred to as gruesome as they made Cora "shiver to think about" (Whitehead 2016: 25). The second unsuccessful escape Cora recounts is the escape of Big Anthony that happens after the death of James Randall when his share of the plantation goes to his significantly crueller brother Terrance. Big Anthony "made it twenty-six miles before he was discovered snoozing in the hayloft" (Whitehead 2016: 52) and taken back to the plantation. Unlike in Blake's case, the punishment of Big Anthony is portrayed in detail and it is very gruesome, one of the most violent and disturbing instances in the novel. Big Anthony's punishment was to make a statement through torture and theatrics as "whenever white men put off punishment some theatre was bound to be involved" (Whitehead 2016: 53). This gruesome three-day affair is conducted in front of the audience of white people and the enslaved people of Randall's plantation. The nature of his punishment differed each day and got worse over time. Restraints were made and "two bosses secured Big Anthony and he dangled the first day" (Whitehead 2016: 54). The second day white visitors arrived at the plantation and "Big Anthony was whipped for the duration of their meal, and they ate slow" (Whitehead 2016: 55). The third day was the culmination of this torture and the enslaved people were called off the fields to witness it. "Randall's visitors sipped spiced rum as Big Anthony was doused with oil and roasted. The witnesses spread his screams, as his manhood had been cut off on the first day, stuffed in his mouth, and sewn in" (Whitehead 2016: 55).

This punishment was drawn out and unnecessarily cruel. However, it was supposed to send a clear message and discourage anyone who had any plans to run away. There was no standard way of punishing the people whose escapes were not successful. The example in the novel is especially cruel and, in a way, redundant. This, however, demonstrates how the punishment was above all about power and showing it.

The main means of seeking freedom in the novel is via the underground railroad but it was not the only or even the most used way to achieve freedom. However, it is a very popular way of portraying freedom-seeking in literature because it lends itself to daring characters and a compelling adventure story, as is also evident from *The Underground Railroad*. Whitehead gives examples of other ways of achieving freedom, although they are not explored in-depth. One of the ways was through manumission, as Caesar's family was promised. Another way was through purchasing one's freedom. This possibility is briefly mentioned in the section on the nature of the jobs enslaved people had.

Another example is John Valentine, who is the founder of the Black community at Valentine's farm. As the farm was a Black community that offered refuge to runaways it can be seen as a reference to maroon communities. Maroon communities were groups of previously enslaved Black people that had run away from slavery and hid in areas around the plantation that were difficult to access (Lockley and Doddington 2012: 126). From the context given in the book, it can be assumed that John Valentine was born free: "his mother was a seamstress, his father a white peddler who passed through every few months" (Whitehead 2016: 314). Upon his death his father left his estate to him and Valentine tried potato farming. Thus there is no indication that he had been enslaved at any point. In this context, it is also important that Valentine was light-skinned and able to pass for white. John Valentine met his wife Gloria at an indigo plantation where she worked. After meeting Gloria, "by the end of the week he had purchased her freedom". Thus John Valentine and his

wife are an example of purchasing one's freedom. However, their situation is different to an enslaved or even dark-skinned person purchasing their own or someone else's freedom. That is also addressed: "When Valentine purchased Gloria, no one thought twice. One way of keeping a woman was to keep her in bondage" (Whitehead 2016: 314). Valentine and Gloria had two sons and "the neighbours thought it broad-minded, if wasteful, that he set them free" (Whitehead 2016: 314). Thus due to the fact that Valentine was light-skinned and presumed to be white by their neighbours, they also assumed that his and Gloria's marriage was concubinage and their children enslaved due to the mother's status.

There is another example of the practice of buying freedom in the novel on Valentine's farm by a man named Mingo whose story is regarded as legendary: "After he had hired himself out from his master for weekend labour, he had purchased the freedom of his wife, then his children, and finally himself" (Whitehead 2016: 297). However, his experience is presented briefly in that one sentence and the novel does not go into details about the specifics of that process.

In the novel, the historically accurate Fugitive Slave Act is mentioned. The act entailed that all enslaved who escaped and were captured had to be returned to their enslaver. The law also required the people in the free states to follow the law and thus turn in Black people who had successfully escaped. The Fugitive Slave Law is mentioned thrice. Two of the mentions explain the nature of the law: "the Fugitive Slave Law says we have to hand over runaways and not impede their capture – not drop everything we're doing just because some slave catcher thinks he's onto his bounty" (Whitehead 2016: 153) and "the Fugitive Slave Law says I have a right to return this property to its owner" (Whitehead 2016: 224). While the third mention acknowledges its dangers for the Black population: "We have a legal rights as American citizens to be here." But the Fugitive Slave Law was a legal fact as well" (Whitehead 2016: 330).

While the law itself is mentioned only thrice, it heavily influences the plot. Upon their arrival in South Carolina Cora and Caesar got new identities because ““You’re runaways,” Sam said. “This is who you are now.”” (Whitehead 2016: 109). For the duration of her stay in South Carolina, Cora’s documentation states that her name is Bessie Carpenter and that she is the property of the United States. The law has a bigger influence on the plot as the slave catcher Ridgeway goes after Cora and in North Carolina takes her with him to take her back to Randall plantation.

### **Barriers Faced in Freedom**

For Black people hardships did not simply end with escaping from enslavement as they were thrust into a completely new environment that they needed to learn to navigate. In that process, they faced multiple different barriers. Some of the barriers were the result of being enslaved and the lack of education that came with that but others were due to the nature of society. In this section, I will focus on both kinds of barriers as they give us insight into the life of free Blacks and the nature of the society around them.

The barriers that previously enslaved Black people faced were often due to the lack of education and their isolated way of living. However this was not always the case as there was a difference between the jobs enslaved people did: some required more specific skills than others, and people who were enslaved in urban areas were more likely to move around in their day-to-day life than people who lived in rural areas who often never left the plantation. Enslavers with different kinds of beliefs and moral codes also contributed to this diversity as is evident from the different experiences of Cora and Caesar.

The situation of Caesar’s family, before he ended up at Randall’s plantation, has been already briefly mentioned. Due to Mrs. Garner’s more liberal views, Caesar knew how to

read and had been able to leave the farm and due to this more liberal upbringing Caesar had a very different outlook on what he could do with his life:

His prospects were limited by his race, to be sure, but Caesar had grown up believing he was free to choose his own fate. “You can be whatever you want to be,” his father said.  
 “Even go to Richmond?” From all reports, Richmond sounded far away and splendid.  
 “Even Richmond, if you like.” (Whitehead 2016: 280)

That is very different to Cora’s experience when they escaped: “This was her first time out in the world and there was much she did not know” (Whitehead 2016: 78). Unlike Caesar Cora also could not read as it was something that was not tolerated at Randall’s plantation as:

Connely once put out a slave’s eyes for looking at letters. He lost Jacob’s labour, though if the man had been talented the overseer would have subjected him to a less dramatic punishment. In return he gained the eternal fear of any slave with a notion to learn his letters. (Whitehead 2016: 114-115)

The first time Cora signed for the groceries for the family she worked for “she signed with an X” (Whitehead 2016: 102) as she did not know how to write her name. Thus upon arriving in South Carolina, her first stop along the underground railroad, Cora starts learning to read and write as “South Carolina maintained different attitude toward colored progress” (Whitehead 2016: 114).

The escaped slaves also had to acquire the very basic bodily behaviours to look like free people. When Cora and Caesar first got to South Carolina “they would have to learn how to walk like a freemen” (Whitehead 2016: 112). The difference in the way how free Blacks hold themselves compared to those who had been enslaved is also addressed by Royal who was born free:

“A free black walks different than a slave,” he said. “White people recognize it immediately, even if they don’t know it. Walks different, talks different, carries himself different. It’s in the bones.” Constables never detained him and kidnappers kept their distance. (Whitehead 2016: 312)

However, living among free people and attending the school for previously enslaved people paid off as

In the following months, Cora mastered posture. Her letters and speech required more attention. After her talk with Miss Lucy, she removed her primer from her trunk. While the other girls gossiped and said goodnight one by one, Cora practiced her letters. The next time she signed for the Andresons’ groceries she would write *Bessie* in careful print. (Whitehead 2016: 112)

It is demonstrated that Cora was very open to learning and recognised its importance but the difficulties have also been addressed, as after having to flee South Carolina she no longer had someone to teach her. Yet she did not stop trying to learn more: while being in North Carolina “she worked on her reading, making the best of the education that had been cut short in South Carolina” (Whitehead 2016: 202). Cora was able to receive an education again once she had made it to Indiana, but the biggest difference there was that the school was not geared towards formerly enslaved people but towards Black children. Being schooled next to children showed the extent of Cora’s skills and how she fell behind next to the children who had the opportunity to learn since they were little. That made her feel “conspicuous, older than all of them, and so far behind” (Whitehead 2016: 286). On Valentine’s farm, children were able to receive an education in the same manner as white children but this also illustrates how people who were born into slavery firstly missed out on that childhood experience but secondly had to deal with those consequences later if they managed to get their freedom.

Whitehead illustrates the general stances on the literacy of Black people. Historically, especially in the South, enslaved and even free Blacks were not permitted to learn to read and write. This has been addressed in the novel multiple times, for example in the dialogue between Caesar and Mr. Fletcher, the shopkeeper who aided Casar and Cora’s initial escape via the underground railroad:

“You can read, can’t you?”

“Sir?” Saying it like the Georgia boys said it.

“I’ve seen you in the square, reading signs. A newspaper. You have to guard over yourself. I’m not the only one can spot such a thing.” (Whitehead 2016: 61)

While in this exchange the dangers of being literate are not directly addressed, it comes across as a very clear warning. The legality of and punishment for teaching enslaved people to read are addressed by the teacher at the school in South Carolina, Miss Handler: ““In North Carolina,” she said, “what we are doing is a crime. I would be fined a hundred dollars

and you would get thirty-nine lashes. That's from the law. Your master would likely have a more severe punishment'" (Whitehead 2016: 114). Those two examples refer to the laws and the general attitudes but as those come from the characters who are against slavery they do not convey the full extent of the anti-literacy sentiments.

The true issue with literacy is highlighted in this quote: "Look around. If they kill a slave for learning his letters, how do you think they feel about a library? We're in a room brimming with ideas. Too many ideas for a colored man. Or a woman." (Whitehead 2016: 330) This quote illustrates how literacy potentially gives enslaved people access to a significantly larger amount of information and anti-slavery literature and the type of information they can consume can no longer be controlled by white people. This sentiment is also expressed in Douglass' narrative where he views literacy as a key to his freedom. This emphasis on literacy through the novel shows its importance in African American collective memory as Cora starts out being illiterate and through her journey to freedom she learns to read so by the time she reaches the North she is literate. Literacy also helps her integrate into society as a free woman, making literacy and freedom go hand-in-hand.

The full extent of the potential of literacy is demonstrated by characters who are against abolition. This attitude is highlighted by the slave catcher Ridgeway: "It was a bother to be stopped on the road in a Free State when the lost property turned out to have a silver tongue. Get them off the plantation and they learned to read, it was a disease" (Whitehead 2016: 95). Both of the examples display the importance of literacy in the same way Frederick Douglass does in his narrative. It is portrayed as something white people do not want the Black population to possess thus making it an important skill to acquire. Literacy has historically been a powerful tool for abolition and self-determination for African Americans.

Another instance of what could be called a barrier due to the lack of education that previously enslaved people experienced was the use of grammatically correct English. There

are multiple instances where Cora's English gets corrected because it is not grammatically correct such as in this instance:

"How are things?" Miss Lucy asked.  
 "Think I'm gonna spend a quiet night in the quarter, Miss Lucy," Bessie said.  
 "*Dormitory*, Bessie. Not *quarter*."  
 "Yes, Miss Lucy."  
 "*Going* to, not *gonna*."  
 "I am working on it." (Whitehead 2016:106)

In this case, Cora is corrected for using contractions which are considered informal and thus would show that she lacks education. Additionally, she is corrected for using the word *quarter* to refer to dormitories because of her experience of slavery. There is another example in which Cora's English is corrected by Miss Lucy when Cora was inquiring about her mother:

"What's her name?"  
 "Mabel Randall."  
 "Your name is Carpenter," Miss Lucy said.  
 "That my daddy's name. My mother, she a Randall."  
 "That is," Miss Lucy said. "She is." (Whitehead 2016: 116)

However, the reason previously enslaved people struggled with grammatically correct English is also addressed in the novel:

He favoured a pidgin of his lost African tongue and slave talk. In the old days, her mother had told her, the half language was the voice of the plantation. They had been stolen from villages all over Africa and spoke multitude of tongues. The words from across the ocean were beaten out of them over time. For simplicity, to erase their identities, to smother uprisings. All the words except for the ones locked away by those who still remembered who they had been before. "They keep 'em hid like precious gold," Mabel said. (Whitehead 2016: 113)

This explanation is rooted in history and the practice of putting together people from different parts of Africa for the journey across the Atlantic Ocean has been addressed earlier in the novel: "The captain staggered his purchases, rather than find himself with a cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue." (Whitehead 2016: 4) Grammatically incorrect English signalled a lack of education and position in society. This has connections to today's situation. The use of African American Vernacular English is very stigmatised as incorrect. Thus Whitehead once again uses an element that can be seen both in the past and present to highlight historical continuities.

The novel makes multiple references to various degrees of racial segregation. The racial segregation as the result of the Jim Crow laws illustrates how the abolition of slavery did not mean that Black people were no longer targeted by unjust laws. The passing of Jim Crow laws happened after the Civil War but Whitehead puts the consequences of those laws into the context of antebellum America to illustrate the severity of the outcomes of those laws.

The portrayal of the state of South Carolina shows a racially segregated society. In this fictional South Carolina there are only Black people who live as freemen. Thus in theory they should have access to the same spaces as white people but, in reality, that was not the case. The novel mentions factories that “tended not to employ colored help” (Whitehead 2016: 104), “colored saloon” (Whitehead 2016: 106), “colored schoolhouse” (Whitehead 2016: 115) and “coloured emporium” (Whitehead 2016: 121). However the rules about who can enter white-only establishments do not seem to be as strict because Cora states about the emporium that “She shopped there as little as possible on account of the markup. From shopping for Mrs. Anderson, she was horrified that things in their local establishment cost two or three times as much as those in the white stores” (Whitehead 2016: 121).

This also brings attention to a predatory aspect as the places that were for Black customers were more expensive. Thus marking up goods in stores for Black people who earned less than white people was taking advantage of them by not following the idea of “separate but equal”. Cora also brings attention to the lack of financial literacy of the previously enslaved people because “money was new and unpredictable and liked to go where it pleased” (Whitehead 2016: 121). A lot of the Black establishments allowed the use of script, which meant that “some of the girls owed months of wages and resorted to script for everything now” (Whitehead 2016: 121). Historically Black people have been taken advantage of due to their lack of financial knowledge because of the period of slavery.

The most extreme portrayal of segregation is in the state of North Carolina where “the negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes” (Whitehead 20126: 187). This happened as a result of the events and political climate after the Southampton rebellion. In the novel the state of North Carolina enacted a law that “forbid coloured men and women from setting foot on North Carolina soil. Freemen who refused to leave their land were run off or massacred” (Whitehead 2016: 198). Or as is highlighted in this quote: “In effect, they abolished slavery. On the contrary, Oney Garrison said in response. We abolished niggers” (Whitehead 2016: 197). This resulted in extreme segregation.

This portrayal of North Carolina refers to the so-called sundown towns which were neighbourhoods, towns or even whole cities and states that practised some form of municipality-wide segregation (Loewen 2005). In milder cases, as the name shows, Black people had to leave the area by sundown, in more extreme cases such as in North Carolina in the novel they were not allowed in the state at all. In the novel the punishment for not following the law was lynching. While there are no longer laws that mandate racial segregation today, those laws were in place well into the 20th century and have had an effect on American society that can be felt until this day. Race and poverty are tightly linked in the US due to history which means that schools in poor areas have a primarily Black student body while the opposite can be said about schools in rich neighbourhoods. There is also a notable amount of media representation that deals with the experiences of Black families moving to white neighbourhoods or Black children going to white schools. Thus these historical events’ consequences are still apparent nowadays.

## CONCLUSION

Historically African Americans have faced the erasure of their history due to racism and their position as former enslaved people. Due to that they have not had the same tools available for recording their history and self-determination as the majority white culture. Thus African Americans have used memory and literature to serve as a way to remember and fill the blanks left behind by the erasure they have experienced. Colson Whitehead in his novel *The Underground Railroad* has heavily relied on African American historical memory to tell the story of Cora's freedom seeking journey. This makes it a very effective source material for analysing the representation and uses of African American historical memory in fiction.

The novel is analysed through four narrative characteristics of slave narratives present in the novel: descriptions of life as an enslaved person, portrayals of lack of bodily autonomy, the aspects of seeking freedom and barriers faced in freedom. Analysing the novel through the characteristics of slave narratives allows me to show how modern narratives of slavery and freedom seeking differ from the original slave narratives by giving examples of both and highlighting the differences. This allows me to show how Whitehead uses Morrison's method of 'parting the veil' to give characters extra depth and emotion that would have been considered too emotional and not objective enough in the case of slave narratives the main aim of which was the documentation of the evils of slavery. This method also allows Whitehead to portray some usually suppressed elements of slave narratives in more detail such as sexual exploitation and the cruelty of the punishments which could not be covered in the 19th century. This enables Whitehead to paint a more accurate picture of enslavement than slave narratives because he does not have to face the historical constraints and the target audience.

The analysis of life in enslavement gives an overview of slave auctions and the experience of transatlantic slave trade, different types of enslavers and their cruelty, the work enslaved people did, their family dynamics and lastly the portrayal of slavery by a white person for a white audience. The last element allowed Whitehead to address the issues of portrayal of African American memory and illustrates the need for the use of historical memory. Throughout history African American history has been recorded through a white lens, focusing only on aspects that white people deemed important. In the novel we see the ironic portrayal of this white gaze in the scene about the Museum of Natural Wonder that misrepresents African American history. While Cora, who is the authority on the subject, brings the inaccuracies to the curator's attention she is shut down, showing how Black people's own interpretations of their history have not been valued.

The analysis of the lack of bodily autonomy discusses the largest number of gender specific examples as for the large part the novel deals with the lack of sexual and medical autonomy experienced by women. However, the analysis also discusses a male specific example. The subchapter also gives an overview of punishments enslaved people received and lynchings. This is also the first instance in the analysis where the examples contain references to both elements from the period of enslavement and after that. In the case of medical experiments both the sterilisation of women and the syphilis experiment of men have their historical roots in post-Civil War events. Putting those events in the context of the period of slavery allows Whitehead to illustrate the extent of American racism. The portrayals of the lack of bodily autonomy in general displays how Black bodies in American history have been viewed as disposable and there to fulfil the needs of white people.

The analysis of seeking freedom portrays the different aspects of the process and consequences of an unsuccessful escape. These scenes continue the trend of not staying true to the historical facts about the period of slavery. History is rewritten notably by portraying

the underground railroad as a literal underground locomotive. Portraying the underground railroad as just means of transportation allowed Whitehead to explore a variety of different freedom seeking scenarios and remain true to the difficulty and the dangers of seeking freedom. Historically the escape via the underground railroad was one of the less common ways of securing freedom but its use allows Whitehead to stress the courage and agency of the freedom seekers. While it was the main way of the escape in the novel, Whitehead gives examples of the other ways to call attention to a full range of the means of seeking freedom. However, it can be said that seeking freedom by escape is very popular in African American collective memory as this is the example where Black people appear as master's of their fate.

The last section of the analysis focuses on the barriers that the newly freed Black people had to face. The two main aspects analysed in this section are literacy and segregation, the consequences of both of which African Americans still have to face nowadays. Whitehead uses the process of acquiring literacy to show how Cora was able to integrate into American society as a free woman. The importance given to literacy in the novel is also testament to the huge role it plays in African American collective memory, as a tool for abolition and African American self-determination. In representing segregation, Whitehead takes a post Civil War element and puts it in the context of slavery to show that the end of slavery does not mean that the attitudes towards Black people changed dramatically.

The elements of African American collective memory Whitehead portrays range across different time periods. The earliest elements go back to the period of transatlantic slave trade while the most contemporary elements are from the 20th century. With this Whitehead takes the reader on a journey through African American history and the historically important events that make up their cultural memory and highlight the extent of American racism. The approach Whitehead uses makes the novel simultaneously very inaccessible and very accessible to the reader. Understanding the elements of historical

memory requires an extensive knowledge of African American history that might not even be available for African Americans. However, Whitehead pairs those lesser known elements with generalising statements about American history, connecting the different elements portrayed in the novel and illustrating their significance. This makes the novel very accessible for people who do not have the background knowledge to make those connections themselves. Thus the novel helps the readers gain new knowledge to make those connections themselves.

This thesis adds to the scholarship on uses of African American historical memory in fiction. My analysis shows the importance of African American cultural memory, specifically the importance of keeping the canon alive by returning to themes already explored in slave narratives to enrich them with contemporary perspectives in order to create African American historical memory and also shift the overall American literary canon.

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## RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL  
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

**Hanna-Britt Augasmägi**

**“One might think one's misfortunes distinct but the true horror lay in their universality”:** representation of African American historical memory in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

**“Võiks arvata, et ebaõnn on isiklik tragöödia, kuid tõeline õudus peitub selle universaalsuses”:** afroameerika ajaloolise mälu kujutamine Colson Whiteheadi romaanis *Maa-alune raudtee*

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Käesoleva magistritöö eesmärgiks on analüüsida, kuidas on kujutatud ning kasutatud afroameerika ajaloolist mälu Colson Whiteheadi romaanis *Maa-alune raudtee*. Töö sissejuhatus annab ülevaate romaani retseptioonist ning selle kirjutamise tagamaadest. Töö esimene peatükk avab afroameerika ajaloo konteksti, mis on vajalik selleks, et mõista mälu ja ilukirjanduse olulisust afroameeriklaste jaoks. Lisaks tutvustab peatükk ka afroameerika kirjandustraditsiooni ja orjanarratiivide olulisust ning afroameeriklaste kujutamist laiemas ameerika kirjanduses. Mälu kontekstis käsitletakse afroameerika mälu temaatikat ning mälu kasutamist kirjanduses ning ka laiemat kollektiivse mälu valdkonda ning seotakse see afroameerika ajaloolise mäluga.

Töö teine peatükk algab romaani tutvustusega ning, kasutades läbilugemist, analüüsib romaani neljas alapeatükis. Töös analüüsitakse afroameerika ajaloolist mälu toetudes neljale orjanarratiivi tunnusele: elu orjana, kehalise autonoomia puudumine, põgenemine orjusest ja takistused vabaduses. Analüüs näitab, et Whitehead kasutab oma romaanis elemente afroameerika ajaloost, mis toimusid nii orjanduse perioodil kui ka hiljem, et näidata afroameerika ajalugu kui tervikut ning rassismi kui äbivat joont afroameerika ajaloolises mälus ka pärast orjandusperioodi lõppu.

Märksõnad: afroameerika kirjandus, ameerika kirjandus, ajalooline mälu, afroameerika ajalooline mälu

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mille juhendaja on Raili Marling,

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Raili Marling

16.05.2023