

SLAVE NARRATIVES AND SPECULATIVE FICTION IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD*^a

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Abstract

The paper explores the links between a contemporary novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by Colson Whitehead and the literary genre of slave narratives, and argues that this popular and critically acclaimed novel bases its narrative structure on the adaptation of slave narrative tropes and the use of speculative realism. The theoretical framework first considers some of the basic tenets of slave narratives as a genre and then places Whitehead's work within a broader context of African American writing, focusing on the relationship between realism and fantasy in slave narratives and Whitehead's novel. Furthermore, Whitehead's narrative is also considered in light of Ramón Saldivar's terms "speculative fiction" or "historical fantasy" (2011, p. 585) which denote a combination of genres blending fantasy and history in order to come up with a contemporary, fluid and multi-faceted narrative way to tell the artistic truth. The central part of the paper offers a reading of Whitehead's novel based on the argument that it represents a creative contemporary adaptation of the slave narrative literary genre as well as an example of postrace speculative fiction which problematizes and highlights the issue of race and the legacy of slavery in contemporary American society.

Key words: slave narrative, Colson Whitehead, race, African American studies, speculative fiction.

УТИЦАЈ РОБОВСКИХ НАРАТИВА И СПЕКУЛАТИВНЕ ФИКЦИЈЕ НА РОМАН *ПОДЗЕМНА ЖЕЛЕЗНИЦА* КОЛСОНА ВАЈТХЕДА

Апстракт

Рад истражује повезаност између савременог романа „Подземна железница“ (2016.) Колсона Вајтхеда и књижевног жанра робовских наратива (енг. slave narratives). Главни аргумент је да је Вајтхед засновао наративну структуру свог

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популарног и вишеструко награђиваног романа на адаптацији тропа из робовских наратива и употреби спекулативног реализма. Теоријски оквир најпре разматра неке од основних карактеристика жанра робовских наратива, а потом смешта Вајтхедово дело у шири контекст афроамеричке књижевности посебно се фокусирајући на однос између реализма и фантастике у робовским наративима и роману „Подземна железница“. Овај роман се такође разматра и у светлу појмова „спекулативна фикција“ и „историјска фантастика“ које је формулисао Рамон Салдивар (2011, стр. 585), а којима се означава комбиновање жанрова и спој фантастике и историјске фикције како би се дошло до савременог вишезначног начина за исказивање уметничке истине. Главни део рада нуди читање Вајтхедовог романа које се заснива на аргументацији да је ово дело креативна савремена адаптација жанра робовских наратива, као и пример пост-расне фикције која проблематизује и истиче питање расе и наслеђе робовласништва у савременом америчком друштву.

Кључне речи: робовски наратив, Колсон Вајтхед, раса, Афроамеричке студије, спекулативна фикција.

INTRODUCTION

Critically acclaimed and widely popular, Colson Whitehead's novels are notoriously difficult to categorize in terms of genre, and have been posing a challenge for critics who described them as black urban fiction, detective fiction, noir, thrillers, magical realism, post-soul literature, etc. (Selzer, 2008, p. 393). What is more, in many of his interviews and articles, Whitehead himself has refused to adhere to any labels or place his fiction within a single genre framework, claiming he “was only wearing realist/detective/horror drag” (2013) in his books. This paper considers the constitutive elements and tropes of his Pulitzer-Prize-winning 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad*, and addresses its links to the slave narrative genre and speculative fiction. This peculiar blend of realism and fantasy is, I argue, what makes Whitehead's novel unique in its attempts at telling the artistic truth, and the main reason why his narrative is so powerful and contemporary, yet linked to the African American historical heritage. His adaptation, not only of slave narratives, but of slave stories and experiences, combined with elements of fantasy, somewhat resembles Tarantino's efforts in the movie domain to rectify history in a way (e.g., *Django Unchained*, 2012) by giving their protagonists near super powers and incorporating fantastic elements to empower their heroes, and give them the ending they deserve.

The Underground Railroad follows the story of Cora, a stray slave child, abandoned by her mother Mabel, allegedly the only slave to have escaped the Randall plantation and successfully evaded the much-feared slave catcher Ridgeway (towards the end of the novel, we learn that Mabel had actually died after a snake bite on her way back to the plantation). Ridgeway is the main antagonist, and the story follows a fated and fateful struggle between Cora and him. Cora runs off with another slave, Caesar,

and is forced to kill a white boy in pursuit of them during the escape. They are helped by a conscientious individual originally from the North, and we learn that not only is there a branch of the underground railroad in Georgia, where nobody expects it, but that the railroad is real: there are tunnels and tracks built by black slaves branching underground across different parts of the country. Cora and Caesar first go to South Carolina, the state with seemingly more liberal policies directed towards the emancipation process of former slaves. As the pursuit led by Ridgeway closes in on them, we also learn that the state of South Carolina conducts terrifying experiments over African Americans, such as forced sterilization and deliberate spreading of syphilis among the black population to study the course of the disease. Caesar is arrested and killed by an angry mob, and Cora manages to get away and ends up in North Carolina in the home of Martin, a former underground railroad conductor, and Ethel, his religious zealot of a wife interested in missionary work for its own sake, but heavily burdened by racial prejudice. North Carolina, we learn, has introduced a zero-tolerance policy towards African Americans and is implementing a sort of a Final Solution, which effectively means that all black people are ordered to leave the state and those caught lingering on, as well as those helping them are publicly executed. Cora hides in the attic like Harriet Jacobs¹ for a while, but is captured again by Ridgeway and taken to Tennessee, where she is saved by a group of armed African American freemen. She spends some time on a self-sustainable utopian-like progressive farm of liberated African Americans in Indiana, falls in love with free-born Royal, and has a brief respite from pursuit. Everything comes abruptly to an end as Ridgeway and his sidekick little Homer, an Uncle-Tom-like figure, destroy the farm and take Cora to show them the tunnel of the underground railroad which Ridgeway wants to dismantle. Cora takes him there and nearly kills him in a fall down the shaft, then uses the railroad to escape to California, leaving Ridgeway to die and achieving her freedom in the West along with many other American settlers.

Cora's journey to freedom, at least at a glance, resembles the stories of some of the famous protagonists of slave narratives; however, there are some significant differences that set Whitehead's narrative apart from both the slave narrative genre and the neo-slave narrative. The next section of the paper first considers some of the basic tropes of (neo-)slave narratives.

¹ The famous author of *Incidents in a Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), one of the best-known slave narratives.

THE LEGACY OF SLAVE NARRATIVES

(Neo-)Slave Narratives

In their seminal study of slave narratives, Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1985, p. xii) define slave narratives as “The written and dictated testimonies of the enslavement of black human beings published before 1865.” A more recent study (Warren, 2014, pp. 184-6) defines a slave narrative as “primarily the tale of remarkable individuals (...) making their way north against all odds,” and as “a tale of the rise of the individual.” They were particularly important as a means of giving voice to former slaves, a way for “the slave to *write* himself into the human community through the action of first-person narration” (Davis and Gates, 1985, p. xiii). In the face of white racist propaganda, the popularity of slave’s accounts was not only important for the abolitionist movement but also as the ultimate proof that African Americans were perfectly capable of writing, which in Western tradition was considered “the visible sign of reason” (Davis and Gates, 1985, p. xxiii). As they often sprung from speeches and retold experiences of former slaves, “the trope of orality” is particularly important for slave narratives and much of African American writing (Davis and Gates, 1985, p. xvi). Providing their accounts of slavery also effectively meant regaining the power of self-definition which is a major step in the process of de-victimization, and challenging and deconstructing negative stereotypes (Collins, 2002, pp. 97-121).

Slave narratives are one of the key genres of American literature, and along with captivity narratives, they represent a major phase in the development of American 19th-century sentimental literature (Warren, 2014, p. 186). As Toni Morrison (1993, p. 66) demonstrated, American literary imagination often used Africanism to articulate “the forbidden in American culture.” Slave narratives were instrumental for almost all major American writers to understand and acknowledge the importance of slavery for the American experience and the American tragedy (Warren, 2014, p. 186). It is no wonder then that:

Consciously or unconsciously, all of [the major black writers] reveal in their writing a debt to the narratives, a debt that stands in marked contrast to the relatively smaller obligations they owe the more recognized arbiters of fiction or autobiography.

(Davis and Gates, 1985, p. xx)

When it comes to the major characteristics and tropes of the slave narrative genre, the first one the critics emphasize is that they represent a combination of genres: whether they are described as representing an archetypal story of a hero completing his/her journey to freedom or an analogy to Western movies, or a type of a mystery story. The original genre, therefore, allowed for some lenience in combining different modes;

however, when it comes to the structure of a slave narrative, very little variation was allowed in the 19th century narratives. As the primary intention of slave narratives was to represent the harsh reality of slavery, and to raise awareness in readers of its dangers and the need to immediately abolish it, it had to be chronological and to firmly follow the established conventions. James Olney (1985, pp. 152-3) provides a long list of observed conventions based on a number of analyzed 19th-century slave narratives, including the fact that they needed to be introduced and authenticated by white people who also determined the form of the narrative.

Starting from the 1960s, slave narratives have also been the inspiration for many novels which are classified as neo-slave narratives, i.e., “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative,” (Rushdy, 1999, p. 3). Whitehead himself acknowledges the importance of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, and their well-known slave narratives for his own work at the end of his novel. Some critics count Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* among metafictional neo-slave narratives with satirical overtones (see, for example, Maus, 2021, p. 124). Salván (2020, p. 15) argues that a major aspect of Whitehead's novel is the fact that he reveals and narrates what was often hidden in slave narratives, either for the sake of protecting those who helped runaway slaves or because the original narratives were censored and retold from white men's perspective, or because relating certain gruesome details of escape was deemed offensive for the readers.

The first link between slave narratives and Whitehead's novel is the hybridity of form that he uses. In her discussion of Whitehead's work, Stephanie Li (2019, p. 1) points out that Whitehead's books are mostly described as hybrid forms, notoriously difficult to define in terms of genre as the writer's main goal is to subvert and/or discard the rules, limitations and predictability imposed by a particular genre. *The Underground Railroad* can be seen as Whitehead's take on the slave narrative and on the fiction dealing with slavery. In one of his articles that deals with writing in general, Whitehead (2009) mocks neo-slave narratives which he terms “the Southern Novel of Black Misery”:

Slip on your sepia-tinted goggles and investigate the legacy of slavery that still reverberates to this day, the legacy of Reconstruction that still reverberates to this day, and crackers. Invent nutty transliterations of what you think slaves talked like. But hurry up — the hounds are a-gittin' closer!

He criticizes the predictable pattern, conventions, common themes and literary devices used, the sentimentality, playing with people's emotions and expectations, and cultural appropriation by white authors. Therefore, it is understandable that his own take on the antebellum period in American history cannot be easily defined or placed within a certain

category. He plays with various possibilities, and especially the notion of neo-slave narratives. His ironic article reveals his peculiar attitude and a deep mistrust towards any type of predictive writing, whether in form or in function. Sometimes described as “New Eclecticism”, Whitehead’s art can be said to cross the boundaries of genre, media, and culture (Selzer, 2008, p. 393).

Slave Narratives and Fictionality

The most striking aspect of a slave narrative is the relationship between truth and fiction: on one hand, writers had to adhere to the demands of realism and give truthful accounts, and on the other hand, 19th-century slave narratives shared some traits with sentimental writing, especially its proneness to melodrama (Davis and Gates 1985, p. xv). Critics often point out this conundrum at the very heart of the slave narrative: it was one’s memory and one’s account, subjective by definition, but it had to be formulaic and predictable so as to counter and prevent any accusations of lying. Ironically, the artist had to forgo his/her artistic license and give “a clearglass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty” in order “to give a picture of slavery *as it is*” (Olney 1985, p. 150). This is the difference between autobiography (another very popular genre among African American writers) and slave narratives: in a slave narrative, the writer/narrator must not artistically shape his memory in order to maintain the trustworthiness of his narrative. Colson Whitehead does exactly the opposite: he artistically intervenes directly in the narrative, deliberately introducing fictional elements and breaking the conventions of the genre in terms of form, structure, and rules. Whitehead is not the first writer to introduce fantastic elements into his version of the slave narrative. As discussed by Sarah Wood (2007, p. 85-6), in her 1979 hybrid novel *Kindred*, Octavia Butler also used fantasy to transpose contemporary meanings and discussions of slavery onto the “reconstructed reality” of slavery, thus broadening the scope of its meanings and interpretations.

Whitehead’s blend of history and fantasy is sometimes called “speculative satire” (Dischinger, 2017, p. 88), and discussed as a contemporary aesthetic strategy for dealing with the relationship between fiction and historical realities and facts. So far, the most elaborate and in-depth treatment of this subject is Stanford professor Saldívar’s work (2011, 2013), which introduces the notions of speculative postrace fiction and historical fantasy, the terms he uses to describe the literary style of contemporary minority writers and their ways of dealing with the issue of race in the 21st century. According to Saldívar (2011, p. 585), speculative postrace fiction, the term that can be applied to Whitehead’s narrative, constantly oscillates between history and fantasy and “Its province in the aesthetic is a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions such as science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy

proper". This blend of genres constitutes a contemporary mode that reconciles a wish for social justice and realism: the readers are given justice while the fantastic mode does not take away from the horrors of slavery, but rather makes the story more poignant and powerful. The wish for "retributive (and ahistorical) justice" is something that fuels not only literature but also popular culture, especially movies, e.g., the already mentioned Tarantino's *Django Unchained* from 2012, and the means of achieving it also involve mixing truth and fiction (Dischinger, 2017, p. 93). Some of the traits and tropes of historical fantasy/posttrace fiction that Saldívar (2013, pp. 4-5) proposes are its "critical dialogue with the aesthetics of postmodernism", mixing of genres, speculative realism, and exploring "the thematics of race in twenty-first-century America."

By employing historical fantasy and posttrace fiction, Colson Whitehead escapes the trap of the sentimentalism of 19th-century slave narratives and neo-slave narratives which often contain the 'justice porn' trope. Whitehead also plays with the notion of authenticity and authentication of slave narratives. By introducing the fantastic dimension into his novel, Whitehead effectively mocks this mistrust of slave narratives and deliberately refuses to play the game of realism and factualness or fact-checking in which, typically, it is the white audiences/critics who have the last word as judges of veracity. As already mentioned, original slave narratives had to respect certain limitations and norms regarding the form and content, imposed by white authority, so Whitehead's strategy is another way of ascertaining and confirming the authentic black voice.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD AND SLAVE NARRATIVES

Truth vs. Fantasy

Almost from the earliest pages of his novel, Whitehead introduces the theme of oscillation between truth and fantasy in a narrative. When describing Cora's grandmother Ajarry and her forced journey to America, the narrator tells us that she imagined other members of her family separated from her at a slave auction meeting better fates than her own. Ajarry did not know that they had all died from the plague while being transported to the West Indies, and comforted herself by fantasizing of her family working for kind white masters up north, the maximum extent of good luck allowed to a North American slave. Whitehead allows his character to imagine a different reality, just like Cora imagines that her mother is free somewhere in America, not knowing that she had died in a swamp during her escape attempt. After Cora is forced to resort to violence in order to defend her meagre lot of land, the plantation folk spawn various malicious and fantastic reports about her and her alleged monstrous sexuality: she is accused of fornicating with wild animals on the full moon.

The purpose of these reports is twofold: in the novel, they are meant to alienate Cora further from her plantation peers; on a functional level, they follow the theme of possible realities that, although unreal, have a direct and important influence on (Cora's) reality.

This notion is further developed when Cora has the first encounter with the underground railroad and its staff. Lumbly, one of the conductors, informs Cora and Caesar that the train will take them to a different state and that:

Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop.

(Whitehead, 2021, p. 82)

When taken literally, the pun "a state of possibility" refers to different states of the U.S.A. and their different laws and treatment of African Americans. As the novel progresses, we, as well as our protagonist Cora, become aware of the irony of this statement, as 'different laws and customs' are all informed and fueled by racism, so each 'state of possibility' boils down to only one possibility for people of color. Its metaphorical potential is also very interesting as it corresponds to the main intention of the narrative: to represent different possibilities, different worlds that could have happened and could have been. Unlike slave narratives and their insistence on realism and a lack of any kind of embellishment or masking the truth, Whitehead refuses to conform to the demands of realism and clearly positions his narrative as one possible way of telling the artistic truth. He deliberately rejects the neo-slave narrative mode and its sentimentality or Morrison's notion of rememory and recreating trauma, and opts for a style that would incorporate a mixture of realism and fantasy while firmly grounded in the history of slavery and its accounts. Whitehead (Selzer 2008, p. 395) himself claims that "Tweaked reality is a tool," and in his writing; this tweaked reality, or rather, realities, become the tools for exploring and exposing the racism of the American (antebellum) society.

The first state of possibility that Cora and Caesar visit is South Carolina, where they are informed there is "a much more enlightened attitude towards colored advancement than the rest of the south" (Whitehead, 2021, pp. 108-9). And, indeed, at first Cora and Caesar do great: they are given new names, new jobs, new clothes, allowed to move freely, work and go to school. However, as the narrative progresses, we learn that former slaves are still slaves in the eyes of the law, only in South Carolina they are owned by the state. The state requires Cora and other African American women to undergo a mandatory gynecological exam, whereas the entire African American population is subjected either to controlled sterilization or left with untreated syphilis so that the progression of the

disease in the human population can be followed. As Cora is informed: “Blood research is the frontier” (Whitehead, 2021, p. 120), and medical experiments done on humans of African American origin will advance medical science further so that it can be of use to the white population. Ironically, African Americans whom racial prejudice and the U.S. laws have rendered sub-human are deemed as humans when needed for medical experiments (the episode with Stevens who steals cadavers for medical purposes and specifically targets African Americans as their relatives will not be able to complain or sue him also underscores this point). But the true irony lies in the fact that Whitehead modeled this episode, this ‘state of possibility’ with all its anachronistic (Cora sees a skyscraper when she first arrives in South Carolina) and fantastic (educated and free African Americans in the middle of antebellum South) elements on the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study² conducted in the period between 1932 and 1972 in Alabama by the U.S. Public Health Service. Whitehead uses speculative realism not only to tell Cora’s narrative but also to pass judgement on the 20th-century American society and its perilous prejudices inherited from the times of slavery, and to further problematize the issue of the legacy and the long-term effects of slavery and racism.

Whitehead returns to the theme of truth and its variations by (literally) placing Cora in a museum. During her stay in South Carolina, Cora gets a job in the Museum of Natural Wonders where she is called ‘a type,’ a human doll who is supposed to be an extra in various historical scenery displays in order to make them more vivid and interesting for the visitors. Some of the rooms with displays include “The Scene from Darkest Africa”, “Life on the Slave Ship” and “Typical Day on the Plantation”. Cora notices that although the scenes are meant to represent history realistically, there are many false details; in other words, the narrative that pertains to truth and realism is based on falsehood and unrealistic, even fantastic details. This becomes particularly important if the fact that the main purpose of museums is to educate and form knowledge is taken into account. The novel thus problematizes the ‘official’ knowledge transmitted through education and culture. Furthermore, Whitehead’s speculative realism also mirrors the ways of creating ‘official’ narratives, somewhere between truth and fiction. As Cora realizes:

² Almost 400 poor and illiterate African American men were subjected to this medical experiment under false pretenses. Their syphilis was left untreated even after the antibiotic became available and they were not informed of their medical condition (Yudell 2005, p. 1865). As a result, most of the original participants of the study died and many of their family members became infected. The case remains a notorious and shameful chapter of U.S. medical history.

But nobody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it. Certainly not the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit at that very moment, pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting. *Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach.*

(Whitehead, 2021, pp. 138-9, emphasis added)

The truth remains elusive and, in a limbo-state between realism and fantasy just like the museum display. What is more, Whitehead uses this metaphor to showcase the African American perspective of truth, i.e., reality constantly being manipulated, changed and determined by white people. In line with Saldívar's previously mentioned definition of posttrace fantasy fiction, the conventions of the genre are used to examine the realities of race in both 19th-century and contemporary American societies.

The most important comment and judgement on the American society comes from Lander, a free-born African American, a preacher on a farm in Indiana and, possibly, Whitehead's homage to William DuBois and his rhetoric (another character, Mingo, is clearly modeled on Booker T. Washington's conciliatory approach):

Valentine farm is a delusion. Who told you the negro deserved a place of refuge? Who told you that you had that right? Every minute of your life's suffering has argued otherwise. By every fact of history, it can't exist. This place must be a delusion, too. Yet here we are. And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes—believes with all its heart—that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are.

(Whitehead, 2021, pp. 340-1)

This speech questions the relationship between realism (truth) and possibility. What makes something (anything) real? The likelihood of it or the existence of it? What if something is real and exists against all odds? However unreal a utopian, self-sustainable farm of African American free-folk with its own school and library may seem, it is less unrealistic than a democratic society based on enslavement, genocide and colonialism. Whitehead employs speculative realism not only as a narrative strategy but also as a mode of thinking about the realities of the society in which he lives, and makes his character a spokesman not only for an individual but also for an entire oppressed group of people. Thus, through incorporating slave narrative tropes and the legacy of famous African

American intellectuals, Whitehead's novel offers a contemporary comment on the American past and its present as well.

Another instance where this can be observed is the use of the Declaration of Independence as a recurring motif. This document is first mentioned when the plantation owner Randall is looking for a slave kid Michael, famous for his ability to recite the Declaration, a wonder among slaves, and learns that the child died in the meantime. The absurdity of a situation in which a slave child recites the Declaration which affirms equality of all men is taken even further because the plantation owner needs the boy to entertain and impress his guests, and becomes very disappointed by the fact that his slave is dead and unable to do his bidding. As her journey through America progresses, Cora realizes how questionable the realities of the Declaration of Independence, the corner stone of American democracy, are:

The way poor Michael reciting the Declaration of Independence was an echo of something that existed elsewhere. Now that she had run away and seen a bit of the country, Cora wasn't sure the document described anything real at all. America was a ghost in the darkness, like her.

(Whitehead, 2021, p. 216)

The next time Cora hears the Declaration, she hardly recognizes it: African American children on the free farm in Indiana are having their first lessons in history and democracy, and are reciting the Declaration. Unlike the dead slave child, whose reciting sounded parrot-like and empty of meaning, the confident voices of newly-liberated children sound like music to Cora. The shifting of meaning and even the reality, the realness of Jefferson's famous document in the novel corresponds to the historical arbitrariness of its interpretation. The phrase "all men are created equal" has shifted its meaning throughout history to signify and include more and more groups of people, and Whitehead highlights this fact through his protagonist's perspective that also changes. A speculative mode of writing, thus, becomes a necessary tool to explore and problematize contemporary realities and constant changes in the circumstances of minority groups.

Movement

Another literary means Whitehead uses to play on the notions of (un)certainty and reality/fiction is the metaphor and the literal meaning of movement. As already mentioned, slave narratives had a clearly-defined structure, with a clearly-delineated chronological order of events, their authors always striving to live up to the expectations of the audience. In his novel, Whitehead breaks these conventions: his narrative chronological order is jumbled and we learn about different characters and their

fates as we piece the narrative puzzle together. Cora's journey is like an adventure story, even a picaresque, in some aspects similar to Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Like Huckleberry, Cora travels through the South and exposes the racism and hypocrisy of the country based on the enslavement of human beings, and just like Huckleberry, she is often disgusted with what she sees and refuses to report the details to the readers. Another trait that slave narratives share with a lot of African American literature is "the pattern of movement and the obstacles encountered ... so basic to Afro-American experience", as noticed by Ralph Ellison (qtd. in Davis and Gates, 1985, p. xx). This notion of movement is in slave narratives metaphorically represented as "a movement from absolute injustice (represented by the slave system) to absolute justice represented by the tenets of American liberalism" (Warren, 2014, p. 184).

Colson Whitehead modifies and adapts the trope of movement and obstacle in his novel in order to complement his artistic efforts of telling a story. First of all, as Cora travels on the underground railroad through the dark tunnels, the novel also leads us through the maze of racism, false promises and troubles that seem to await African Americans wherever they appear in America. After she escapes from South Carolina, Cora finds herself in North Carolina where "the negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes" (Whitehead, 2021, p. 187). The state authorities have decided to ban African Americans from North Carolina altogether and those who were unable to move are publicly executed every week during the mass celebration called the Friday Festival, whereas their rotting bodies are hanged along the road ironically called "The Freedom Trail". Although this seems like another speculative, unrealistic imagining of America's past, Whitehead based these chapters on true events in the early history of Oregon³, again blurring the line between reality and fiction. Cora spends her time in North Carolina hidden in the attic, where she is scarcely able to move and only has a small opening through which she can observe public hangings that happen every week. Her physical inability to move corresponds with the metaphorical situation in which she finds herself unable to move from the racist state(s), but this also underscores North Carolina's inability to move away from the racist and white supremacist attitudes that inform its law-making system and, ultimately render its population barbaric.

Throughout the novel, movement signifies freedom, an opportunity to escape slavery and a chance for a new beginning. Whitehead's underground railroad is given almost magical powers so that nothing can hap-

³ Before joining the Union in 1859, Oregon was envisaged as a whites-only utopia and after joining the Union, the state of Oregon was the only one to introduce the laws which specifically prohibited certain races from legally living, working, or owning property within its borders (Strochlic 2021).

pen to the protagonists while they are on the move. Ridgeway makes a fatal mistake when he tries to move Cora through Tennessee while keeping her chained, and, sure enough, she is saved. In the end, Cora finds her freedom constantly moving, she literally drives the wagon herself, leaving Ridgeway immovable and pushing westwards towards freedom. Just like in *Huckleberry Finn*, who wants to move westwards, to the Territory, freedom lies in the West and in constant movement. For Cora, California offers a place of hope, where she goes to find her freedom along with the multitude of American settlers of different origins who have decided to try their luck in the West. From what she has seen on her journey across America, it is clear that this retelling of a slave narrative will not end in absolute justice – there have been too many victims along the way. This is another very deliberate and purposeful intervention and modification of slave narrative tropes by the author of the novel. However, what prevails and remains a constant symbol of freedom is the underground railroad itself. With its elusiveness, constant changes, movements, new tracks, old tracks abandoned and reinstated, Whitehead's underground railroad, built by generations of enslaved black people, represents their own escape from slavery which had to be achieved through their own efforts, despite all the attempts to keep them in a subservient position.

CONCLUSION

One of the greatest merits of Whitehead's literary strategy in *The Underground Railroad* is his adaptation of slave and neo-slave narratives to speculative post-race fiction. This decision is particularly relevant when considered in light of the fact that a contemporary way of representing truth in literature and culture is often multifaceted, fluid, and sometimes even contradictory in order to include various perspectives. Just like in Whitehead's novel, in contemporary culture, 'self-evident truths' are often questioned, analyzed, complemented, modified, etc. Whitehead incorporates the slave's perspective, but makes his slave protagonist almost super-hero like and turns her story of suffering into a story of empowerment. Furthermore, he gives an interpretation of past and contemporary phenomena by working them into a fantastic setting for his novel, unreal, but grounded in reality. This fluctuation between fictionality and truthfulness is more than a narrative strategy. Firstly, it mirrors the insecurity of the position of a runaway slave – neither enslaved, nor free, her fate constantly prone to change and dependent on external factors. Secondly, it represents a reworking and a sort of distancing from the original genre of slave narratives which were conventionally directed towards white audiences and sanctioned by white arbiters of truthfulness. Whitehead's narrative decidedly and purposefully resists such authentication and gives power and significance to its protagonist. And finally, the uncertainty of

speculative postrace fiction mirrors the uncertainty of contemporary reality, which proves it to be a proper mode for contemporary storytelling that is not only about the narrative but also about questioning one's own reality, beliefs and attitudes.

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УТИЦАЈ РОБОВСКИХ НАРАТИВА И СПЕКУЛАТИВНЕ ФИКЦИЈЕ НА РОМАН *ПОДЗЕМНА ЖЕЛЕЗНИЦА* КОЛСОНА ВАЈТХЕДА

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Резиме

Рад истражује повезаност савременог романа „Подземна железница“ (2016.) Колсона Вајтхеда и књижевног жанра робовских наратива (slave narratives). Главни аргумент је да је Вајтхед засновао наративну структуру свог популарног и вишеструко награђиваног романа на адаптацији тропа из робовских наратива и употреби спекулативног реализма. Теоријски оквир најпре разматра неке од основних карактеристика жанра робовских наратива попут формулаичности, ригидне форме која је морала да задовољи захтеве белачке публике и потребу да се инсистира на истини и реализму. То је значило да су афроамерички аутори и ауторке стално морали да доказују најпре своју писменост, која је због расистичких ставова била оспоравана, а затим и веродостојност својих сведочења, најчешће уз помоћ белаца који су гарантовали за истинитост њихових прича. Вајтхед у свом роману намерно крши ова правила и конвенције и од своје јунакиње прави готово супер-хероину која превазилази све препреке и којој се неупитно верује. Овај роман се такође разматра и у светлу појмова „спекулативна фикција“ и „историјска фантастика“ које је формулисао Рамон Салдивар (2011, стр. 585) а којима се означава комбиновање жанрова и спој фантастике и историјске фикције како би се дошло до савременог вишезначног начина за исказивање уметничке истине. Наш аргумент је да је овакав наративни поступак ауторова свесна побуна против једнозначног читања према унапред прописаним (белачким) правилима и начин да се Афроамериканцима и њиховом наслеђу да приоритет у наративу. Главни део рада нуди читање Вајтхедовог романа које се заснива на аргументу да је ово дело креативна савремена адаптација жанра робовских наратива као и пример пост-расне фикције која проблематизује и истиче питање расе и наслеђе робовласништва у савременом америчком друштву. Кроз роман који садржи и фиктивне и реалистичне елементе засноване на стварним догађајима из америчке прошлости, Колсон Вајтхед преиспитује америчку историју, америчко друштво и неке од његових основних премиса из угла потлачене мањине која успева да се избори за равноправни положај упркос свим препрекама, па подземна железница остаје симбол те непрестане жеље и борбе за слободу.