

**A Journey Towards the True Face of America: the Motif
of the Journey and the Little Cosmoses in *The
Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead.**

Elixabet Arandia Arregi

Degree in English Studies

Department of English and German Philology and Translation and
Interpretation

Tutor: Margarita Giménez Bon

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Abstract

Travel literature has conventionally been concerned with recounting the adventures of courageous men and women in remote locations to encounter their auras and develop as individuals. Nevertheless, Colson Whitehead employs this literary genre to twist it around and narrate the untold within neo-slave narrative by revisiting the history of the United States. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the motif of the journey and the little cosmoses through the framework of travel literature, focusing on American history in *The Underground Railroad*. To accomplish this, some background information on Colson Whitehead is introduced, as well as a general explanation of travel literature or travel writing. Each station will reveal different practices of black oppression that have taken place over different periods of time. Each section in the paper combines secondary sources and close reading to analyze the role of the Underground Railroad and the cosmoses of each station as a different time period in the history of racial oppression in the United States. Finally, the conclusion rounds up how on account of the motif of the journey and the little cosmoses mentioned above, American history has been revised.

Key words: The Underground Railroad, Colson Whitehead, travel literature.

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1. Introduction

The publication of Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966 marked the African American novel for the remainder of the century (Rushdy 87). After it, multiple authors followed Walker's footsteps and created multiple works within the genre of the neo-slave narrative, such are the examples of Ernest Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and Gayl Jones's *Corregidora* (1975).

As Rushdy defines, the neo-slave narrative is the one which "assume[s] the voice of the slave and revise[s] the conventions of slave narrative" (93). Among its characteristics are the use of the form of "the historical novel, the pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative, and the novel of remembered generations" (Rushdy 89). Authors disclose the inner workings and complexities of a group that simultaneously joined in and reacted to both slavery and the Civil War and show what the reality of life supposed for the slaves (Rushdy 89). Besides that, with the story of a particular slave they achieve to collect the individual experience into the collective memory, which has been denied. Therefore, the purpose of the author is to "heal a nation" reclaiming an era which has been neglected for long, an entity that has been ignored, and a population of courageous people that have been unjustly treated (Rushdy 97).

This need to tell a revisioned narrative of slavery arose in the middle of intellectual, institutional and social changes which American society went through during and since the 1960s. On account of the Civil Rights and anti-war movements, a group of history students perceived the need to "write history from the bottom up" and revisioned slavery by putting the agency of the slaves and their resistance in the center (Rushdy 88). The Black Power Movement helped also in the empowerment of African descent writers and intellectuals to engage in the explorations of new historical and fictional slave past. As a result, authors undertook the journey to tell "about what enslaved people were not allowed to speak of or write about" (Rowell 2). As Colson Whitehead confessed in an interview made by Emma Brockes for *The Guardian*:

In fifth grade, we did 10 minutes on slavery and 40 minutes on Abraham Lincoln, and in 10th grade you might do 10 minutes on the civil rights era and 40 minutes on Martin Luther King and that's it. I think it's probably better now.

But there's no reason for the powers that be to address that part of history.

With the increase of mass incarceration and police brutality towards black people, a new demand for a revision of history is needed. It is within this historical context that by

using travel literature Colson Whitehead goes back to the past and narrates the untold, what “the ancestors were not allowed to reveal” (Rowell 2), the neglected history in his novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016).

Through the literal Underground Railroad, the teenage female protagonist, Cora, will come across with “the true face of America” (Whitehead 83) as she runs away from the plantation in Georgia to the North. In each of the stations where she will stop, she will encounter with a different period of American history and different ways of practising black oppression, such as the experiments on men and the sterilization of women conducted in South Carolina or the public lynchings of North Carolina.

Therefore, the readers, together with the protagonist, will get immersed in the journey to revisit American history. Each station will reveal different black oppression practices which have been made throughout different periods of time and with the open end, Whitehead displays that race equality is not a reality yet, since Cora does not reach the final station.

Bearing in mind the previous details, the objective of this paper is to discuss the motif of the journey and the little cosmoses through the framework of travel literature, focusing on American history. A special focus will be put on racial inequality, since it is a basic critical category in addressing this novel. For this purpose, first I will give the explanation of the life of the author Colson Whitehead. In the next section, I will introduce travel literature. Finally, I will analyze the motif of the journey and little cosmoses to inspect American history, focusing on race.

2. Author: Colson Whitehead

“What isn’t said is as important as what is said” (Whitehead “How to Write”). This quote reflects the nature of Colson Whitehead’s literature, which is mostly shown in the novel at issue. But before starting understanding the novel we should begin by analyzing Whitehead’s life. Whitehead was born in 1969 and was raised in Manhattan, New York. His childhood and youth were marked by privilege as he is one of four children of two successful entrepreneurs. He attended the elite Trinity School on the west side of Manhattan, inaccessible to most of African Americans. In general, he was a very formal boy, until he entered university. His parents wanted him to study to be a lawyer or a doctor, but he wanted to be a writer. So, he graduated in English and Comparative Literature at Harvard College.

Whitehead started writing at a really young age, encouraged by the immense amount of books in his house, as he said in an interview for *The Guardian* “I had two older sisters, and every book brought into the house I would eventually inherit” (Brookes). After graduating from college, he began writing reviews for the *Village Voice*. This freelance job led him to start writing fiction, as he admits in *The Guardian*:

The job at the Village Voice was 35 cents a word, so it wasn't that high profile. But once you were in the paper you could write for different sections and they really gave you a chance if you were in the building every day and under foot. And being a freelancer gave me the time to start working on fiction, and the confidence of living from writing gave me more confidence.

His first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), is an experimental novel which is “set in an elevator inspection service” (Brookes). It was very well received, winning the Quality Paperback Book Club's New Voices Award and nearly winning the PEN/Hemingway (“Bio”).

The novel that came afterwards was *John Henry Days* (2001), “an investigation of the steel-driving man of American folklore” (“Bio”). It was also widely recognized since Whitehead received the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award and the Young Lions Fiction, apart from being finalist for the Los Angeles Times Fiction Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize (“Bio”). He continued writing and published *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), *Sag Harbor* (2009) and *Zone One* (2011) before publishing the novel for which he was awarded with his first Pulitzer Prize, *The Underground Railroad* (2016).

He came up with the idea for the novel fifteen years before publishing the book. He had to do a great deal of research and spend a long time on it, as he manifests in *The Guardian*:

When I had the idea in 2000, it seemed like a good idea, but I didn't think I could pull it off. (...) I didn't think I was a good enough writer. I thought if I wrote some more books I might become a better craftsman and, if I was older, I might be able to bring the maturity of some of those years to the book and do it justice. And so I shied away from it. It was daunting in terms of its structure, and to do the research as deep as it needed to be done, and to deal with the subject with the gravity it deserved, was scary. And then, a couple of years ago, I thought maybe the scary book is the one you're supposed to be doing.

Apart from obtaining the Pulitzer Prize, he also won the National Book Award and the Carnegie Medal for Fiction, as well as, being a #1 New York Bestseller.

In 2019, Whitehead published *The Nickel Boys* which won the Pulitzer Prize for the second time. Besides that, it was awarded with the Kirkus Prize and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction. Next fall he will publish his following novel, *Harlem Shuffle*.

In addition to his writing career, he has taught at several universities, including the University of Houston, Columbia University, Brooklyn College, New York University, Princeton University and Wesleyan University, among others.

The series by Barry Jenkins, director of the Oscar-winning Best Film *Moonlight* (2016), adapted from Whitehead's novel for Amazon Prime Video, premiered on May 14. According to Jenkins, this adaptation has been "by far the most ambitious and personally challenging undertaking of his career" (Ugbu).

3. Travel Writing

The debate of classifying travel writing as an independent literary genre or a thematic subgroup in literature is still alive since the relationship between travel and other genres have been really close. That is why it is important to clarify this point in order to continue with the further analysis.

But first, what is a literary genre? We agree with the definition given by Santos & Encinas that genre is "a classification of literary works that have a series of common aspects in their textual form that differentiates them from others belonging to different genres" (3).

In order to define travel writing, it is necessary to delve deeper into what travel is. Human beings have always felt the need to travel and, consequently, to leave a record of it. We can find travel stories in all periods, cultures and countries throughout the history of humankind. Sometimes they were fictitious, sometimes true. Travel is a really powerful educational tool as many intellectuals have argued. For instance, the philosopher John Locke proclaimed that it has the quality "in shaping the personhood" (Lipski 1) since, apart from learning different languages, it provides one with self-discovery and the consequent improvement. The being that departed is not the same being that returned. In Jakub Lipski's words (4):

The shaping of and the exploration of identity are (...) based on the patterns of linearity and circularity, respectively. When the self is being shaped on the road, there is no coming back, strictly speaking; the returned self is a new

man. Conversely, the exploration of identity depends on the psychological construct of a circular journey—the destination becomes home; the self may be changed but only inasmuch as the change is tantamount to greater self-knowledge.

Apart from that, “it triggers the thrill of escape, from the constriction of the daily, the job, the boss, the parents” (Fussell 13), as well as, since the Industrial Period, from the industrial sceneries of the Western cities. In Fussell’s words, “travel sharpens the senses” (14) as the traveller does not see the ordinary events of the day in the same way as they do at home.

In addition to that, it produces homesickness, which is in tune with loneliness, as a result of facing the fears of being the only one of the same physical and cultural characteristics might produce in an unknown environment.

All these feelings and experiences are so crucial in the development of the traveller’s identity that they feel the necessity of communicating and putting it on record for the people of their community. This is one of the main reasons for the popularity of this literary format.

However, there are different ways to put this into record. Taking part from the degree of fiction, we will divide three types of travel writing: guidebook, travel book and travel literature. The guidebook, in general, is a non-fictional form. According to Fussell, it “belongs to the world of journalism” and it “is to be carried along and to be consulted frequently for practical information” (15). On the contrary, the travel book belongs “to literature and they last” (Fussell 15) but it is not read during the journey, “[r]ather, it is read either before or after, and at home, and perhaps most often by a reader who will never take the journey at all” (Fussell 15). However, it is “too factual and not literary enough for those readers and writers who prefer more obviously imaginative works such as novels” (Thompson 32). Finally, travel literature is, in general, purely fictional, where the author has literary license to create the imaginative world they desire. This travel literature is the form from which the novel in question departs.

Therefore, as Thompson declares, the genre is “a constellation of many different types of writing and/or text” which “a variety of features or attributes can make us classify a text as travel writing, and each individual text will manifest a different selection and combination of these attributes” (26).

As we have mentioned before, travel is in the genesis of the human race and hence, affects all the cultures in the world. The first written accounts of the subject of travel are the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c.1000 BCE.), Homer's *Odyssey* (c.600 BCE) and the Biblical books of Genesis and Exodus.

In ancient times, people travelled for very different reasons, such as war, trades or religion. Due to all these travels, travel-related texts emerged, like the files known as *periploi* in Greek and *navigaciones* in Latin. These documents were composed of lists of ports, which were very practical for the following travellers.

There are also many literary accounts of travel in Classical literature. On the one hand we have the *Odyssey*, which has served as a great influence on Western literature. The *Odyssey* was not intended to draw any map of the journey. However, we can imagine that the dangers and adventures that Ulysses encounters during the voyage were, to some extent, common to travelers of the time. On the other hand, we have the utopian travels, that is, stories of "fantastic journeys through fabulous geographies" (Garcia Gual 95). Plato was the first to introduce utopia into the Greek imaginary with his mythical story about Atlantis. Here, he described a fabulous empire that was located on a large island in the Atlantic in the distant past. Later, in the Hellenistic era, these fantastic places were located in the Indian Ocean.

In the Middle Ages, we find many travel-related documents. Africa and Asia produced great interest and this gave occasion for the emergence of a rich and speculative literature. Many of these texts contained descriptions of foreign people and places of a fantastic type, depicting them as monsters or supernatural beings, which clearly denote the fears of Europeans.

Besides that, the pilgrimage narrative, also known as *peregrinatio*, had a great relevance in literature. As an example, we can find Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1387). We cannot leave aside the travel account that marked the era, *Travels of Marco Polo* (c. 1300). Polo's descriptions of the sophistication and richness of China captivated the Western society.

The Modern Era was inaugurated by the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus. This event propitiated the era of colonization of the lands of America, Africa and Asia. As a consequence, travel writing gained great importance as politicians, merchants and navigators needed to gather information for future voyages and expeditions.

As far as fiction is concerned, Thomas More in his *Utopia* (1516) parodied the new travel accounts "inventing an imaginary new culture that could have served as an unsettling mirror to European society" (Thompson 44). Likewise, the genre of picaresque fiction appeared which placed its protagonist "on the road to encounter a sequence of adventures and misadventures" (Thompson 44). Although the genre was originally Spanish, with the magnificent work of Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605), the genre spread throughout the continent creating the following works, Thomas Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller* (1594) or William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1611).

The 18th century was the period in which travel writing gained prestige and popularity. People read not only to gather information about their upcoming travels but also for intellectual profit and entertainment. Besides that, more and more people were able to travel thanks to technological improvements such as the steam engine.

The Grand Tour generated a lot of interest at the end of the 17th century. It consisted of an extended visit of sometimes even two years to the European continent, especially to France and Italy. This tour was usually made by young aristocratic men. They learned, apart from foreign languages, valuable information for their education. This is very well explained in Joseph Addison's *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* (1705) which became an essential handbook for the Grand Tourist.

All of this was of great influence on the writers of the time. As Fussell notes, the fictional literature of the period "is full of traveling heroes enmeshed in journey plots" (129). Some scholars have claimed that those travelogues had a great influence on the modern novel. Such are the examples of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) which is "in part a parody of the voyage narratives produced by William Dampier and similar figures" (Thompson 51-52). The Romantics also presented in their poems the topic of travel and "the traveller persona" (Thompson 52). Among others, Byron's *Childe Harold* or Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798).

In the 19th century, imperialism became of central importance in Europe. This generated innumerable travel-related texts very different from one another, from memoirs or literary travelogues to functional documents for specialists. One of the most important travel writings that emerged in this context was the exploration narrative. In this type of narratives the explorer was idealized and they told their travel experiences, one of the most known writers of this type of narratives being Rudyard Kipling.

Equally, many Victorian writers took the travelogue form into other literary genres, such as, Charles Dickens's *American Notes* (1842) and Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad* (1869). In fiction, there were many works in which the travel theme is very much present like in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). Here, "the assumptions of cultural and moral superiority" from "the European imperial project are powerfully critiqued" (Thompson 56), although it is full of biased descriptions of Africa and its inhabitants.

The 20th century suffered a democratization of travel thanks to the incorporation of the car and the airplane in society. In the 1930s travel writing flourished in the Modernist mode, becoming the protagonist into "a self-deprecating persona" (Thompson 59). Nevertheless, this century saw the decrease in the status of the genre.

With the internet, travel writing has reinvented itself with the creation of the travel 'blog' or weblog. Without a doubt, travel writing has been with us since the beginning in various forms and will continue to adapt to the new demands and transformations of society.

4. Motif of the Journey

4.1. The Journey

The novel of this study, *The Underground Railroad*, tells the story of "a fictional female slave who escapes from a Georgia plantation in the 1850s" (González Groba 255). Whitehead establishes his characters into a journey through American history, creating "an African American epic of resistance which becomes the story of America itself" (González Groba 256). Cora, a runaway slave, will establish the journey through different states: Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana. The novel is structured into "twelve sections named for either a state, idea (The North), or character" (Dubek 74).

However, throughout this journey, Cora will come face to face with "the true face of America" (83), the history of "the black experience of perpetual unfreedom and inhospitality" (González Groba 259). The first station agent, Lumbly, tells Cora and her companion, Caesar, that "[e]very state is different. Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach the final stop" (82). Nevertheless, Cora finds "only darkness outside the windows on her journeys, and only ever would be darkness" (314).

Later, she will learn that “[a]ll men are created equal, unless we [whites] decide you are not a man” (219).

As we have said before, the novel is set in the 1850s “when cotton was booming” (González Groba 260). The journey starts three generations earlier, when Cora’s grandmother, Ajarry, was kidnapped and brought from the shores of Africa to the New World. Since then, she and her descendants have lived and worked in the same plantation in Georgia, the Randall plantation, where “escap[ing] the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible” (9). From here on, the journey will be marked by “abrupt station, closures, track terminations, and unexpected route deflections” (Dubey 122).

In order to go through American history, Whitehead uses the museum mode to ironize the Living History tour. This term is related to the “historical enclaves, ranging from historic houses and farms to entire villages, which preserve and recreate past ways of life” (Dubey 118). Hence, it tries to animate history, in a way, by “employ[ing] first-person interpreters, or costumed actors who perform activities typical of a particular period and region” (Dubey 118).

However, as Dubey states, Living History museums follow “the demand to say something positive about slavery (...) culminating [African Americans’ history] in freedom and black advancement” (119). This is the point that Whitehead criticizes in his novel. By mobilizing the museum form, Whitehead criticizes “the representational techniques (of historical framing and spatial design) used to bring slavery into public visibility” (Dubey 134).

Through this structure, Whitehead achieves to make emphasis on the contradictory forces at any period. Besides that, he makes use of anachronisms that help to the fraction of the wholeness of each place, opposed to the bounded historical periods of the Living History composition (Dubey 124-125). However, this effect “promotes a distancing rather than immersive approach to historical understanding (Dubey 132).

In this sense, Whitehead uses the museum trend in order to point out “continuities between past and present and to convey the circuitous, interrupted, and incomplete trajectory of freedom” (Dubey 130). By taking liberties with the time limits and settings, the reunion with the past has been literalized in the story (Dubey 123), always “subordinated to the present” (Dubey 125).

Cora does not reach her destination of freedom or “Home Free”, rather she continues to be in “a state of perpetual transit” (Dubey 129). As Edwidge Dandicat

claims in her essay “Message to My Daughters”, the African American community has been treated almost like refugees in the country. Just like other black people, Cora finds herself in the middle of a world that has “no places to escape to, only places to flee” (307).

4.2. The Underground Railroad

This journey occurs by means of the railroad. From its creation, the train has always been an important symbol for the United States, since, in a way, it has connected the country from East to West. Besides that, it has been regarded as the “vehicle of freedom” (González Groba 256), as well as, the symbol for technological progress.

The train used in the novel, however, is not just anyone, but the Underground Railroad. Much has been said about the mythos of the Underground Railroad lately. Some scholars have even argued that it was “the first racially integrated civil rights movement” (González Groba 257) in the country, but all in all, the general idea is that of “an enduringly popular symbol of interracial collaboration in pursuit of freedom” (Dubey 111). Therefore, as happens with the Civil Rights Movement, the legend of the Underground Railroad has been advocated from all parts of the political arena (Dubey 120). However, the reality was not that charming. The railroad was not an organization created by abolitionists that helped the slaves into their “passage to liberty” (Dubey 120). As Larry Gara claims, the few runaways who managed to escape “were primarily dependent on their own resources” (18). In fact, “the abolitionists had no centralized organization” and the already free slaves “contributed much more to such enterprises than they have usually been given credit for” (Gara 18).

Whitehead literalizes in his novel the organization in a real train, with wagons, railroad rails and stations, working “in tunnels under the surface of the earth” (Dubek 74). Fugitives who manage to reach the home or business of a station agent enter the depot through a trapdoor, descend the stairs and wait on a platform for a train with no fixed timetable or destination (Dubek 74). By means of this train the runaways, together with the readers, will go through the history of the United States, transporting them “to different historical sites” (Dubey 113).

Whitehead uses the railroad as “a vehicle for revealing the true face of the nation” (123), from the captivity story of Cora’s grandmother, Ajarry, in the shores of Africa to the Tuskegee syphilis experiment that took place in the twentieth century. Besides that, Whitehead tries to turn the idea of the dialectic between abolitionist

saviours and passive refugees around and make a statement in favor of the significance that the slaves themselves had as they were most of the time on their own. In that regard, Dubey proclaims that “the metaphor in the novel ultimately undermines the mythos of freedom surrounding contemporary commemorations of the Underground Railroad” (121).

With the physical realization of the Underground Railroad, a new question arises, that of material labor. Whitehead makes the readers suggest the central role African American workers played “in building the material foundations of the nation” (Dubey 122). For instance, when Caesar asks Lumbly, a station agent, who built the Underground Railroad he answers with “who builds anything in this country?” (81). Indeed, he goes one step further when Caesar continues asking how they made it, answering “with their hands, how else?” (81). Here, Whitehead emphasizes “on the physical labor involved in the construction of the railroad system” breaking, thus, with “the romance of abolitionist saviors” and “sustain[ing] its own counterromance of freedom” (Dubey 122-123).

As a result, Whitehead highlights the personification of the Underground Railroad as the runaways “become their own vehicles of escape” (González Groba 267). They could wait for it but as there were few people who would help them, they had to take the initiative to set sail towards freedom. Throughout the different stations of history, Cora will be transformed as she states: “On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light” (363). In remembrance of John Locke, we observe the quality of the journey “in shaping the personhood” (Lipski 1). When Cora first takes the train she “leave[s] behind the known world of an old identity and become[s] a new person at the end of the journey” (González Groba 268). Hence, as Dubek claims, “Cora will be transformed by the experience, gaining knowledge and insight along the way” (74).

5. Little Cosmoses throughout Different States

5.1. Georgia

Georgia is the representation of slavery in cotton plantations. It starts from the kidnapping of Ajarry, Cora’s grandmother, in the shores of Africa and the journey filled with suffering until she dies in the Randall plantation in Georgia. Her descendants remain in the same plantation until Cora’s mother, Mabel, manages to escape. Nonetheless, Cora still remains in the cottonfield.

According to Li, the Randall plantation is portrayed as a “Hobbesian state” (16). Here, the slaves are traumatized “under siege” (Li 16). Whitehead described the plantation in *The Guardian* as a place where “[e]veryone is going to be fighting for the one extra bite of food in the morning, fighting for the small piece of property. To me, that makes sense; if you put people together who’ve been raped and tortured, that’s how they would act.” Besides that, Whitehead gathers the events that are mostly depicted in slave narratives, such as, the violence from part of slave-owners on slaves; the unsuccessful escape attempts and the following punishment; the point of realization through the confrontation with a slave master, and the consecutive determination to escape; different phases of the procedure, including treachery, persecution, uninterested assistance from perfect strangers, long periods of waiting and hiding and, finally, the reaching of the North (Martín Salván 12-13). This will be the turning point for the protagonist, and thus will also be the starting point in her “passage to liberty” (Dubey 120).

Nevertheless, there is a place in the plantation where Cora can feel in a way safe, the garden. The garden was passed from generation to generation, she inherited it from her mother Mabel, as her mother inherited it from her mother Ajarry. As Cora “owned herself for a few hours every week” (15), she can cultivate her imagination there. As González Groba claims, it is a “site of resistance” which debunks the myth of the slave who just works in forced physical labor and has no creativity (266). It will be this garden that Cora will remember along the journey as her home since it was the only place she could find shelter.

5.2. *South Carolina*

Cora and Caesar’s first stop is a dystopian South Carolina, where elevators and skyscrapers are a reality, though they still are in the antebellum America. Slavery have been abolished, now the former slaves are “the property of the United States government” (110). It is to say that the white citizens of the state at issue have a “much more enlightened attitude towards colored advancement than the rest of the south” (108-109). All of them are provided with all their needs, including food, housing and jobs. Nevertheless, it is a paternalistic state where whites are invested in “their mission of colored uplift, especially for those with aptitude” (117).

Nonetheless, Cora will discover that the ultimate objective of the state is the extinction of the black race in the States. For that purpose, they are subjecting the black

population under eugenics and sterilization. Medical experiments are being carried out through the syphilis infection and sterilization of black women by the new hospital (González Groba 264), as quoted, “the syphilis program was one of many studies and experiments under way at the colored wing of the hospital” (145). This recalls to the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male which took place in 1932, lasting for forty years. It consisted of a research to observe how syphilis progressed without giving any treatment. To this effect, the black men that participated were told that they had “bad blood” and that they would be granted with free medical care, but they were not, since none of the participants was given penicillin which was the most common medication to cure the disease (Li 10).

Concerning sterilization, Cora is suggested by Dr. Stevens to “consider birth control” (134) by “a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby” (134), in order to “take control over [her] own destiny” (135). She discovers that this “surgical technique” is “mandatory for some in the state. Colored women who have already birthed more than two children, in the name of population control” (135). This again recalls the sterilization black women had to go through in the decades of 1960s and 1970s. According to González Groba, these poor black women were threatened to go under sterilization if they did not want to be denied medical care (264).

It is in this station that Whitehead criticizes the Living History museums that we explained before. Cora is hired to perform as a slave at the Museum of Natural Wonders in the Living History exhibit (Dubek 75). She has to play different roles in three exhibits: Scenes from Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship, and Typical Day on the Plantation. The museum’s aim is to educate the public on American history, as quoted, “[l]ike a railroad, the museum permitted them to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience from Florida to Maine to the Western frontier” (130). Despite this, “nobody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world” (138). Cora discovers that white visitors prefer the lies over the truth, the truth in the museum was “a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach” (139). In spite of the manipulation of the truth, Cora does not buy that story, as she quotes: “The whites came to this land for a fresh start and to escape the tyranny of their masters, just as the freeman had fled theirs. But the ideals they held up for themselves, they denied others. (...) The land she tilled and worked had been Indian land” (139). Later in the story, Cora creates her own Museum of Terrible Wonders in her

imagination. While waiting in the underground station of South Carolina, “in those long hours, she could not keep from devising cruel scenes, arranging her own Museum of Terrible Wonders” (172). Here, she is the object “as she watches herself being tortured” (Dubey 117). With this description, as noted by González Groba, Whitehead reflects “the many ways in which black history has been stolen and re-written by white narrators” (263).

5.3. *North Carolina*

The second station is North Carolina, where slavery have been abolished, instead now the farm labor is done by poor immigrants, which are “ruled by brutal white supremacists” (González Groba 264). Here, as well as in South Carolina, they want to get rid of the black community, but instead of using mass sterilization programmes, they are making this possible by “a fierce slaughter of blacks” (Kelly 18).

Cora arrives in a town whose main road is called “Freedom Trail” (183). According to Dubey, this term is frequently used in reference to visits to Underground Railroad and civil rights movement historic places (125). The novel creates a very tough image of the road which Cora refers to as “hell” (183), since it is lined with “corpses hung[ed] from trees as rotting ornaments” (182). By means of anachronisms, Whitehead achieves to bring into mind the abuses held by white supremacists in the early twentieth century with the lynchings, making the point that the oppression of the black community did not ceased after the abolishment of slavery, remember the Ku Klux Klan. Besides that, it reminds the “recent museum exhibitions of lynching photography” that are held in the present (Dubey 125). Therefore, this anachronistic image of the Freedom Trail “graphically renders the sense of being stuck in history” (Dubey 125).

Cora stays at the attic of the local station agent for an indeterminate period of time, where “the only source of light and air was a hole in the wall that faced the street” (185). It is clear where Whitehead took influence from, the autobiography by Harriet Jacobs, writing with the pseudonym of Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). In this book, Jacobs tells about her escape from slavery, in which she had to hid for almost seven years.

Though Cora started with her education in the previous station, she obtains critical thinking skills in North Carolina, thanks to the interactions with her hosts, Martin and Ethel. Cora reads the Bible and the Declaration of Independence and starts to question them, as she states: “The white men who wrote it didn’t understand it either,

if *all men* did not truly mean all men” (139). In addition to that, she also starts to understand “the politics of white identity construction” watching people of the town through the hole of the attic (Dubek 76). Every Friday white people gather for a festival, which consists of “lively music, a minstrel show, a morality play, and a lynching” (Dubek 76). After all these observations, Cora concludes that the white folks “were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear” (216).

A new interesting character is presented in this chapter, Homer. He is the slave of Ridgeway, a slave catcher who is following Cora. The most interesting part of this character is that he was freed by Ridgeway, but he decided to remain at his side. This decision allows him to continue with his education. As he observes Ridgeway, he becomes more conscious about the “double-consciousness he will need to survive in white America” (Dubek 77). It seems that he is afraid of freedom, as “each night, with meticulous care, Homer opened his satchel and removed a set of manacles. He locked himself to the driver’s seat, put the key in his pocket, and closed his eyes” (243). However, when Ridgeway dies at the end, he is free to use the notes he took from Ridgeway to tell the story as he wants, as did Homer in *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Dubek 77).

5.4. Tennessee

On the way back to Georgia, Ridgeway directs Cora and the rest towards the “west instead of south”, since “a Georgia planter named Hinton had commissioned Ridgeway to return one of his slaves (...) who had relatives in one of the colored settlements in Missouri” (249).

The landscape described in Tennessee is, according to Dubek, “apocalyptic” (77). This is due to “a massive fire that has denuded the landscape and led to several outbreaks of disease” (Kelly 18). This fire was caused by homesteaders while they were “trying to clear some scrub” (247). Here, Whitehead makes the point of a burned land stolen from the Indians.

Whitehead emphasizes the oppression of Indian people focusing on the Indian Removal Act of 1830. As quoted, “they sat on what was once Cherokee land, he said, the land of their red fathers, until the president decided otherwise and ordered them removed” (245). A little later he goes “they rounded up the Indians in camps, the women and children and whatever they could carry on their backs, and marched them west of the Mississippi” (245). We observe here a direct reference to the Trail of Tears: “as one Cherokee sage put it later, not without cause, not without that Indian flair for

rhetoric. Disease and malnutrition, not to mention the biting winter that year (...) claimed thousands" (245-246).

Together with the Manifest Destiny, Whitehead makes the point of "the imperative of property seizure" of the Europeans in Indian land (Dubey 129). With all these stops a message takes over that "you cannot escape slavery contravenes the various narratives of racial progress" (Dubey 129).

5.5. *Indiana*

Whitehead describes the next station as a form of utopian socialism "on a black-owned farm" (Kelly 18). The farm is the so-called Valentine farm, whose motto is "stay, and contribute" (302) and where the fugitives can find shelter (González Groba 266). According to Dubey, this farm represents "an enclave of freedom" (128), since all the residents are "free and black and stewards of their own fates" (337). These occupants work the land in community mode, but Whitehead makes the emphasis on the idea of "cultivating black aspirations to modernity (Dubey 127). This is the first place that Cora makes a home and starts to "imagine futurity" in her whole journey (Dubey 127).

The farm, however, is surrounded by white communities which are afraid of "a black stronghold in their midst" (334). Cora finds out that "the whole country is the South" (González Groba 266), since the "WHITES ONLY (...) nightmare [is] reaching up from the south" (330).

Cora, finally, feels safe in the farm, mostly in the library which is her favourite room in the property. This magnificent library retains, among others, "the disparate literature of the colored tribes" to "stories of black people yet to be born" (327). The library, therefore, depicts, according to Dubey, "an alternative to the museum as a site of race-making" (128).

Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, the Valentine farm gets destroyed by a group of white people, who set fire to the library. As a consequence, many of the residents end up dead. Cora and Homer are the only ones who achieve to survive, "the reader and the writer" (Dubek 79). Here, we might observe that Whitehead wants to suggest that reconstructing the library accounts for fighting for liberty, "embark[ing] on an intellectual and emotional journey" (Dubek 79).

5.6. *The North*

In the last section, Cora, injured, manages to escape from Indiana and takes a train that will take her to the last station. Instead of heading north, as the name of the chapter suggests, she is going to the West, the traditional American place of renewal and beginning, the so-called American Dream. Passing through Missouri, she will arrive in California, but we are not going to be present at the conclusion of her journey. Hence, she embarks in the last part of her journey to the promised land, “the non-slave territory” (González Groba 268).

The story does not end in a state where the protagonist finally can create her own home and live forever happily there, it rather ends in the train. This might suggest that Whitehead wanted to make emphasis on the fact that black people are and have been in transit in America since the first slave arrived on the shores of the country, as there are still inequalities and oppression exercised by those of the ruling race. As quoted, “in transit like the passenger she’d been ever since she ran” (215). Therefore, Cora is running away from the nation that has rejected her to have a home, as she states in the novel “no places to escape to, only places to flee” (307). Hence, the Underground Railroad has not arrived at its destination yet, and will not arrive till black oppression culminates (González Groba 269).

This is the part where Whitehead makes the point of Cora being “the locomotive itself” (281). As González Groba claims, the Underground Railroad is not a system of railroad that you can take and go wherever it is heading to, but “it was the individual runaways who, with their own bodies, became their own vehicles of salvation” (268).

Whitehead finishes his novel with an open end, which is at the same time hopeful and realistic. He is aware that there is no perfect place for anyone, and even less for those who belong to the black community, however, he wants to transmit an encouraging message that in spite of the difficulties, there is light at the end of the tunnel that represents all the civil movements that have achieved the rights and laws that black people nowadays enjoy. In addition to that, this open end might suggest that the historical outcomes of slavery have not finished yet (Martín Salván 29).

Here, we are presented by the last character, “an older negro man” (365). His story is not told, but Cora wonders what his journey has been like. With this new presentation, Whitehead illustrates the many stories of black people which have not been told and have been silenced in history (Martín Salván 29).

6. Conclusion

All in all, through this paper it has been demonstrated that the motif of the journey and the construction of the little cosmoses in each of the stations, represented by different states, have been used for the revision of American history and to narrate the untold. Employing the museum mode, Whitehead goes through different racial inequalities and black oppression exercised throughout different historical periods by those of the ruling race. For that purpose, he uses the train, and more specifically the Underground Railroad, to break with its mythos, the symbol of “the interracial collaboration in pursuit of freedom” (Dubey 111).

We have observed that Georgia is the representation of slavery in cotton plantations of the South. It starts with the story of the kidnap of Ajarry from the shores of Africa and continues until the conviction of Cora and her companion, Caesar, into their initiation towards their “passage to liberty” (Dubey 120). Throughout the following stations, Whitehead will illustrate the different practices to make the black race disappear and that have been exercised since the creation of the nation. On the one hand, South Carolina will be the place to portray the eugenics and sterilization of black men and women, recalling the Tuskegee study and the black sterilization that occurred in the twentieth century. On the other hand, North Carolina will represent the slaughter of blacks that took place after the abolition of slavery with groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Tennessee, nonetheless, will exhibit the American imperative of Manifest Destiny in stealing the land of Indian people with the Indian Removal Act of 1830. Indiana will represent a utopian socialism “on a black-owned farm” (Kelly 18), the Valentine farm. Finally, the idea of the North will be switched with going to the West, the traditional American place of renewal and beginning, the American dream. However, the readers do not have information about the final resolution of the story, since the novel ends in the train. This lets Whitehead make the point that black people have been in transit since the first slave was kidnapped on the shores of Africa. In addition to that, with the open end the author is realistic and optimistic at the same time, since he is aware that black oppression is still a reality, but there have been several improvements that have led African American people to enjoy the laws and rights they have nowadays.

Lastly, given that the author stated in several interviews that he had been inspired by Jonathan Swift's novel *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), the initial theme of the paper was to analyze the influence that Swift's novel employed in the structure of *The Underground Railroad*. However, for reasons of time and space it has not been possible

to delve deeper into this area. Besides that, the character of Caesar is quite similar to that of Gulliver. Therefore, an interesting field for further research could be the analysis of the similarities in the structures of both novels and the creation of Caesar's character from Gulliver.

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