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來自地底的笛鳴：

科森·懷特黑德的地下鐵路再想像

A Whistle from Underground:

Colson Whitehead's Re-Imagined Underground Railroad

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Railroad

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## Abstract



This thesis investigates Colson Whitehead's reimagination of the antebellum abolitionist network in *The Underground Railroad* (2016) with a Marxian approach inspired by Steve Pile's *Real Cities: Modernity, Space, and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*. Reading the multitemporal landscapes unfurled by the fugitive journey as economic allegories, I hope to disclose the black activist advocacy for social reform underlying Whitehead's fictive subway-like transit system. The introduction of my study places the reimagined Underground Railroad among the time-disturbing literary devices in previous neo-slave narratives for exploration. Chapter One focuses on the alternate states the fugitive protagonist travels through, with a theorization of the racialized horrors at each stop. As adaptations of real historical events, the appalling scenes in Whitehead's novel signal racism as inseparable from the economic factors of capitalism, which still plagues America nowadays. Chapter Two concerns the confrontational models of social progress Cora the runaway woman and Ridgeway the slave catcher live upon. Respectively eliciting the feelings of deprivation and utopian aspirations within the subterranean transit network, the nemeses determine the future of the railway and its people in the clash of their credos. Summarizing the entire thesis into a brief conclusion, I want to underline the epochal changes of class formation Whitehead captures, which resonate through a body of neo-slave narrative writings proliferating in the late-capitalist milieu.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, neo-slave narratives, capitalism, rememory, infrastructure, utopia

## 摘要



受史蒂夫·派爾的《真實的城市：現代性、空間與城市生活的幻影》對資本主義的反思啟發，本文從階級區隔的角度切入，探討科森·懷特黑德的《地下鐵路》(2016)對美國內戰前的秘密結社「地下鐵路」的再想像。筆者將書中逃奴之旅途經的多時相景觀讀作經濟寓言，望能揭露懷特黑德虛構之形似地鐵的交通系統所隱含的，根植於黑人行動主義的社會改革主張。緒論中，筆者將再想像後的地下鐵路置於前人的新奴隸敘事曾使用的干涉線性時間觀的修辭技巧之下，以做進一步的鑽研。正文第一章聚焦在逃奴主角途經的抽離真實時空的美國各州，加以理論化各站所發生的，種族化的駭人暴行。改編自真實歷史事件，小說中一幕幕怵目驚心的場景指出種族主義跟資本主義的經濟要素密不可分，持續為禍當今的美國。第二章涉及逃跑女奴蔻拉及奴隸獵人里啟維所依存的對立的社會進步模式。從地下交通網分別激起剝奪感及對烏托邦的想望，死敵之間信念的碰撞將決定地下鐵路及其子民的未來。總結全文，筆者企圖凸顯懷特黑德筆下縮時時空中的階級形構，彼同晚期資本主義的大環境下激增的新奴隸敘事著作視為一整體，實多有共鳴。

關鍵字：科森·懷特黑德、《地下鐵路》、新奴隸敘事、資本主義、再記憶、基礎建設、烏托邦

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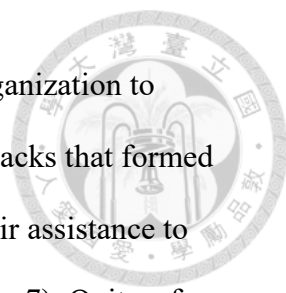
## Introduction

### Into Colson Whitehead's Multitemporal Landscapes



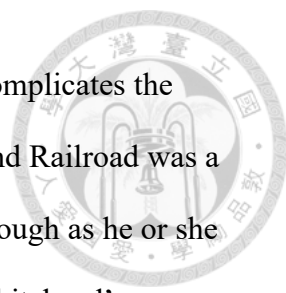
Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* drew critics' interest when it was first announced as the winner of the 2016 National Book Award and then the winner of the 2017 Pulitzer Prize. Praised by the members of the committees for its combination of the violence of slavery and the drama of escape in a myth, the novel continues to gain positive reviews from the media and enter the book lists of African American celebrities such as Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey. Despite being a more conventionally-set novel than its predecessors *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*, *The Underground Railroad* inherits the same kind of temporal incongruity with its introduction of a literary variant of the historical Underground Railroad (Grausam 122).

Operated during the early to mid-nineteenth century, the historical Underground Railroad started as isolated efforts of local abolitionists and gradually developed into a larger network of secret routes and safe houses through which fugitive slaves escaped to the North. Many of the Underground Railroad's routes through New York included real trains, according to M. W. Taylor, but the name of the secret network was mainly symbolic (qtd. in Zabel 18). The term "Underground Railroad" was purportedly coined by the owner of Tice Davids, who exclaimed that his slave "must have gone off on an underground railroad" when he reached the Ohio shore in his failed pursuit to find his slave in roughly 1831 (Hudson 6). Ohioan abolitionists probably hid the man and helped him escape. Despite the popular conception that the network of the Underground Railroad was of white abolitionists risking it all to transport fugitives to free states or Canada, the composition of the friends of the runaway featured people of color as well. Quakers might have initiated the abolitionist movement with their founding of the Society for the Relief of Free Negroes Unlawfully Held in Bondage in Philadelphia—



which later became the Pennsylvania Abolition Society—the first organization to transport runaway slaves (Calarco xxvii). Nevertheless, it was free blacks that formed the bedrock of the movement, who often felt obligated to provide their assistance to runaways due to the bonding of race and family relationships (Hudson 7). Quite a few free blacks worked as slave rescuers for the secret network, venturing down the South to guide their kindred to the North, e.g. Harriet Tubman, nicknamed “Moses” by those she rescued over eleven years of daring missions (Hudson 221). Run by people of color and white abolitionists, the Underground Railroad network was like a “Free Train” heading toward the ideal that the United States would become a nation of racial, ethnic, and gender equality.

Whether the Underground Railroad in American history can be defined as an organization remains under debate, since this social movement spawned more formal organizations only in a few sites such as Cincinnati and Philadelphia (Hudson 6). In spite of the unsettled definition of the Underground Railroad network as an organization, it is undeniable that its members organized their efforts to achieve communication within and between regions. Their attempt to organize individual efforts was fully demonstrated by their use of standardized terminology, a variety of code words and signals related to the railway through which the friends of the fugitive communicated effectively. Some of these secret codes involved “station” (the site where the activities of harboring slaves took place), “agent” (“the person who dispensed information, possibly coordinated the planning or plotted the course of an escape”), and “conductor” (“the person who transported or guided fugitives from slave territory” or “through hostile northern territory”) (Hudson 7, 8). In Whitehead’s narrative of the slavery past, these standardized terms are literally reimagined, transforming the Underground Railroad network into a real railway system with tunnels built underground and locomotives operated by train conductors. By reimagining the



Underground Railroad as a subway-like transit system, Whitehead complicates the inspiration that comes from his childhood notion that the Underground Railroad was a real train, and ventures to ask: “What if every state our hero went through as he or she ran north was a different state of American possibility?” (“Colson Whitehead’s ‘Underground Railroad’”). Through the writer’s experiment with counterfactual timelines, readers confront a series of racialized horrors in each stop of the railroad: the medical experiments performed on African American bodies in South Carolina, the protagonist living in an attic to avoid the white community’s persecution in North Carolina, an African American farm burnt down to ashes in Indiana, and so on. Whitehead’s readers are likely to be startled by these variants of American states before they notice the historical links between these gruesome depictions and the events of racialized violence taking place in a wide range of times and spaces in the American past.

Through these historical referents, Whitehead encourages readers to look into the painful memories of enslavement, and recognize the ongoing effects of slavery in the modern-day social environment. The retrospective aesthetic presented in *The Underground Railroad* reveals a path of empowerment against the sanitization of slavery often demonstrated in works of popular culture.<sup>1</sup> Instead of using alternate histories to distract his readers from the tragedies of African American slaves, Whitehead signals racism as a complicated issue deeply rooted in the dynamics of capitalism, which still matters today. His railway system, in this perspective, joins the economic allegories of his previous novels, speaking out against contemporary America whose people intend to remain in perpetual flight not just from their past but from the

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<sup>1</sup> See Fain for the sanitized slavery in contemporary black cinema. An instance can be found in *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey* (1985), in which Gordon Parks alters the beating scene in Northup’s original autobiography to alleviate the audience from the guilt associated with the institution of slavery. See also Leonard for sanitized middle-class African American experiences in black dramas, and the productions of mainstream sanitized hip-hop, which help to maintain a façade of colorblindness.



enduring contradictions at the core of their nation. In this study of Whitehead's imaginative depiction of the Underground Railroad, I hope to unpack the writer's narrative of the past with a detailed analysis of his railway. By reading into the railroad journey of the escapee, I want to emphasize the symbolic meaning of this re-imagined Underground Railroad, which points to an unfulfilled dream of liberation inherited by present-day subjects from their antebellum ancestors.

When it comes to the symbolism of Whitehead's Underground Railroad, former critics' perspectives are divided. While literary critics such as Matthew Dischinger argue that Whitehead's railroad system is a metaphor of slavery (89), others, like Manisha Sinha, indicate the transit system represents the quest of freedom of enslaved African American subjects ("The Underground Railroad in Art and History"). Despite such seemingly incompatible interpretations of Whitehead's railroad, the symbolism of the railroad is multilayered, and exceeds both aspects for its form directly relates to the existing economic structure. To put it in other words, there is a dimension of the railroad that is particularly capitalistic, that gestures toward the haunting memories of slavery, and functions as a mirror of the dynamics between the urban subject and the contemporary capitalist world. To analyze this aspect of the railway system in more depth, I am going to dive into the writer's critique of a market economy demonstrated by his reimagination of the Underground Railroad. To begin with, I would like to examine how Whitehead ruptures the linearity of history by an integration of multiple times and spaces of American history, and how these alternate histories introduced in the landscapes of underground tunnels and railway stations recall what Steve Pile calls the phantasmagorias of city in his work of urban study (3, 4). In Pile's book-length study of dream-like and ghost-like experiences in the city, he clarifies that big cities are phantasmagorias, integrations of multiple spaces and times, and reality and imagination (15). This modern experience is, in my perspective, not just recreated but reformed in


Whitehead's creation of the railroad system. To put it bluntly, the intangible elements of Pile's urban phantasmagorias become concrete in Whitehead's novel, making it possible for the characters to wander in a cityscape where their desires, memories, and dreams break into the reality. Cora's journey through the railroad system, which bears a close resemblance to a modern-day subway system but has old-fashioned steam locomotives and handcars running down its tunnels, mirrors this universal search for freedom in the chaotic metropolis of capitalism today.

Breaking away from Dischinger's reading that Whitehead's railroad operates perfectly without any intervention of the characters' subconscious, I find the railroad a container of the collective dreams of the economically enslaved. However, despite the fact that the railroad carries shared longings for freedom, each railroad experience is a dialogue between an individual and the society, and is always personal. As an in-between that exists in the outside world and in the characters' psyches, the Underground Railroad questions the supposed homogeneity of the collective memories of the enslaved. When talking about her hair-raising escape with her peers, Cora only discloses the main contour of her journey yet omits certain details related to the operation of the Underground Railroad. Her refusal to divulge too much about the railroad's structure no doubt reflects the lack of antebellum records of the historical Underground Railroad. In fear of putting their helpers in peril, the nineteenth-century ex-slaves often stayed silent about the operation of the abolitionist network, keeping the Underground Railroad a secret organization full of ambiguity (Washington 1). Nevertheless, another reason for Cora to stay mute is her knowing that each enslaved subject's experience differs from another's, and is hence "a secret about yourself it never occurred to you to share," which "would die in sharing" (Whitehead, *The Underground* 318). Thereby, besides rail tracks and locomotives, which are the basic units of the railroad system, the interiors and exteriors of the stations and the associated train people will all be actively discussed

in my thesis. Via a discussion on how these elements of the railroad system reflect a capitalist social environment, and how they interact with the protagonist, I want to show that Cora's railway journey, which belongs to her only and which rejects sharing, manifests the heterogeneity of memories of the slavery past.

To further explore the Underground Railroad as an allegory of the economically enslaved, I will attempt to theorize the three kinds of economic systems presented in Whitehead's novel, namely slavery (or plantation capitalism), commercial capitalism, and utopian socialism. These three types of economic systems are by no means randomly arranged. In my opinion, from Georgia's plantation to the Carolinas' capitalist societies to Indiana's self-sustaining utopia, Cora's railroad journey follows the historical development of capitalism, and moves to an imagination of a better future. Although this image of a prosperous socialist society is broken by the subduing force of the dominant social group in the book, this episode nonetheless envisages an ideal society of new possibilities, which many urbanites today still dream of. Through a textual analysis of the novel's depictions of dissimilar economic systems, I hope to highlight the effects capitalism has had on the imaginations of the progress of America. Unlike Dischinger's article, which compares Whitehead's railroad system to "the contradictory democratic national ethos that promised liberty while displacing and enslaving" (89), I want to argue that the transit system embodies the endurance of a capitalist economy, which seems to be the prerequisites of structural violence. My ultimate goal is to show that Whitehead's Underground Railroad resists easy categorization. Going beyond a mere political critique or a simple metaphor of freedom, the transit network discloses the disturbing entrepreneurial values to which American laborer subjects, especially those of social minorities, still bend their knees nowadays.

In addition to a theorization of the Underground Railroad, I suggest placing Whitehead's novel in the tradition of neo-slave narratives for scholarly discussion.

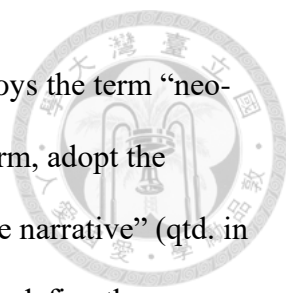


Previous critics, including Matthew Dischinger and Ted Gioia, endeavor to coin new terms for the genre to which Whitehead's work may belong. The former comes up with "speculative satire," by which he emphasizes the interplay between magical-realistic components and satire in the novel (Dischinger 82); while the latter promotes the term "hyper-realist fantasies," which, in his opinion, perfectly describes a work that mixes tiny amounts of fantasy with large doses of realism (Gioia). Nevertheless, I think defining Whitehead's fiction as either of the two may unavoidably neglect the spirit of black nationalism Whitehead's writings inherit from the works of neo-slave narratives.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, instead of coining new terms for Whitehead's highly inventive novel, I prefer to see how it inherits literary conventions while bringing new possibilities to an existing canon. In the subsequent paragraphs, I will provide a brief review of the redirection of "neo-slave narratives," with which I will examine Whitehead's multi-temporal sense of the present in his novels. My aim is to show that the evolution of African American literature always accompanies the changes of social conditions of America, and to draw a picture of the haunting slavery system from which modern-day Americans have not yet escaped.

Neo-slave narratives are modern or contemporary narratives of slavery that primarily emerged in the twentieth century. In Bernard W. Bell's 1987 study *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, the term "neo-slave narratives" first originated. It is described as "residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom," which marks the genre's inheritance of slave narratives' orality (qtd. in Smith 168). In Ashraf Rushdy's 1997 book article, the scholar supplements Bell's definition by elaborating on how contemporary fictions of slavery lay stress on the enduring social consequences of slavery and their celebration of "oral" modes of representation (533).

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I follow the definition of black nationalism as an important ideology in African American history which is grounded in the belief that efforts to operate within a political system deemed racist and unresponsive to black needs are doomed to failure. For a definition of the term, see Van Deburg.

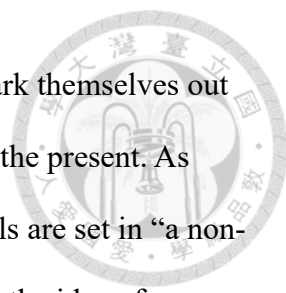


Later, in his 1999 book-length study, Rushdy more restrictedly employs the term “neo-slave narratives” to refer to “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative” (qtd. in Dubey, “Neo-slave Narratives” 332). Bell’s and Rushdy’s attempts to define the genre shed light on early neo-slave narratives’ rigorous adoption of slave narratives’ conventions. However, during the last decades of the twentieth century, the works of neo-slave narratives proliferated to embrace a variety of writing styles, including science fiction, satire, and postmodern experiments. Considering the redirection of neo-slave narratives, A. Timothy Spaulding prefers to utilize the term “postmodern slave narratives” to place the evolution of the genre in the context of the rise of postmodernism (8). Despite the fact that the genre since the late twentieth century shares “many of the key preoccupations of postmodern aesthetics and politics,” Spaulding declares that recent writers of slavery retain a stable conception of identity that comes out of the cultural and racial politics of the sixties (3). Spaulding’s contention on this distinctly African American form of postmodernism, which demonstrates an embedded tension between black nationalist values and the anti-foundationalism<sup>3</sup> of postmodernism’s stance on history, is fully represented by the time-rupturing narratives of Whitehead. Subverting the postmodernist aim to ascend beyond human existence through a deconstruction of reality, his narrative devices join the rest of post-1970s writings of slavery in a search for a reformation of the canon, and an endeavor to maintain a black nationalist identity resistant to white capitalism.

A large amount of post-1970s fictions of slavery have ruptured the linearity of history with narrative devices of spatial dislocation and temporal anachronism, such as rememory, flashbacks and flashforwards, and time travel (Dubey, “Neo-slave

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<sup>3</sup> In this section, I follow the definition of anti-foundationalism as a philosophical position which rejects foundationalism, i.e. it rejects the need to justify philosophies of knowledge with a foundation of truth. For a good definition of the term, see Buchanan.

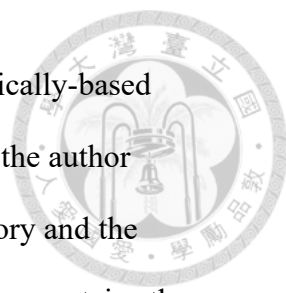
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Narratives” 344). Yet, Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* mark themselves out from these postmodern antecedents for their multi-temporal sense of the present. As Daniel Grausam states about Whitehead’s previous works, both novels are set in “a non-realist now of conflicting historical referents,” and hence, complicate the idea of contemporaneity as a homogenous experience of time (122). He continues to elaborate that this multi-temporal sense of the present is a product of the changes in the nature of capital in the West, by which he refers to the Reagan/Thatcher neoliberal revolution and the emergence of “new economies” (Grausam 123). Arguably, Grausam bases his argument upon Jeffrey T. Nealon, who names the “cultural dominant” since the late 1980s as “post-postmodernism” (123). And Nealon’s differentiating the present cultural production and the economic factors that produce it from those of the former ages may arouse further debates amidst the ongoing disputation over the periodization of the modern and the postmodern. Still, Grausam’s literary analysis captures the style of Whitehead and provides an informative reading of the economic allegories in *The Underground Railroad*. Compared with the futuristic cityscapes of *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*, Whitehead’s use of a railroad network may not be considered distinctively postmodern. Nonetheless by producing a literary variant of the Underground Railroad out of an integration of multiple times and spaces, the transportation system creates an effect of phantasmagoria discernable in its predecessors. With this perspective in mind, Whitehead’s novels harken back to Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* and Charles Johnson’s *Oxherding Tale*’s defiance of historical realism, but exceed both in rebelliousness for his fictional landscape full of historical referents directly mirrors the urban phantasmagorias of the present time. By reworking the slavery past, yet constantly undermining the linear view of history, the writer’s multi-temporal landscape restates the advocacy of the Black Power movement: slavery has not come to an end in America; what has happened is that the urban underclass (a large percentage of whom

are African American) are plagued by an equally enslaving capitalist system, suffering labor extortion for their underprivileged standing.

It is easy to observe that postmodern African American writers often foreground reimaginings of the antebellum period in representations of the enslaving present, but when it comes to Whitehead, the author not only follows the same form of African American discourse to describe black subjects' conditions in the present world of capitalism but extends his critique to include other racialized groups, who likewise fall into the threatening clutch of market economy. For instance, in *The Intuitionist* (1999), where segregation is a current issue in a futuristic city, the writer adopts the informing metaphor of the elevator to signify social progress, involving racial, gendered, and economic advancement (Grausam 124). While access to upward mobility seems to promise social mobility, the gap between the top and the bottom of the building indicates that such a model of development is inherently built on inequality (Grausam 124). The horrible fall caused by the malfunctions of the elevator indicate that this kind of social formation can only lead to disaster; the terrible accident of the metropolis may be a warning, a vision of America in becoming. Whitehead's condemnation of racism and capitalism, which depend on each other, is also in the background of *Zone One* (2011), a zombie novel staged in a post-apocalyptic New York City. In the dystopian universe created by the writer, political and economic elites in Buffalo live in a habitable environment unsmearred by the post-apocalypse, while the animate zombies and the working-class soldiers sent to reclaim the city from the walking dead struggle for survival. As Strombeck suggests in his literary analysis, the comparison between the lives of the Buffalo elites and the rest of New Yorkers' can be read as an economic allegory (263). Here, race is not just a matter of skin color, but unveils the fundamental power relation between the exploited and the exploiter under economic factors which racism serves. In addition to the fictions of alternative universes, the heavy scent of

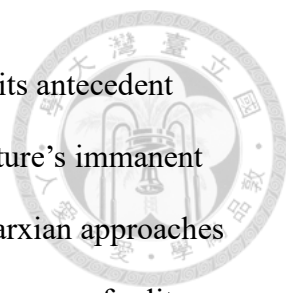




economic criticism can also be discerned in Whitehead's more historically-based novels. In *John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), the author respectively criticizes the commodification of African American history and the financial industry's privatization of public life. Even though the former contains the distortion of John Henry's folklore for the taste of the market, and the latter features the renaming and rebranding of an African American founded town, both of them highlight the poisonous influence marketing and branding has on the image of minorities (Collins 286-87, Grausam 126-27). Whitehead's concepts of progress, commodification, and discrimination consistently run through *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* to *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*. And these ideas rising from an in-depth meditation on the destructiveness of capitalism later find their way into *The Underground Railroad*, merging with each other through the symbolism of the odyssey to the North, with an eye on the future path of black nationalism.

Whitehead's advocacy of emancipation rearticulates the abolitionist advocacy of slave narratives. But to make his writings more relatable to readers, the African American author introduces fictional characters whose ideologies are largely of the postmodern context to better represent contemporary American subjects. When it comes to *The Underground Railroad*, Cora does not fulfill the traditional expectations of the enslaved women in slave narratives. Since she is convinced that her mother abandoned her and made it to the North alone, she is irreconcilably hostile to her. Cora's identity as an orphan, incompatible with the integrity of familial connections among slave mothers and daughters articulated in slave narratives, evidently marks the sense of rootlessness in the spirit of the present era (Santamarina 241). Likewise, Ridgeway the slave catcher has no hatred or racist feelings toward runaway slaves since he judges them as pure income. Viewing black slaves through the lens of desexualized commodification, the slave catcher does not correspond with the context of 1850s America. Thus, besides the





spirit of resistance Whitehead inherits from neo-slave narratives and its antecedent genre, I would like to adopt Anna Kornbluh's understanding of literature's immanent critique to examine Whitehead's text. Based on Kornbluh's essay, Marxian approaches to crisis and the utopian dimensions of Marx's theory remain promising arcs for literary studies today (397). Her view of the novel as critique, which should reveal universal class antagonism and create utopian narratives for readers, finds a good example in Whitehead's novel (406). Inspired by Kornbluh's ideas about *The Underground Railroad*, I want to see how Marxian criticism is manifested in Whitehead's book. By actively including Marx's conception of capitalism, with a special focus on David McNally's reading of Marx's notion of a vampire-like market, I aim to contextualize the fictional characters and landscapes of capitalist economies. And because of the integrated times and spaces in Whitehead's narrative, it also seems appropriate to take a glimpse at the historical links between the antebellum records of slavery and Whitehead's railroad system. By contextualizing the railroad system in both the antebellum and the contemporary contexts, I want to investigate the aftermath of slavery and the durability of capitalism.

To provide a theoretical framework for Whitehead's economic allegory, which enables a research of the capitalistic dimension of the railroad system, I would like to base my argument on Marxian economic criticism. Nonetheless, finding that I need more than Marx's critique for a research subject deeply involved with the collective dreams of the economically exploited, I would also like to integrate Toni Morrison's rememory and Steve Pile's phantasmagorias of city into my theorization of the railroad system. Through an effort to draw materials from these transdisciplinary sources, I hope to bridge Marx's concern of material determinants with theories of the immaterial, of wishes, desires, imaginations and dreams of contemporary America. In the following, I will first start with Pile's city phantasmagorias, and then move toward Marxist critiques

and finally Morrison's "rememory."

According to Steve Pile's urban studies, cities are more than cement forests crowded by urban dwellers. Instead, cities can be described as phantasmagorias for they are a peculiar mix of spaces and times, in the midst of which the ghost-like or dream-like procession of things flows (Pile 3). The elements of the procession may be either emotional or physical, and may come from any place and may evoke very different times, whether the remembered or the imagined (Pile 3). Noticing the correlation between Pile's urban phantasmagorias and Whitehead's fictional landscape, I argue that the immaterial elements in Pile's city become concrete in Whitehead's fiction. To push my argument further, amid these concretized elements, the railroad system operates as an embodiment of the collective dreams of the economically enslaved, carrying longings for freedom that have yet to be satisfied. As a blend of wishes of the enslaved, Whitehead's railroad can be studied with the emotional works of city proposed in Pile's book: dream-work, blood-work, magic-work, and grief-work (167). Among these four works fueled by four separate emotional elements—dreams, vampires, magic and ghosts—I would like to exclude magic-work, for this emotional work rooted in the occult in Pile's discourse has little to do with my project. One may doubt why I would not solely focus on the dream-work of cities since it has the most to do with human wishes and desires. In my defense, because the railroad system is a combination of overdetermined emotional components, whose mechanics reflect the confinement of social stratification, and whose journey promises the emancipation from the haunting past, it is necessary to incorporate all the three works to build a more solid argument. And since Pile has touched upon Marx's vampire-likeness of the market and Morrison's idea of traumatic memories in his chapters of blood-work and grief-work, I would like to extend these dimensions briefly mentioned by Pile by forging Marxist critiques and Morrison's "rememory" into my theoretical framework. In the upcoming paragraphs,



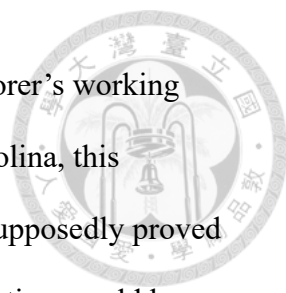
my probe into Marx's and Morrison's insights will attempt to cast more light on the cause and effect between the economic determinants and the protagonist's mental state of hauntology.<sup>4</sup>

In *Monsters of the Market*, David McNally emphasizes Marx's concept that "the very insidiousness of capitalist grotesque" has to do with its "invisibility with the ways in which monstrosity becomes normalized and naturalized via its colonization of the essential fabric of everyday life, beginning with the very texture of corporeal experience in the modern world" (2). Through the supposedly invisible hand of the market, humankind become commodified, when the labor power is cut away from laborers' bodies and transacted into the enormous body of capital. To shed more light on the capitalist dissection of proletarians, McNally contextualizes Marx's rhetoric with the public anatomy theater in the Renaissance Period, where anatomy on dead criminals of low economic status was performed for entertainment and scientific research. McNally's historical link is not too distant from the 1850s social context of the American South, where autopsies and dissections were conducted on the African American deceased under the ineffectiveness of anatomy laws.<sup>5</sup> This antebellum manifestation of Marx's structural violence later finds its way to Whitehead's railroad system. On the surface, South Carolina is a railway stop where job opportunities are secured for ex-slaves, making it possible for them to buy all kinds of merchandise to serve their material needs. However, beneath the government's tolerance is its hideous scheme of dissecting black cadavers and, moreover, bringing genocide to the entire race. The depiction of grave-robbing and sterilization policy in the novel seems to reflect the utilitarian attitude of capitalists. Seen through the eyes of a capitalist, the value of the

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<sup>4</sup> See Pile's use of Derrida's model of haunting and the ghost. See also Derrida for his coined term of *hauntology*, which is related to temporal disjunction and the persistence of the past.

<sup>5</sup> See Killgrove for recent bioarchaeological researches on the postmortem dissection of African Americans, a 19th-century case of structural violence.



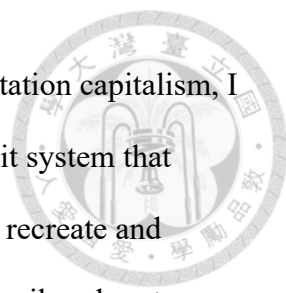
laborer depends solely on his/her level of productiveness. So if a laborer's working ability is considered inadequate—in the literary variant of South Carolina, this viewpoint is bound with nineteenth-century pseudo-science, which supposedly proved the black's mental capacity was inferior to the white's—the unproductive would be removed for the better. Behind the delusion of freedom the city hides its true face of greed, which is the same face of present employers who prompt their employees into daily toil, and easily replace them when other sources of labor power are at hand. From slavery to capitalism, the change of socio-economic system seems to bring no antidote to the plague of structural violence, but may in fact render it more subtle.

The venom of a capitalist economy, which fosters a society equally enslaving and dehumanizing to the one of antebellum period, should be responsible for the recurring feeling of being haunted in modern-day hearts. This mental state of hauntology is exemplified by Pile with the experience of ghost sightings, which are often reported in the location related to traumatic memories, and which embody the deep anxieties toward the urban life inside the haunted. Pile's discourse of grief-work manifested in ghost stories, as the author himself clarifies, is similarly discussed in Avery Gordon's study of sociological imagination in relation to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (144, 194). In Morrison's renowned novel, Sethe the ex-slave coins the term "rememory" to indicate something that is gone yet remains; the term is fully exemplified by the ghost of Sethe's infant daughter, whom she murdered years ago yet who returns to haunt the rest of her family (qtd. in Smith 79). The returning of the memories of slavery, which consumes Sethe in the form of *Beloved*, can be read as a symbolic representation of how contemporary Americans reimagine the traumatic past. Although no actual ghost has been witnessed by the protagonist in Whitehead's novel, the memories of captured and killed fugitives have the same kind of innate hauntedness. In the protagonist's experience as a runaway, we recognize that the young woman was constantly haunted

by the memories of slavery. Though she had already traveled far away from the Randall plantation, the traumatizing memories kept returning to her, possessing her, and denying the delusion of freedom generated from the outside world. By threatening to come back and make their presence felt at any moment, dead African American slaves enter the present, negating the latest generation's isolation from the antebellum age. Besides bringing back the traumas of the past, which seek redress for colonial injustice, the deceased also appear to bring out the hidden fear of their witnesses: the present time is not free from the cruelty of economic exploitation.

Despite his sharp condemnation of capitalism, Whitehead—much like Morrison in her work—ends his protagonist's nightmare in an exorcism of the past. Whereas Beloved leaves the house forever, Cora takes her departure from the Underground Railroad terminus. If the Underground Railroad, as mentioned above, carries the traumatic memories of the economically enslaved, then, the fact that the young lady finds a route out encourages the interpretation that she ventures from the existing economic system in search of the possibility of social reforms. And this final solution of *The Underground Railroad*, which concludes the odyssey of a runaway as a journey of empowerment, pictures a future of liberation. With her leave from the underground, the young woman manifests that there may be an exit of modern-day enslavement, if we refuse to submit to the false wishes promised by capitalism and start to go after the dream of equality.

My thesis will contain two body chapters and a conclusion, with which I explore the socio-economic aspects of Whitehead's reimagined Underground Railroad. In this Introduction, I have highlighted the multi-temporal sense of the present in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Instead of comparing Whitehead's Underground Railroad to a typical time machine, a simple means through which he makes his readers confront racialized horrors of the past, e.g. the notorious Tuskegee syphilis experiment and the

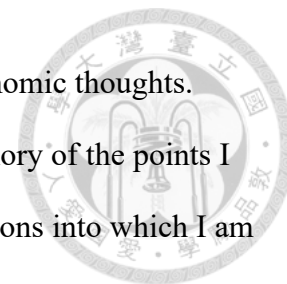


pseudo-science developed by antebellum scientists to legitimize plantation capitalism, I have argued that by reimagining the Underground Railroad as a transit system that shares similarities with modern subway networks, Whitehead tries to recreate and reform what Pile calls the phantasmagorias of the city. The inventive railroad system can, thus, be viewed as a reflection of how contemporary African Americans rememorize the past. The protagonist's journey therefore represents an ever-lasting search for the meaning of life in the metropolis nowadays, where the endless stream of things pass by, and where the swirls of the material and the immaterial accelerate in the production process. Based on these ideas generated from the transportation system, in the next chapters, I will tap into the structure of the railway and its dynamics with the railway characters to gain a more comprehensive view of the writer's concern with the fraudulent nature of capitalism.

Chapter One will begin with a detailed analysis of the railway stops the protagonist travels by, with main emphasis on Georgia, the Carolinas and Indiana. The three kinds of economic systems of the state, i.e. slavery (or plantation capitalism), commercial capitalism, and utopian socialism are by no means randomly assigned. From Georgia's plantation to the Carolinas' cityscapes to Indiana's self-sustaining utopia, Cora's escape route follows the development of capitalism, and ends in an imagination of an alternative to our dystopian present. Chapter Two will discuss the operation of Whitehead's railroad system, and then move toward the power relations between the characters, especially Cora's rivalry with Ridgeway. Through a theorization of the railroad people and the railway's underground and ground structures, I hope to relate the transportation network to the cityscape of contemporary America. Also, a resemblance can be found between Ridgeway's attitude toward runaways and entrepreneurs' expectation of employees. By showing the way Cora is objectified and commodified in the eyes of the slave hunter, the war between the two characters foregrounds an

universal class antagonism that calls for an analysis of Marxian economic thoughts.

Finally, I will provide a short conclusion to refresh the readers' memory of the points I have made in the former chapters, and try to raise some larger questions into which I am unable to look in this limited-scale study for scholars in the future to explore.



## Chapter One

### Away from the Haunting South:

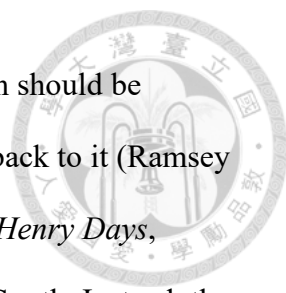
#### From the Landscapes of Capitalist Economies to a Socialist Utopia



As a fugitive protagonist, Cora passes through alternate states of counterfactual timelines on her northward odyssey. Her experience of different space-times of African American history, as Steve Pile might argue, reflect how phantasmagoric urban spaces awaken the traumatic past inside the present-day psyche. In the sections below, I would like to tap into this hauntology of the African American past in the modern-day heart. By approaching the fictive Underground Railroad stations with Pile's three emotional works of the city, I hope to compare Cora's search for the North to an inward quest of a way out of the structural violence inherent in the lasting system of capitalism. To emphasize the economic systems of the alternate states en route, whose sequence follows the development of predatory capitalism and prophesizes its future collapse, I am going to start with the southmost stop before going northward. Unfolding his narrative with a return to the American South, Whitehead seems to visualize an emotional overflow of the repressed thoughts of antebellum slaves in the individual. While the traumatizing memories of plantation slaves continuously enmesh the protagonist woman in grief, those of runaway slaves work in the opposite manner, which offer mental repairs for empowerment.

As a region of traumatic memories, the South stimulates the literary imagination of the persecuted under the monolith of capitalism. Like Toni Morrison, a forerunner of postcolonial narratives of slavery, Colson Whitehead revisits the historical South through his portrayal of the plantation life that marks the postmodern turn from the primarily white discourse of "single regional essence" (Ramsey 769). Rejecting the notion of an assumed "regional exceptionalism," he renders the historical South not as a





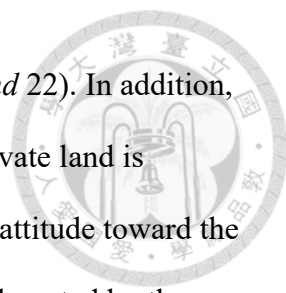
place of down-home pastoral roots but as a social construction, which should be approached with the purpose of “appropriating” it rather than going back to it (Ramsey 769, 783). An exemplification can be found in his earlier work *John Henry Days*, wherein the black journalist J. Sutter is never immersed in an actual South. Instead, the black protagonist is caught in multiple narratives of a South, which declare the arrival of an era in which no narrated event is referential, and in which the southern reality is unseizable under postcolonial constructions of reality (Ramsey 782). In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead’s emphasis on American culture’s tendency to disassemble history into non-existence is, nevertheless, toned down by a realistic reconstruction of Antebellum Georgia. With an eye to preserving the proceedings of history through the recollections and imaginations of African American ancestors, his take on personal appropriation of southern history draws closer to Morrison’s seminal *Beloved* than it was in *John Henry Days*. According to Morrison, to access the interior life of nineteenth-century slaves requires imagination in complement to the recollections told by ex-slaves in remaining slavery records. Through the imaginative act of “remembering” where we were, the picture of the past may be completed to yield up a kind of truth (“The Site of Memory” 302, 305). Georgia station in Cora’s story, whose soil bears the young woman’s experiences of being downtrodden and joins her misery to her antecedents’, offers a textual demonstration of how the location of trauma invokes the terror of slavery in the present-day psyche. The hauntology of the earth can be found in Cora’s family plot, a three yards square standing between the rows of slave cabins passed down through the three generations of women.

Notwithstanding its location inside the Randall plantation, the strip of land between the cabins is deemed by the slaves as their private property; vying for each other’s plot, the community members strive to increase their limited personal space for growing food, raising livestock, or nurturing other living resources (Whitehead, *The*

*Underground* 16). For Cora, the gardening work at her family plot brings her back to the old times when she was a child the others stepped upon after Mabel's departure. Among those haunting memories, "the day of the hatchet" has personal significance to her—when the conflicts between Cora the stray kid and those who sought a redistribution of her land accumulated in the kid's desperate counterattack (Whitehead, *The Underground* 15). Although the child manages to destroy an enemy's doghouse built on her territory under the community's acquiescence, according to Morrison's site of memory, the image of an event of personal importance tends to remain in the place where it happened. An elaboration of the hauntology of site can be found in Sethe's words in *Beloved*:

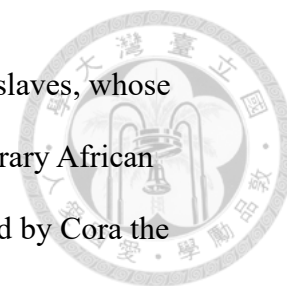
"Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened." (36)

As Sethe the ex-slave clarifies, one's rememory has a tendency to haunt the locale of the past and can be hard to dissipate. Similarly, the doghouse on Cora's land had been brought down, but the "picture" of it remains there, threatening to bring back the emotions accompanying the act of violation—including the sense of being forlorn, the rage triggered by the intruder, and the pain caused by the intruder's revenge. It should also be noticed that despite Morrison's argument that there is no straightforward equivalence between a thought picture and a symbol ("The Site of Memory" 302), the day of the hatchet is clearly endowed with symbolism in Cora's consciousness. Not only the dog house itself is remembered as an imitation of the plantation owner's residence; its occupation of her garden also resembles a seizure of the property of the



disadvantaged people by the privileged (Whitehead, *The Underground* 22). In addition, the mutt's ignorance toward its residence's invasion of the child's private land is reinterpreted as a kind of "indifference" identical to the dog owner's attitude toward the socially marginalized (Whitehead, *The Underground* 22). As a place haunted by the individual recollections of socio-economic exploitation, the family plot brings the day of the hatchet back to the grown-up Cora with the details of the incident repainted to reflect a marginalized subject's view upon the unjust society. The haunting relationship between the southern soil and its inhabitants, which recalls the confinement of a capitalist environment for present-day citizens, reiterates the inescapability of economic exploitation. To imagine the country anew, an abandonment of the anxieties rooted in the mindset of the exploited is needed. However, the dream of emancipation is not easy to chase since there is always a tug-of-war between the wish for social equality and dominant capitalist values. The psychological struggle is represented by the figures of Mabel and Ajarry—the two antecedents whom Cora contrasts in her mind.

To approach Ajarry as a figure of endurance that condenses the anxieties under a forced obedience to the capitalist society, Pile's and Ramsey's understandings of the return of the deceased are pivotal. In Pile's study of the collage of times and spaces in urban areas, Freud's term "the return of the repressed" offers a psychoanalytic explanation of ghost sightings (140). Due to an eruption of painful thoughts and ideas once kept away from consciousness, the individual encounters the ghostly manifestation as an incarnation of the fears and anxieties that are "old-established in mind" but have been "alienated from it only through the process of repression" (qtd. in Pile 141). By extension, in Ramsey's reading of Morrison's *Beloved*, the conception of "the return of the repressed" is utilized to describe the presence of the infant daughter Sethe murders, an enslaved spirit that awakens the remembered horror of slavery (776). By correlating Morrison's ideas of rememory to Freudian discourse in the case of the infant ghost,



Ramsey points out the significance of seeing the phantoms of black slaves, whose ghostly manifestations embody the emotional struggles of contemporary African Americans (776, 779). Although no actual ghost of slave is witnessed by Cora the African American woman in *The Underground Railroad*, the suppressed memories of the first generation of black slaves reenter her consciousness with a similar Freudian mechanism. Due to the remembrance of her grandmother, Ajarry, who had never known the taste of liberty, Cora initially turns down Caesar's invitation of running north. The evoked pictures ranging from Ajarry's voyage on the Middle Passage to her death in the cotton field conveys a view of the social order as inescapable, forcing Cora to get back to her exploitative daily life. Since these images are largely conflated with the earlier generations' memories of slavery, the protagonist's memory of her grandmother goes beyond a personal experience and reaches a collective extent. By reconnecting the living to a slavery past long been forgotten in the postmodern consciousness, Whitehead implies that the remembrance of African American slaves plays a double role for present-day citizens. On the one hand, it is a process in which one acquires the spectacles to see through the deep-rooted evils within a socio-economic system. On the other, there is an irrevocable risk of being possessed by the deceased and trapped in a perpetual melancholia.<sup>6</sup> A question thereby emerges: how to free ourselves from the phantoms of the enslaved ancestors—as the repressed return—without simply denying their collective nightmares of slavery. To find a solution to the dilemma, Pile recommends postmodern people to “use one ghost against another to suggest alternative ways of proceeding,” to put it another way, to summon different times and spaces from

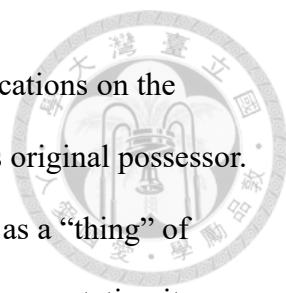
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<sup>6</sup> In *Real Cities: Modernity, Space, and the Phantasmagorias of City Life*, Pile adopts Freud's categorization of the two alternative forms of grief-work: mourning and melancholia. Compared with mourning, in which the living recognize their loss and learn to live with broken emotional attachments to the deceased, melancholia appears to be more harmful for it often involves a spiritual death. It is possible for melancholic feelings to lead the living to “a cessation of interest in the outside world,” and a serious lowering of self-regard that can reach “a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings” (qtd. in Pile 149).

the urban phantasmagorias to bring about alternate histories for the future (162). An application of Pile can be found in Cora's reimagination of her mother Mabel, whom she recalls as the only one that has reached the North through the Underground Railroad.

If the mental image of Ajarry represents the submissive feelings to a capitalism that transforms human beings into sheer commodities, then that of Mabel operates in the opposite way by refusing the assumption that human bodies can be measured by monetary value. With the picture of her running away through the Underground Railroad network, the mother arouses utopian imaginations in her daughter and propels her to break loose from the possessing memories of enslaved ancestors (Whitehead, *The Underground* 9). Some may contend that Mabel's escape is revealed to be a failure in the end of the story, and therefore, the fugitive figure of the mother does not manage to flee from the southern land. But, I want to emphasize that even though Mabel's actual journey does not lead to freedom, it does in the recollection of every single dweller on the Randall plantation. Recalled as the only one that has made it out, the figure of Mabel the fugitive slave embodies the collective dream of social reform, whose image continues to return to those possessed by the memories of slavery, encouraging them to follow her steps toward an alternative present. And although it is true that Cora has an irreconcilable rage against Mabel as a runaway mother, her hatred and sense of being forlorn does not stop her from utilizing the rememory of Mabel to travel through a state-to-state journey which might have a potential for an exorcism of the melancholia of the South. Her resolve is fully indicated in the yam-digging scene, in which Cora repeats what her mother does before her flight and bestows it with a ritual meaning.

By uprooting the yams in the family plot on her last day on the plantation, the protagonist seems to elevate the act of food preparation into a symbolic departure from the capitalist values she learns from Ajarry. As a figure of the condensed anxieties



generated within a submission to capitalism, Ajarry haunts several locations on the plantation, including the family plot where she grew vegetables as its original possessor. Accordingly, an ideology of capitalism in which she minds her place as a “thing” of exchange value permeates into the land’s soil, attaching itself onto the vegetation it cultivates (Whitehead, *The Underground* 7). Through the process of symbolizing, the interdependence between the plant and the southern soil is transformed into a representation of the correlation between the construction of a mindset and the socio-economic milieu. In the former days, Cora used to watch over her yams on a block of sugar maple by the family plot. Perching on her block of maple gains personal significance for the young woman, as it reminds her of how the first plot owner Ajarry survived the malevolent world like her “immovable” three yards square (Whitehead, *The Underground* 17). Cherishing the plot and her grandmother’s perseverance “like a stump that reached down too deep” into the southern earth, Cora used to lead a life of endurance in social oppression (Whitehead, *The Underground* 16, 17). It should also be kept in mind that it is on “the day of the hatchet” when the block of maple is found, right after she defends the plot from an invader. Therefore, by returning to her perch and occupying it “like a vulture,” Cora used to follow Ajarry’s living principles of endurance as if possessed by the black ancestor’s ghost (Whitehead, *The Underground* 278). However, abandoning the garden inherited from Ajarry, the protagonist shows an attempt to detach herself from the possessing mindset of slavery—with its recurring statement that a person should accept her place in an universe dominated by a capitalist economy. If the garden used to be an “anchor in the vicious waters of the plantation to prevent her [Cora] from being carried away,” then it is no more for a woman who chooses to venture out of an antebellum past into the unknown of a time-rupturing railway (Whitehead, *The Underground* 65). Mourning but not overwhelmed by the terror of slavery, Cora ends her ritual in the garden and carries the uprooted yams into

the northward journey. No more are the vegetables a remnant of a past bounded to her grandmother's ghost. Instead, they are transformed into a token that signals a departure of the dead slave, which emboldens the young woman to move on with her loss and broken emotional attachments to the deceased (Pile 149).

Adopting the empowering image of the fugitive slave (Mabel) to dispel the melancholic memories of the enslaved plantation farmhand (Ajarry), Cora's ritualization of yam-digging follows Pile's argument that we use one ghost against another to suggest alternative ways of proceeding. Reconstructing a figure of social resistance and letting her escape through a railway system that reminds of a modern-day subway, Cora's reimagination of history resonates with the sightings of ghosts in ethnic American literature, which "figure prominently wherever people must reconceive a fragmented, partially obliterated history, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (qtd. in Collins 285). Based on this premise, her treatment of the traumatic legacy of slavery may pacify the growing concern over an African American returning from "a past that can neither be properly remembered nor entirely forgotten," as Kathleen Brogan discusses in her analysis on ethnic ghosts (qtd. in Collins 285). Besides the aim to rebuild a history fragmented by trauma through memory and imagination, it is noteworthy that Cora perceives isolation as a position of resistance. Notwithstanding the dominant community members who force her to move into Hob—the impoverished cabin where the disabled and the stray are sent—the young woman does not let the isolated environment get to her as a site of deprivation. With its location as part of the community but outside the main body, Hob prompts the protagonist to reconsider the reality taught by the dominant group to the colonized community. Although her mother Mabel, as someone with "the same reluctance to mix," had set herself apart from the rest of the community before there was a Hob (Whitehead, *The Underground* 64), the difference that decides the fates of the two women is that one

remains bound to familial connection while the other is not. While the bond of family keeps Mabel from reaching freedom, it doesn't hinder the paces of her stray daughter. For an interpretation of the differentiated endings of the two women, Sean Grattan's reading of Hannah Arendt may be helpful, particularly its argument on singleness as a means of resistance.

Praised as one of the twentieth-century thinkers most invested in exploring the political ramifications of solitude, Arendt repudiates the totalitarian logic operated through "destroying all space between men and pressing men up against each other" which only annihilates "the productive potentialities of isolation (qtd. in Grattan 127). Her critique of a totalitarian discourse, which forcibly couples the state of isolation with loneliness, inspires us to draw on solitude as a political realm that holds the potential of utopian thinking (Grattan 127).<sup>7</sup> To rethink solitude from a counterview against the logic of loneliness, urbanites might redeem themselves from the feelings of rootlessness and alienation within modern-day metropolises. Being a single person within the crowd, thus, retrieves a positivity in replacement of the perpetual woe that engulfs every heart worn by urban alienation, which are mourned in modernist literature as an inherent theme (Williams 15).<sup>8</sup> Talking back to a pessimism of isolation constructed under "a persistent intellectual hegemony of the metropolis" (Williams 14),<sup>9</sup> Cora speaks for those who are isolated within or marginalized from the society in the postmodern context. And her voice should be differentiated from her mother's, for it involves a

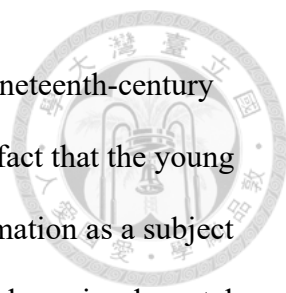
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<sup>7</sup> I agree with Grattan's assumption of singleness as a place of potential, which has a lot to do with the rootless feelings in the psyche of Postcolonial America, and which hints the utopian possibility within the heterogeneity of modern dreams and desires. But, his following argument that the utopian subject is only possible in a world of things, wherein the difference between subject and object melts down to call forth a future of thingness, in my opinions, is not necessary so in Whitehead's work, especially with Whitehead's condemnation on the objectification of human bodies in mind.

<sup>8</sup> Williams urges that this grief of isolation be observed together with a recognition of "the imperial and capitalist metropolis as a specific historical form" at different stages, a view that comes from the poor world peripheral to the metropolitan systems (23).

<sup>9</sup> Despite that Williams's focus is more on publishing and artistic forms, the logics of cultural hegemony he reproaches remains instructive when it comes to analyzing Cora's vision of the city as socially marginalized.





reformist vision of metropolitan hegemony that no more fits in the nineteenth-century milieu, where Mabel resists the world as a fugitive. Still, despite the fact that the young woman is born to an era where she is destined to resist the social formation as a subject of rootlessness, the abolitionist spirit of nineteenth-century runaway slaves is adequately inherited in her journey of exile. With a reformed aesthetics of resistance, she will keep the hope Mabel once felt when crossing over the swamp that contains the memories of numerous fugitive slaves, reaching out for a promise of liberation which has not yet been fulfilled in her mother's era.

With Cora's flight from the Georgia station, the storyline invests the history of the South with a new meaning that reveals an African American haunting in contemporary America. In Peter Collins's argument on the ghosts in *John Henry Days*, he declares that the African American haunting is not just a cultural and ethnic haunting as Brogan defines, but proven to be more of an economic haunting in Whitehead's book (286). In *The Underground Railroad*, the economic haunting in *John Henry Days* described by Collins is presented in its full dimension of the development of capitalism and urbanization. On the one hand, the inseparableness of the pictures of Mabel the fugitive and that of the Underground Railroad exemplifies that the ghosts of decolonization cannot be commemorated without remembering the anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles they are forever tied to (Pile 161, 195).<sup>10</sup> On the other, Cora's position of marginality and solitude reflects the social evils that have their precursors in an early stage of capitalism. The reimagined past in the young woman's consciousness thereby reflects a proletarian way of seeing with its universal value. By rearticulating the space of marginality as a space of strength, the young woman delegitimizes the hegemonic discourse of the colonizer. Her effort to create a root in the rootless era invites us to

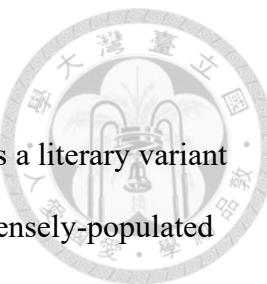
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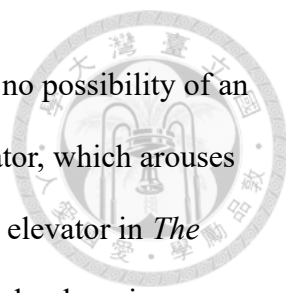
<sup>10</sup> Here, Pile adopts the rebuilding of the World Trade Center for exemplification. Even though the background of 9/11 differs from the antebellum setting in Cora's story, the challenges of accommodating and settling with the ghosts of anti-colonial, anti-capitalist struggles underlie both cases.

rethink the theme of exile with a retrospective view of history.

Carrying the rememory of the abolitionist movement, Cora enters a literary variant of South Carolina, where ex-slaves are free to choose their jobs in a densely-populated city, and where the social structure represents the present-day America in an allegorical resemblance. However, a present that functions upon commercial capitalism may be closer to the past of plantation economy than Cora has assumed. With a revelation that minority wage workers are undergoing a grotesque economic dissection under the utilitarian government, the South Carolina station shows that it may be hard to exorcise the slavery past, not with the country's foundation remaining on an economic system of the oppressor and the oppressed.

Being "one of the tallest buildings in the nation," the landmark skyscraper the Griffin Building is known as a local business center comprised of financial institutions in support of the manufacture and consumption of a wide range of commodities (Whitehead, *The Underground* 102, 103). Nevertheless, despite the commercialist prosperity the skyscraper extols, its troubling aspect indicates the divisions of socio-economic class. While the deep-pocketed whites are allowed to work inside the high-level offices of the building, the less prosperous whites and African American citizens are provided with low-paying jobs outside the building as factory laborers or domestic helpers. Therefore, whenever Cora takes the elevator up the Griffin Building, she has an uneasy feeling during the uplift. In case of fatal malfunctions of the machine, she never fails to brace herself with the brass rail in a mix of fright and excitement (Whitehead, *The Underground* 103). Considering the elevator as a metaphor of progress in *The Intuitionist* (Grausam 124), the machine in the Griffin Building conveys identical metaphorical ideas. As signified in *The Intuitionist*, the elevator is dependent on structural inequality as a model of upward mobility; the taller the building gets, the larger the gap between the top and bottom of the building becomes (Grausam 124).



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Under an ever-increasing gap in representation of income inequality, no possibility of an uplift for the disadvantaged is in sight. Also, the “magic” of the elevator, which arouses a presentiment of disaster inside Cora, recalls the tragic falling of the elevator in *The Intuitionist*. A symbol of advanced civilization and well-developed technology in a futuristic city resembling New York, the elevator of the newly opened Fanny Briggs Building stops all of a sudden and then drops its way down to the ground. The unexpected catastrophe can be a warning against the model of economic progress that the country has relied on since long ago. It may be true that people living in capitalist economies in the twenty-first century enjoy material comforts unimaginable a few decades earlier, as Randall G. Holcombe notes, and that even the urban poor lead a better life than their counterparts before the Industrial Revolution (ix). But, as an economic system, capitalism is inherently unrighteous for it unavoidably results in inequalities and abuses of power. The magical flight powered by the monstrous power of capitalist wealth may cause unexpected havoc, despite that the modern-day city is in progress on the economic front.<sup>11</sup> Some may argue that South Carolina’s government enforces racial segregation to separate African American citizens away from white citizens, so the state’s hierarchical conditions are rather a result of institutional racism than cultural capital inequality. And South Carolina’s hierarchal society, therefore, should be more about the persistence of racism and racial discrimination in twenty-first century America. It may be true that there remain forms of racial discrimination nowadays less readily identifiable than the overt racial prejudice of the pre-civil rights era. But, I want to say that the key determinant of South Carolina’s structural inequality is indeed economic factors, while race and racism are but means to consolidate the power relations between the capitalist group and the proletariat group. An example can

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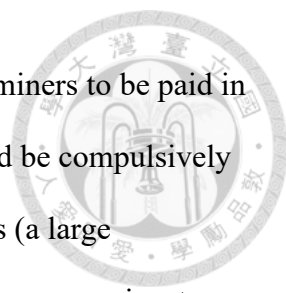
<sup>11</sup> In *Grundrisse*, Marx describes capitalist wealth as a “monstrous objective power,” highlighting the dominance of the spectral world of value over its creators (qtd. in McNally 121).

be found in Cora's separate experiences of shopping in the colored emporium of the local neighborhood and in the white store on Main Street.

Although the colored emporium and the white stores sell the same products, the prior charges much more than the latter. The price set by the colored emporium, as Cora has noticed, is two or three times more expensive than that of white shops, and likewise for the other sorts of local establishments (Whitehead, *The Underground* 121).

Previously in the episode, the writer reveals that the African American residents in town—either the ex-slaves bought by the government or the ones born free—are restricted to low-paying jobs arranged by the Placement Office. Having this information of the segregation policies in mind, we reasonably speculate that the colored emporium as well as the other local facilities can only be governmentally-owned. On the surface, the South Carolina government appears to be generous in providing the materialist comforts enjoyed by its white citizens to their colored counterparts, which would not happen to destitute plantation slaves in the nineteenth century. Behind the public image of benevolence, the hypocritical government makes itself the prime capitalist in the wonderland of commerce. Granting itself a monopoly over the African American market, it gains immeasurable profit from the colored citizens in all fields of life, including food, housing, and education (Whitehead, *The Underground* 121). Further, for those whose salary is not enough for extra purchases, scrip's credit is issued for such demands. Under the disguise of an incentive, scrip's credit leaves a considerable amount of blacks in debt (Whitehead, *The Underground* 121). The double-layered exploitation schemed by the government leaves the African American laborers in a perpetual financial stress. As a result, cheap black labor is secured with better economic opportunities forever barred from the African American workers. The historical counterparts of these strategies of monopolization can be found all over the United States under Jim Crow laws. As Matt Stoller introduces in *Goliath: The 100-Year War*



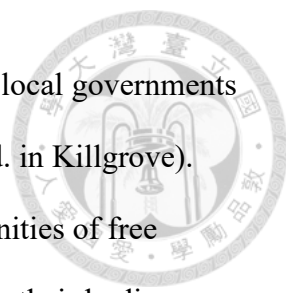


*Between Monopoly Power and Democracy*, it was common for coal miners to be paid in company scrips, and who did not trade them in company stores would be compulsively laid off (189). Other types of industries forced their low-skill laborers (a large proportion of whom were free African American workers) to take company scrips, too. Both Calvin Schermerhorn and Alex Gourevitch lay emphasis on how scrip became an exploitative tool in the plantation economy in the Jim Crow era (“Racial Divides”; “Our Forgotten Labor Revolution”). It is said that even though some sugar workers had already gained as little as “the equivalent of less than \$1 an hour today,” they were paid not in cash wages but in useless scrips spendable only at plantation stores that charged inflated prices (“Racial Divides”). Even more disheartening to Jim Crow laborers, the Supreme Court had struck down “nearly every legislative effort” to ease labor’s burden; a law that was going to ban company scrip as payment as well as another law that defined employer’s liability for injuries were all declared unconstitutional (Watson 184). Based largely on the context of Jim Crow labor condition, the state of South Carolina can be regarded as a literary incarnation of a concentration of financial power that results in misuses of authority over minorities. This social evil of concentrated financial wealth subsists as a threat to democracy and individual liberty, which does not seem to cease over the decades.

Holding complete financial power and having governmental agencies as its allies, the state government of South Carolina thrives as a monopolistic enterprise, a reminder of any big company that cooperates with political elites to maintain its status, in Jim Crow era or in the present. Such an exchange relationship between political elites and economic elites to retain their positions at the top of the political and economic hierarchies, as Randall G. Holcombe suggests, has led America to systematic corruption (1). In such an inherently corrupted system, the masses fall prey to the dictatorship of political and economic elites. At the bottom rung of the social ladder, minority workers

are left in a vulnerable position, where their bodies are less immune to economic exploitation than other citizens. Controlled by the South Carolina government's economic policies and a tax system in service of the privileged class, the labor power of the minority undergoes an unfair exchange for wage in the labor market. Treated more like working bodies instead of human employees, they become disposable and replaceable in the state business's objectification. Through its ill-treatment of human capital, the state business easily takes the autonomy away from these workers, treating their body parts as inorganic parts of the mass of machinery.

Referencing American medical experiments that happened in different historical periods, Whitehead warns us against this innately objectifying mechanism of capitalism, which threatens to bring back the antebellum nightmare of slavery. From Stevens the medical student who works for the Anatomy House of the Proctor Medical School, readers learn that the state government is secretly involved in the business of body trade. During the daytime at the government hospital, Stevens sees the colored patients and takes care of their physical well-being. At night, however, he satisfies the school's terms by traveling with resurrectionists to graveyards, snatching colored cadavers to sell to the medical institutions with a demand for specimens. The "morbid paradoxes" of Stevens's profession should be understood with the infamous history of autopsy and dissection of dead bodies in the United States (Whitehead, *The Underground* 163), and also David McNally's Marxian approach to public anatomy. According to recent bioarchaeologists' studies on the dissection of the dead in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, the vast majority of the cadavers dissected or autopsied were economically marginalized. In those days, there was a much higher rate for African Americans, immigrants, and the poor to fall victims to resurrectionists than upper-middle class whites; the situation was the most severe for black southerners as a particularly marginalized group (qtd. in Killgrove). Due to the ineffectiveness of anti-



grave robbing laws, illegal agreements between medical schools and local governments were commonly made for procuring dead bodies of black people (qtd. in Killgrove). And this social phenomenon aroused deep anxiety inside the communities of free African Americans, whose fear of a structural violence through which their bodies would be dismembered as objects could not be erased. In my opinion, that fear of body dissection can be comprehended with McNally's reinterpretation of renaissance public anatomy through Karl Marx's ideas of market economy. Public anatomy, which was bound up with ritual exercises of class-power over proletarian bodies, bears a close resemblance to the alienation of productive acts from laborers in market economy (McNally 29, 123).<sup>12</sup> Through an allegorical dissection performed by the capitalist, the abilities of laboring are estranged from the proletariat, transformed into undifferentiated abstract labor that can be sold and purchased. Any kind of capitalist dismemberment, which compels wage workers to sell their working abilities in a piecemeal manner, changes life-energies into alienable fragments of personhood, "dead things" that can be traded off (McNally 147). Seen through the same lens of criticism, Stevens's robbing of cadavers and his service in the Anatomy House gains its full meaning as an economic allegory. In addition to the distinct criticism on the fragmentation of proletarian bodies, I want to lay emphasis on Stevens's status as a less privileged white within the system. Although behind the trade of body snatching are the corrupt government officials, Stevens is the one under the risk of being charged for the crime. Hired to be a scapegoat, the medical student doing so for tuition relief manifests to readers how an ordinary white under economic pressure becomes an oppressor of the more disadvantaged social groups. An epitome of scapegoating, corruption, and structural oppression rooted in capitalist culture, the body trade of South Carolina seems to

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<sup>12</sup> See McNally's interpretation of the anatomized subject in Rembrandt's *The Anatomy of Dr. Nicolaas Tulp*.

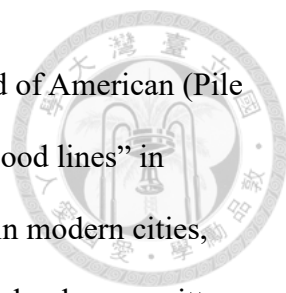
represent the lasting exploitation in the U.S. economy. In the economic model functioned upon the vampiric mechanism of capital, the dismemberment of laboring bodies becomes unavoidable. To sustain the circuit of capital accumulation, life energies have to be extracted from laborers to refuel the mass of machinery.<sup>13</sup> Vampiric capital, which “assumes the form of an ‘animated monster,’” in this sense, will continue in its thirst for living blood and its invisible blood consumption (McNally141).

Combining Marx’s vampire-metaphor with the imagery of the train engine, Whitehead draws readers’ attention toward the capital’s blood-drinking as the foundation of economic progress. Adopting the “ruthless engine of cotton” as a symbol of white capitalism, he expresses through Cora’s mouth that despite the country’s national image of liberal democracy, the nation cannot function without a “hungry boiler fed with blood” (Whitehead, *The Underground* 139, 193). To extend the symbolism of blood-sucking engine, North Carolina, as the next station in Cora’s modern odyssey, is portrayed as a state which inflicts the institutionalized violence on immigrant workers from Europe. Switching its fuel between the colored bodies and the white bodies of the urban poor, capitalist monstrosity sacrifices the masses in the underclass for technological advancement and economic development (Whitehead, *The Underground* 205). In my opinion, Whitehead’s portrayal of the vampiric urban economy finds resonance with Pile’s blood-work of the city. Arguing that blood can stand for specific meanings in the age of imperialism, Pile cites Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* to explain how Count Dracula embodies crystallized anxieties over race and class in the imperialist city (106). Being an undead immortal continually moving around different places, Dracula’s movement is likened to the circuit of money. And as a Székely descended from many brave ancient races, Dracula is proud of himself not only as an

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<sup>13</sup> The mass of machinery, as McNally comprehends, should involve factories, assembly-lines, computerized production-systems, and other forms of production apparatuses (141).



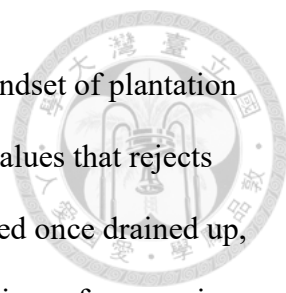


imperishable but a successor of bloods superior to that of English and of American (Pile 109). The underlying fear of “not making the best of cosmopolitan blood lines” in Stoker overtly presents an anxiety about “the deterioration of races” in modern cities, which, considering the context of nineteenth-century England when the book was written, is strongly associated with the supposed inferiority of the bodies of manufacturing labor (Pile 109). The blood flowing inside the veins of the “unproductive” underclass, which is believed to be inferior and should be removed from the cosmopolis for the better, satisfies a mindset of the elite population that tends to secure financial industries for white-collar citizens whereas deeming welfare for impoverished wage workers needless.<sup>14</sup> To exclude the proletariat from the heart of the city—a dream that some upper-class people may want to fulfill—takes the form of eugenics in the alternate history in *The Underground Railroad*. South Carolina’s birth control is no doubt a scenery of the dark wish for protecting the “best” bloodlines from being marred by the offspring of the proletariat.

Aiming at the annihilation of the African American working class, the municipal policy of health turns out to be a ploy which inflicts genocide. With secretive sterilization, the state hospital performs planned surgeries to leave colored women infertile. In the near future, there will be no fear for “willful and cunning” descendants of African extraction to rebel against local whites like in Jamaica uprisings, as a South Carolinian doctor mentions in his racist remarks (Whitehead, *The Underground* 146). In his statement is, for sure, a historical reference of the medical science as pseudo-science in antebellum America. But behind the scheme of genocide is not really the justification of cotton economy and racial segregation by creating “evidences” that African Americans were biologically inferior to Euro-Americans (Killgrove “How Grave

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<sup>14</sup> For the logics of under-class baiting that predominate the ages of Fordist capitalism and post-Fordist capitalism, see Strombeck.



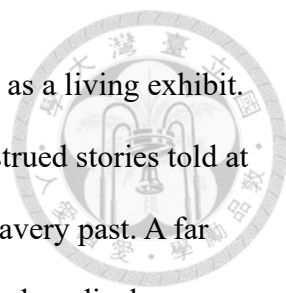
Robbers and Medical Students”). Uncoupled from the antebellum mindset of plantation capitalism, the municipal planning promotes a set of commercialist values that rejects the increase of laborers’ bodies. Disposable and needing to be disposed once drained up, proletarians yield up their flesh and blood to capital, while the bloodlines of economic elites are preserved from the hazard. Moreover, accompanying the controlled sterilization is a supplementary program run also by the colored wing of the state hospital: a medical experiment that share its main features with the Tuskegee syphilis experiment.<sup>15</sup> Informed that they are infected with blood ailments instead of syphilis and treated with a placebo, the colored patients who frequent the colored saloon Red Café spread their disease to initially healthy patrons without knowing it (Whitehead, *The Underground* 145, 146). An apt metaphor of the disgust of the unclean blood, the colored saloon of the government urges a cleansing of the urban poor, whom are believed to be the malignant tumor of the city. Differentiated from the Tuskegee syphilis experiment in its ultimate goal to eradicate the colored proletariat, these two medical programs supervised by the authorities should be recognized as the by-products of finance capitalism.

Even worse, not only are the marginalized laborers controlled and exploited under the governance of the privileged few, but the status quo seeks to incorporate the black heritage for commercial interests. For the cultural exploitation on African American wage workers, I recommend that we look into Cora’s days working at the Museum of Natural Wonders, a government-related institution that sanitizes the history of slavery for a business purpose.

Employed by the museum to act in the three scenes behind the show windows,

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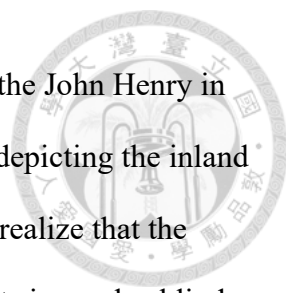
<sup>15</sup> It is noteworthy that the duration of the Tuskegee syphilis experiment overlapped with the heyday of autopsies on African American cadavers in the early 20th century South. Back then, Southern blacks’ bodies were utilized in disproportionate numbers for medical purposes. “In the field of medicine,” James Davidson says, “black bodies, despite these claims of inferiority, were often used as instructional materials to aid white doctors training to treat white patients” (qtd. in Killgrove).

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Cora helps to convey a distorted version of African American history as a living exhibit. A disparity can be found between the historical truth and the misconstrued stories told at the municipal museum, which warns against the sanitization of the slavery past. A far cry from the atrocious injustices endured by plantation slaves, the window displays please the visitors by introducing slave men and women as job seekers who ventured across the Atlantic Ocean at their free will, and who are content with working in a secure environment of agriculture (Whitehead, *The Underground* 130, 131).<sup>16</sup> The museum's retelling of the origin of African American people, which is meant to trigger amusement rather than a realization of the disturbing past, provides a critique of cultural hegemony. Also built on the market's co-optation of the heritage of slavery, the commercial use of the John Henry folktale in *John Henry Days* conveys a similar kind of counter-hegemonic criticism. In a speech given to the attendants of the John Henry festival, a PR representative of the U.S. Postal Service carefully erases the race and class from John Henry so the "specifically working class African American folk hero" morphs into "a universal symbol of human spirit" (Collins 294). By robbing the John Henry tale of its history, and rendering the folk hero as an increasingly vague character of flat ahistoricity, the postal company satisfies the market need with a banal heroism of man power's defeating the machine. The whitewashing of racist crimes in John Henry's folklore—the total absence of the hazardous conditions of railway construction and the exploitation of black labor during Reconstruction—exposes the pernicious effect the postmodern market has on black legacy (Collins 294). Rewritten to affirm the racist ideology of the target customers, the unnamed working class African American played

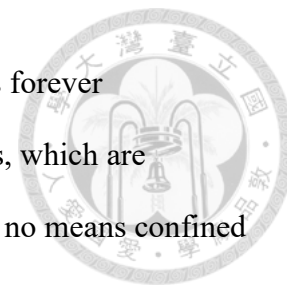
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<sup>16</sup> The Carolinian museum's romanticizing of the African-American past is evidently based on the living human displays of slavery emerged in ethnographic villages and concession stands of world fair during the 1870s (Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery" 114). Relocating postbellum living human exhibits to the space of the museum, Whitehead exposes that contemporary American museums can hardly escape from narrating slavery as "one phase in a progressive historical sequence" to join in the state's modernizing agenda of racial advancement (Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery" 116, 118-19).

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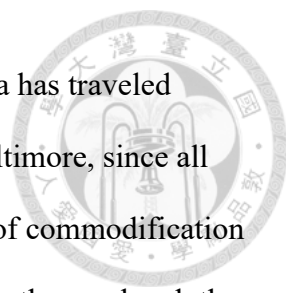
by Cora in *The Underground Railroad* loses the historical depth like the John Henry in the John Henry festival. As Cora shifts between the sanitized scenes depicting the inland of Africa, the Atlantic Ocean, and the American South, she comes to realize that the stories of African Americans have been stolen and retold by merchants in a color-blind and class-blind fashion. Her meditation on how the marketplace remakes every aspect of the black working class's life into an object of purchase brings the painful knowledge that she can never become a speaking subject in hegemonic compliance. Trying to talk back to the commodifying gaze before the display windows, Cora casts an evil eye to the audiences she thinks of as “the weak links” of the crowd (Whitehead, *The Underground* 150). Unfortunately, although those she stares at always “break” and wake up temporarily from the delusion behind the glass window, the young woman cannot break away from the glass prison (Whitehead, *The Underground* 151). Neither can her small effort chop off all the “links” to wake the whole society up from its historical amnesia. At the end of the day, she stays silenced in a world of commodities, where her voice of liberation is submersed by the deafening noise of the colonizing talks.

The loss of the sense of agency in the marketplace results in another flood of traumatic memories in Cora. As observed by Freud, grief-work is closely allied to dream-work, so it is not a surprise that the ghosts of slavery reappear in Cora's thoughts at night (qtd. in Pile 170). The ghosts the young woman calls her own, whom were once forgotten after she had left the Randall plantation, emerge in her brain again during nighttime at South Carolina. And this time, these memories are blended with her present experiences in the city, giving birth to the most appalling nightmares ever. Looking into the worst dreams Cora had when hiding underground in the South Carolina station from Ridgeway's posse's raid, the mutilation of working bodies is performed by the authority figures from the plantation past in collusion with the ones of the urban present (Whitehead, *The Underground* 172). Under their full control of economic dissection, the



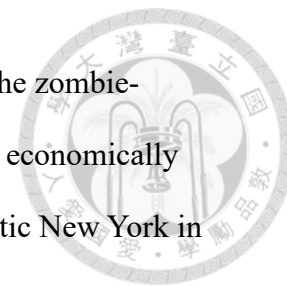
young woman is trapped in a disempowering state where her body is forever manipulated, violated, and autopsied. These grotesque dream images, which are generated over and over in the young woman's subconscious, are by no means confined to her psyche. With shared experiences of deprivation, African American factory workers are all said to be "haunted by the plantation," stricken by a melancholia of collective traumas in their daily lives (Whitehead, *The Underground* 126). As an allegory of postcolonial America, the Carolinas are enshrouded in a depressing air, where the urbanites cannot properly mourn for the haunting past, and where the ghosts of the persecuted walk among the living to call for justice. Looking down through a peep hole in the attic, Cora sees North Carolinian parkgoers slump "on their distracted circuits," as if trying to avoid their eyes to "the dead ones [the African American laborers] who had built their town" (Whitehead, *The Underground* 212). These city dwellers, who are caught between the two worlds of "the reality of their crimes" and "the hereafter denied them for those crimes," may show how present-day psyches can be consumed by the postcolonial traumas in urban places (Whitehead, *The Underground* 212). The North Carolinian city, where the dead workers of decaying infrastructure find their way into daylight to denounce injustice, implies an emotional crisis of modern-day Americans. Besides the worry of the city being overshadowed by the ghost, the spectral return of the deceased directs toward a much more serious concern: a death of utopian dreams in the city.

In the city spaces where the livings' souls are forever worn down by the melancholic mood, the thoughts of social reinvigoration seems to have died. In *Spaces of Hope*, David Harvey feels the urgency to recover utopian longings, which have given way to despair, discrimination, and alienation in contemporary American cities (qtd. in Pile 176). The decline of utopian thoughts that has pervaded Harvey's hometown Baltimore (and presumably cities everywhere in Pile's point of view) can also be found



in Whitehead's Carolinas. Although the stations of the Carolinas Cora has traveled through may not necessary grieve in the same way with Harvey's Baltimore, since all cities deal with their dead using varied strategies, the circumstances of commodification make the urban dwellers experience the symptom of despair alike. On the one hand, the urbanites' are likely to be enchanted by "a dream-world of commodity fetishism," which distils their dreams into commodities or ensures their unformed wishes coalesced around dreams that it already has commodities for (Pile 31, 184). Misled by the deceitful dream images produced within the wonderland of capitalism, Cora almost decides to stop taking the underground train to the North. For a second, the "daily sting of the plantation," her utopian pursuit of a better future is driven away by the thoughts of the attractions she can purchase with the money she earns (Whitehead, *The Underground* 124, 125). Lingering by the glass windows on Main Street, the protagonist and the fellow street wanderers are enchanted by a nightmare in the daylight, where their wishes of freedom are harnessed by the capitalist economy and thus can never be fulfilled. On the other, even if a person swears to reject the allure of commodified dreams, it is unlikely for him or her to get away from body commodification as well as cultural commodification. For those whose bodies are cut open in the economic dismemberment and whose voices are deprived, the civilization is on its way to a downfall. The "death-in-life" capitalism imposed on the living prefigures a dystopian future, where all laborers are going to exist as soulless bodies in the capital's acquisition of life-energies (McNally 143).

Drawing upon the experiences of the ontological death in slavery, the urban poor in postcolonial cities endeavor to understand the pervasive forces of capitalist modernity—a reason that the myths of zombies and vampires continue to play a role in the present



world despite their folkloric origins (McNally 143).<sup>17</sup> Considering the zombie-metaphor, a strong intertextual connection can be found between the economically dissected in the Carolinas and the walking dead in the post-apocalyptic New York in *Zone One*. In *Zone One*, in contrast to the animate zombies and the working-class soldiers sent to reclaim the city from the flesh-eating dead, Ms. Macy and the other elites in Buffalo stay in a habitable environment, away from the apocalyptic world ridden with the masses whose activities are subservient to and led by an alien will under the capitalist economy. These elites of the new provisional government, who refuse to join the zombie walk in the dystopian New York, form an economic allegory of the wealthy upper-class who find no need to struggle for survival and seek to clear the under- and working-class from urban neighborhoods for commercial interests (Strombeck 263). In this perspective, the zombie apocalypse in *Zone One* can be viewed as the final stage of the nightmarish world of predatory capitalism, and is where the Carolinas are rolling down toward. Living a second-class citizen's life, Cora observes the fearsome likeness between the physical examination she takes in the state hospital and the assembly line in Caesar's machine factory (Whitehead, *The Underground* 134). Transformed into a lifeless "product" that will function in efficiency for the gains of the capitalist state, the young woman has been through the early stages of the zombifying objectification. Recalling the nameless monster in *Frankenstein*—a creature patched up in carcasses whom McNally takes as a metaphor of any worker under capitalist dissection—the Carolinians are walking down an equally devastating path.<sup>18</sup>

Dismembered and reassembled in Marx's economic dissection, the working class are

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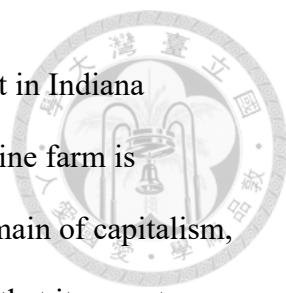
<sup>17</sup> Although the instance Pile gives in his writing is the ontological death in western African fables, considering postcolonial environments in a global scale, I think it appropriate to introduce these zombie- and vampire-tales' dramatization of capitalists' reduction of people into properties into my argument.

<sup>18</sup> Frankenstein's monster and *Zone One*'s flesh-eating walking dead may seem dissimilar for the former is resulted from scientific experiment whereas the latter are caused by virus outbreak. However, to put it in McNally's words, both the zombified creatures direct toward the objectifying capitalist environment, wherein the masses are transformed into the living dead.

essentially zombies in becoming; what awaits them shall be a dead end with no turning around.

Taking an alternative train away from the present of a degraded civilization, Cora reaches the station of the Valentine farm, an Indiana settlement full of utopian possibility. In contradistinction to the Randall plantation, the black farm operates on a communal basis, where the community members stay and contribute for mutual prosperity. Coming to learn that work can be something that unites folks rather than pure suffering, Cora perceives the notion of liberty in a new dimension that highlights the potential of collective effort. Her newly-gained understanding that freedom is “a community laboring for something lovely and rare” (Whitehead, *The Underground* 325), as Nihad M. Farooq discusses in an essay on black utopia, articulates the collective aspiration of the black settlers who founded colored plantations in slavery-bordering states from the 1850s onward. Although such settlements seemingly contradict the model of freedom as marronage, which Whitehead recommends through Cora’s journey; in effect, they transform the concept of fugitivity from the individual practice of “running from” into the aspiration of “a collective belonging in motion” (qtd. in Farooq 95). Thus, in the new ontology of liberty these black settlements inaugurated, a possibility of knowing forms of life outside the realm of capitalist nation is provided (Farooq 95). The aspiration of overturning the current system in collective effort is fully expressed in the final speech of Elijah Lander, a DuBoisian black orator of the Valentine farm. In his last oration at the gathering of the Valentine farm, which is participated by both farmhands and the Underground Railroad agents, the thinker from Boston lights up a path of the future of the farm by propelling the listeners to imagine the new order they can bring by uniting as one in utopian pursuit. Announcing that sometimes “a useful delusion is better than a useless truth,” he confronts his opponent orator’s proposal of accommodating the farm into the dominant order set by the nearby white plantations,





which would erase the energy of radicalism from the black settlement in Indiana (Whitehead, *The Underground* 340). Some may argue that the Valentine farm is fundamentally a cooperative farm so it cannot subsist outside the domain of capitalism, and thus, the ill fate of the Indiana station is prewritten. But, the fact that it cannot jeopardize the relations with the white towns without paying a high price shall not deny the collective future unbounded by the state borders drawn by the community. Their visions that rise out of the constraints of the present situations offer a crucial redefinition to utopia, as more of a “feeling” of urgent idealization than a physical location (Farooq 104). The affective borders defined by the shared dream of utopian socialism, as Pile might put it, capture the essence of the spaces of hope. Siding with Harvey’s advocacy of a new interpretation of utopia, Pile declares that urban utopianism should not mean planning “a perfect society” stabilized by “a perfect urban spatial order,” which cannot be untethered from authoritarianism and totalitarianism (177). Instead, it should be more about the visionary thought of an utopian city that empowers us to always dream the city anew and to intervene in urban social processes. Inspired by his prospect of an urban utopia, I suggest that we regard the Valentine farm—a combination of a spatial form of socialist economy with the revolutionary spirit of nineteenth-century black settlements—a time-space brought into existence from the wishes of transformations in social form and temporal process already contained within city phantasmagorias. As a space of collective hope, the Indiana station exceeds the protagonist’s previous vision of an utopian city, wherein the “buildings of polished white stone” crowds a planned village and a colored blacksmith runs his own business (Whitehead, *The Underground* 57). And as a transformational space, the station of the farm trains its inhabitants more in the active practice for collective survival than a static state of settlement. Thus, even though the farm itself is destroyed when Ridgeway arrives with a white posse to kill Elijah Lander and most of his folks, the spirit of

abolitionism shall live in the survivors. Remembering the Valentine farm, one does not need to go after his or her utopian dream alone any more. As long as the significant moment during Lander's speech—when the listeners feel they are on “the verge of some new order”—is passed down to the new generations by storytelling, the utopian city will continue to inhabit every abolitionist heart (Whitehead, *The Underground* 342). The Valentine farm will eventually be revived, though it may come back in a different form, in a space-time different from the alternative reality of Whitehead's Indiana.

From the landscapes of the slavery past to an idealized future, the fugitive journey of the protagonist presents an utopian awakening from the nightmare of capitalist economies. The yearning of democracy and the longing for a just and liberal city, as Whitehead expresses through his states of counterfactual timelines, are transcendent of temporal and spatial boundaries. Defined by the affective borders of the shared struggles within marginalization and enslavement, the shiny locomotive heading north is not stopping its chase for the promised land. For the next chapter, I would like to further develop my argument on the interrelation between mental life and the urban space of utopianism. Regarding Cora the fugitive woman as an incarnation of the Underground Railroad's momentum of social resistance, I wish to take a closer look at her struggle with Ridgeway the slave catcher and the rest of his gang, especially his black apprentice Homer. Being each other's opposite, the nemeses embody contrary sets of dreams that reside in the postcolonial minds. While Ridgeway and Homer dedicate themselves to ruining the railroad network to maintain the social order of capitalist hierarchy, Cora insists on confronting his values of imperialism with her spirit of liberation. Their conflicting ideologies mark the universal class antagonism between wage workers (especially the underclass) and social elites, which has been existing in national and global scales, and which implies an urgent need for social reforms.

## Chapter Two

### Disassembling the Railroad Strata:

#### A Permeating Threat from Aboveground and the Aesthetics of Resistance



Colson Whitehead is by no means the first African American writer to combine the literary symbol of a train with the dream of progression passed down by the abolitionists of the Underground Railroad. Still, he may be the first writer who reimagines the Underground Railroad as a structured railway enterprise that equally incarnates the impetus of social reform and the feelings of deprivation in the late-capitalist milieu. At once the reflection of the railroad people's utopian dreams and their sense of powerlessness toward market economy, the subterranean railway complex harbors the intense feelings displaced from the above-ground society in its layered physical structures. While Cora intensifies the utopian aspirations within the underground strata, Ridgeway threatens to undercut the abolitionist forces and corrode the railroad spaces into capitalist dungeons. As countervailing powers, the runaway woman and the slave catcher proceed to determine the fate of the railway and its people in the clash of their rivalrous ideals. In this chapter, before delving into the emotional aspects of the railway strata foregrounded by the protagonist and her nemesis, I want to distinguish Whitehead's Underground Railroad system from the "Tubman Tradition" of twentieth-century African American literature. Compared to the train symbol in the "Tubman Tradition," Whitehead's hierarchal railway enterprise seems to offer a more acute understanding of the relations between the urban infrastructure and the economically marginalized.

In *The (Underground) Railroad in African American Literature*, Darcy A. Zabel recommends viewing the repeated use of the train as symbol in twentieth-century African American literature as a self-created inheritance (12). Dissatisfied with the

representations of trains in the canonical works of nineteenth-century American literature, which Leo Marx decries for automatically associating the locomotive with an American Dream of industrial progress that favors the wealthy, African American writers take the train symbol for their own uses to revisit the history of slavery and to form an identity speaking out against the dominant discourse on social progress (qtd. in Zabel 10).

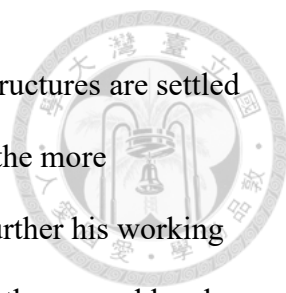
Among their adaptations of the train symbol, the recurring image of the Underground Railroad as a flying train driven by the slave rescuer Harriet Tubman forms a literary tradition later named by Zabel as the “Tubman Tradition” (33). By reimagining the Underground Railroad as a vehicle of elevation, contemporary African American poets and novelists go through an inward journey in search of self, and also bespeak their willingness to move beyond the status quo for an ideal America as a place of freedom. No more is the train a one-layered symbol of economic power subject to the ideology of white capitalism and white supremacy; in reverse, the train becomes “a symbol of the power to oppose power,” calling for resistance against structural violence upon which the United States built its foundation (Zabel 15).

The symbolism of Whitehead’s Underground Railroad shares some of its major features with the train symbol in the “Tubman Tradition.” Although Whitehead’s locomotive does not fly into the sky with its passengers aboard, but runs down the underground tunnel in engulfing darkness, it functions as a time-traveling machine as well. Boarding the locomotive, hence, gains the symbolic meaning of crossing the thresholds of time and space in search of the possibility of emancipation. However, despite the similar design of transforming the historical Underground Railroad into a steam locomotive of liberation, Whitehead’s version of the train symbol displays a more complicated dynamic between economic circumstances and urban subjects. In his subway-like railway system, the train as symbol becomes half of a means of spiritual transcendence and half of secular confinement, and thus provides an economic allegory

of the pervasiveness of capitalism. The paradox of the Underground Railroad network, which represents the dilemma faced by the freedom pursuers in the domain of a market economy, is fully embodied in its physical structures as spaces of heterogeneous utopian imaginations. Not only is every personal dream taken in as an independent unit, but these units are rearranged in a stratified order within the whole, rendering a microcosm of social stratification.

Carrying emotional elements from individual occupants, the working places of the railroad people are by no means a homogenous whole. Rather, they embody variant recollections of abolitionist missions, and hence, can be deeply personal. Examples can be found in the depictions of the interiors of the stations. Since every station concretizes its owner's concealed desires and fear, it is not a surprise that its inner objects usually possess metaphorical meanings reflective of the person's utopian pursuits. His dream told by the landscape paintings of farmlands hanged on the walls of white tiles, the unnamed station agent of Tennessee dreams of a future where plantation will be idyllic self-sustainment instead of slavery (Whitehead, *The Underground* 309); for Martin of the North Carolina station, the utopia is written in his old man's secret diary "surrounded by colored stones in a kind of shrine" on the platform, which signifies the father-to-son succession of the will of an abolitionist (Whitehead, *The Underground* 210, 211). These heterogeneous spaces of abolitionist works, which contain personal memories echoing the shared longing for freedom, offer a clear view of how dreams traffic in both personal and social wishes (Pile 28).

Nevertheless, despite a diversity of utopian wishes attached to the places of abolitionist works, the stratifying of these places calls forth the confinement of social hierarchies. Notwithstanding that the Underground Railroad was fundamentally a



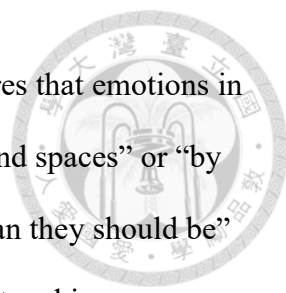
nonprofit organization,<sup>19</sup> the layers of its underground and ground structures are settled according to its members' places in the social strata. In other words, the more marginalized a railway member is in the above-ground society, the further his working place—as an embodiment of his utopian imagination—is down from the ground level. Instances can be found in the working places the three groups of railway members separately occupy. While the all-black engineers (or conductors) drive their smoking trains deep down the underground, the white and black station agents either run their train stations half situated above ground and half beneath the earth, or else they are sent across the nation to complete abolitionist missions. Aside from the engineers and the agents, the all-white officers fulfill their responsibilities full-time above-ground in decision-making, involving looking after the daily operations of the enterprise, recruiting the best talent, and motivating the newly hired to stay passionate toward the railroad business.<sup>20</sup> From an all-black bottom to a middle evenly constituted of whites and blacks to an all-white top, these tiers of the Underground Railroad's body are laid reflecting the social formation of class, where the underclass is coded as an African descendant population. However, besides building the underground society into a mirror image of the one above-ground, Whitehead's intentional arrangement of the railroad strata seems to have an even more profound motive.

The effect created by the layering of the railway's structure, in my viewpoint, can be further examined with Pile's adoption of Freud's dream-work in his study of the dreams in the city. Inspired by the Freudian point of view that "each dream is produced

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<sup>19</sup> I am referring only to Whitehead's Underground Railroad, which has a clear organizational structure. For a philosophical rethinking of the historical Underground Railroad as an organization based on its communication dynamics, see Washington.

<sup>20</sup> Based on Atul Tandon's definition, the only factor that tells a non-profit apart from a social enterprise is the former is tax-exempt while the latter is not. All is just about a tax label and there is no fundamental difference between the two (Tandon). Thus, the Underground Railroad can be taken as something between a non-profit and a social enterprise, for part of it runs on the donations of abolitionists and part of it is sustained by profits made by cooperatives such as the Valentine farm.

The logo of National Tsing Hua University (NTU) is located in the upper right quadrant of the page. It is a circular emblem with a central bell and the university's name in Chinese characters around the perimeter.

such that its emotional core is not where it appears to be,” Pile declares that emotions in cities are commonly displaced, either onto “marginal social figures and spaces” or “by shifting the emotionally intense aspects of cities somewhere other than they should be” (48). In this regard, by diving deep down the underground strata and touching upon a substructure formed by the figures of marginalization, we are able to reach the secret place where Whitehead hides the emotional core of his multi-temporal landscape. It is true that the subway-like transit system as a whole already displays marginality, for it functions as an intermediate space that conveys physical and emotional elements between the aboveground and the underground worlds. Nevertheless, these intense feelings toward social deprivation in city life are majorly displaced onto the blue-collar train conductors, who are witnessed as the drivers that have no power in choosing the routes they are proceeding into, and are therefore, differentiated from the black conductors of the historical Underground Railroad who were free to devise their own rescue routes.

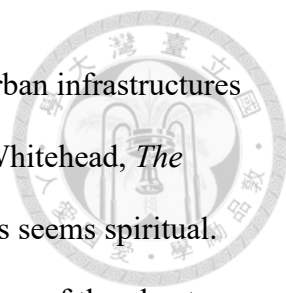
Take the young engineer who incautiously drives pass Cora at the South Carolina station as an illustration. After Cora yells in full volume to make his locomotive back up on the tracks, the young man explains the reason why he misses her on the platform: “The bosses hadn’t heard from the station agent, so I was running express. This stop wasn’t on my schedule” (Whitehead, *The Underground* 175). We learn from his apologetic defense that the train engineers are supposed to follow the orders of superiors regardless of the actual conditions of the passengers. Although there is a high possibility that this young engineer is born free, for he speaks with “a carefree authority” unlikely for an ex-slave (Whitehead, *The Underground* 175), he still cannot decide where his train goes, and can only take care of the tasks his superiors entrust to him. The same is observed in the ex-slave engineer that drives Cora and Caesar from Georgia to South Carolina, who clarifies to his grateful passengers that he is hired for nothing more than

taking the passengers to where they have to be, so there is no need to thank him for following the railroad instructions (Whitehead, *The Underground* 108). The irony of these blue-collar conductors, simultaneously in and not in the driving seat, fully reflects the power relations in the above-ground world and emotions toward these relations.

Produced in the economic milieu of white capitalism, the underclass's sense of impotence and their wishes for freedom are then relocated onto the margins of the society. To drive underground, therefore, obtains its symbolic meaning from both the nature of the job and its location far beneath the Earth's surface. Lacking the power to decide their routes and terminuses, the locomotive engineers drive their passengers through mile after mile of darkness inside the underground tunnels. Since these blue-collar figures embody the secret desires and anxieties inside America's poor, their ride directs us toward another group of railroad characters who play a crucial role in the railway operation yet remain unseen throughout all the scenes: the enigmatic builders of the tunnels. Arguably, Whitehead's mystification of the tunnel builders creates an ambiguity in the history of the Underground Railroad organization, so one can only make guesses about the full picture of the railroad system. Still, several cues hidden in the description of the faceless tunnel builders make me believe they are highly associated with the country's traumatic memories, especially the remembrance that the infrastructure of the modern-day city has been sustained above the past sacrifices of a minority.

When asked for the identities of the tunnel builders, Lumbly answers the question with a question: "Who builds anything in this country?" (Whitehead, *The Underground* 81); the suspense extends when Royal declares to Cora that no one knows when the tunnel of the Indiana station is dug, followed by an uncanny addition that there is no sign of human activities in the station, "not even an old toothpick or a nail in the wall" (Whitehead, *The Underground* 307). Even though it is hinted that the colored workers





are the hidden architects of American cities, who build all kinds of urban infrastructures from buildings to walkways and so may as well shape the railroad (Whitehead, *The Underground* 212),<sup>21</sup> the force excavating and connecting the tunnels seems spiritual. In my opinion, Pile's grief-work of the city offers a postmodern reading of the phantom-like tunnel builders who leave no trail of life, with no one certain of the whole history of their labor. When urban experiences trigger memories in the living, ghosts appear, accompanied by "the uncanniness" of "the unexpected appearance of the past in the present" (Pile 137). Given that infrastructures are places of the memories of African American manual labor, the vibe of otherworldliness Cora feels when traveling through the tunnels reminds us of how modern-day urbanites are haunted by deceased minority workers in the locations of traumatic reminiscences. Inhabiting the tunnels, the spirits of colored laborers become the essential part of the fabric of the Underground Railroad network, coworking with the railroad members alive to continuously broaden and reshape the cityscape. But, a danger also lurks in the underground world. For the tunnels extending in darkness are where "the only proper concerns of the living circulate around death"; to a degree, they reaffirm that the modern anxieties about the infrastructure of inequalities have not yet been relieved (Pile 150). This haunting relationship between the site of trauma and the individual's memories of the past is elaborated in its full in Cora's psychological state. Through endless times of involuntarily remembering her days on the Randall plantation, the fugitive woman at the railroad's facilities strives in a personal melancholia she seeks to exorcise, though this exorcism may come only with a

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<sup>21</sup> This understanding of urban modernization has been fully stated in the North Carolina episode. For the North Carolinian late-night parkgoers, the memories of a colored labor that erected everything from the houses to the lynching platform on the park always arouse a sense of guilt. So, they only go to the park after dark, when everything the colored labor build loses its shape in the darkness, and when they can at least try to avoid the reality of their crimes. The same concept of the hidden architects of the city is presented in Whitehead's previous novel *The Intuitionist*, as discussed by Dubey in *Signs and Cities*. In the futuristic but hierarchal city, the black working-class protagonist has labored "to sustain the infrastructure of the modern city even as she has been written out of progressive narratives of urban modernity" (Dubey, *Signs and Cities* 240).

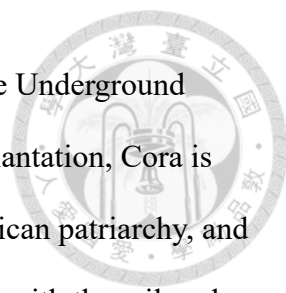
final departure from the Underground Railroad's haunted realm.<sup>22</sup>

After mining the two dimensions of the Underground Railroad, as half a space of its people's utopian dreams and half of their despair toward an infrastructure of the socially marginalized, I now wish to turn to Cora's role in the underground society. In spite of her status as human freight, which makes her the one with the least authority among the railroad characters, the black female figure turns out to be the chosen one who inherits the spirits of fugitivity from the Underground Railroad without being entirely bound by the disempowering melancholia embedded inside the infrastructure. Throughout the narrative, it is hinted that she is the driving force which may open a future of utopian potential that no one in the railway organization has ever arrived. In my point of view, Cora's exceptionality comes from her double identity. First, she is a railway passenger, who has been sent through multiple times and spaces of the cityscape, and who has traveled through the convergence of abolitionist dreams of the Underground Railroad. This means she automatically gains a more comprehensive vision of the American past and present compared to the other railroad characters. Stopping by the diverse stations which carry heterogenous emotional elements of their owners, the young woman gets to witness how social processes produce particular kinds of in-between spaces that blur any barrier that might exist between internal and external worlds, where "the affect, meaning and power" associated with the elements of city may change as they move (Pile 49). Entering the collective dreams produced spatially through Freudian processes such as displacement and condensation (Pile 41), the woman gazes upon the traffic of intense feelings in personal and social wishes in a wide field of view. In addition to the free entrance of the dream spaces in city life, Cora is a double minority, an identity which makes her the closest person to the bottom

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<sup>22</sup> For the full analysis on this modern-day mentality, with special focus on personal memories of the antebellum South, please see Chapter One.





constituted of the socially excluded—where the emotional core of the Underground Railroad lies. An outcast from the black community of the Randall plantation, Cora is aware of the marginal position of black women in the world of American patriarchy, and her feeling of being out of place does not decrease in her interactions with the railroad men. Although the railroad engineers and agents are all good-natured and willing to meet Cora's needs, the young woman recognizes herself as “a stray” in every sphere, who belongs neither to the plantation nor the railroad enterprise of a “fraternity of odd souls” (Whitehead, *The Underground* 174). Accepting the railroad men's arrangements, Cora is transported from one station to another without much agency. The absence of black women's voices in the railroad's business exposes a deficiency of the enterprise of black activism. Not only does the train's cabin readdress social limitations, whose driving seat rejects a female subject during its progression in the gale (Whitehead, *The Underground* 175), but the all-male railroad engineers celebrate the status quo as if infected with “a kind of tunnel madness,” without a faint hint of other ways an abolitionist community may function (Whitehead, *The Underground* 313). From Cora's case of being physically and mentally exiled from the main body of the male-dominated organization, we learn how the “relentless return of the dominant discourse and practice of community” can leave a double minority in a vulnerable position, as Miranda Joseph argues in *Against the Romance of Community* (qtd. in Grattan 138).


Still, it is Cora's estranged position from the railway community that makes her the one sober enough to see through the illusions of freedom generated within the mainstream. As an outcast slave and a female passenger, her vision from the margins is broader and closer to the railway's emotional core than any other railroad person, which has the potential to bring destruction and regeneration to the present organization of social systems. In the next section, I am going to inspect how Whitehead tackles the tension between Cora the runaway and Ridgeway the slave catcher. If Cora carries the

potential to shake the capitalist order, then Ridgeway stands firmly on the opposite side as its gatekeeper, guarding the logic of group-based social hierarchies by all means. The slave catcher is a boulder that hinders the waves of gender and racial progressive ideas, an ultimate incarnation of white sovereignty and capitalism that frustrates the imaginations of social mobility.

Cora's entrance into the world of commercial capitalism is undermined by Ridgeway in at very start, whose vow to recapture and mentally destroy her negates the freedom the runaway woman temporarily achieves outside of Georgia (Whitehead, *The Underground* 98). If Cora resembles the liberating soul of the alternative train, Ridgeway and his associates should be understood as the beings of the vampiric drive of capitalist economy.<sup>23</sup> According to Marx's notion, capital assumes the form of an "animated monster" in its consuming of the human beings as if they were inorganic parts of a gigantic apparatus (qtd. in McNally 141, 142). The automaton's "vampire thirst for the living blood of labour" must be satisfied (qtd. in McNally 140), and Ridgeway likewise sees this as his duty, insisting that America advances upon capitalist expansion regardless of the railway characters' appeal for an alternative model of progression. Going after the protagonist in his determination to uproot the network of fugitivity, the slave catcher masterminds a series of racial attacks across the state. His utmost goal to find the entrance into the underground complex and demolish the underworld's construction recalls what McNally calls the "capitalist monstrosity" in his rereading of Leslie Silko's work on Marx's accumulating capital (115). Since capital's power lies in the way it "invisibilises its own monstrous formation" while permeating into the fundamental tissue of everyday life (McNally 114), Ridgeway's underhanded intrusion into the underground structure provides a scenario of capitalist thoughts'

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<sup>23</sup> For more on Whitehead's adoption of Karl Marx's vampire-metaphor in his imagery of train engine, see Chapter One.



sleeping into utopian imaginations and attempting to eat up the collective aspirations of urban innovation. Spurred by Ridgeway, hegemonic capitalist ideologies force themselves through the ground surface and obscure the prospect of a better future unfolded by Cora's voyage. Amplifying the anxieties of social exclusion within the infrastructure, the slave catcher's appearance conjures up a Gothic picture of a capitalist underworld, a regime of night where "the secret dungeons that harbour labouring bodies in pain" will be reinforced instead of disintegrated (McNally 138).<sup>24</sup> In addition to the hauntedness of the slave catcher's spying out the locations of Cora and the railroad complex, it should be stressed that the rivalry between Cora and Ridgeway in the long chase is detached from the gender dynamics between black females and white males denounced in antebellum slave narratives. Alternatively, the enemies' incompatibility is built upon two sets of sentiments that define the class antagonism nowadays. The slave catcher's gaze upon the fugitive woman is a postmodern capitalist's cold estimation of one laborer, equally objectifying and desexualizing.

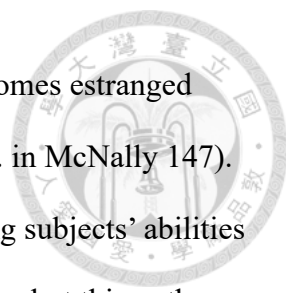
Although the antebellum context of white males' sexual exploitation of black female bodies is never absent from Whitehead's writing, Cora's entry into the Underground Railroad's landscape marks an instance when a laborer's value is unhooked from sexuality. Similarities and dissimilarities between the mindset of plantation capitalism and that of commercial capitalism are found in Terrance Randall the rancher and Arnold Ridgeway the slave catcher. As a sadist, Randall never hides his crooked desires for slave women. African American women are objects of his possession waiting to be exploited: "He tasted his plums, and broke the skin, and left the mark" (Whitehead, *The Underground* 36); and the act of producing children is divorced

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<sup>24</sup> Coining the term "Marxist Gothic," McNally finds an expression for Marx's consistent use of Gothic imagery (138). Although Margaret Cohen has initiated a specific word "Gothic Marxism" that attends to the irrational, she seems not to have figured Marx's voyage through the capitalist underworld (qtd. in McNally 138).

from affectional bonds since children born to slave mothers are simply taken as a resource for his profit. A management method to solidify his status as an entrepreneur and to achieve capital growth, sexual exploitation is regularly required. Due to Cora's public challenge of his authority, the young woman soon becomes her master's target of suppression. In front of a captured runaway burnt alive, Randall slips his hand into Cora's shift and harasses her (Whitehead, *The Underground* 56). His ownership asserted through the sexual harassment forces her to flee the plantation before her master makes full use of her body as a breeding machine.

On the other hand, Ridgeway consciously disengages his sexual instincts with his expertise in catching slaves. Back in his novice year, when he first hunts down an absconded fugitive in New Jersey, the slave woman proposes to share a night with him in exchange for freedom. Though he lies with her, he makes no promise to close the deal, and has no sexual involvement in his profession ever since (Whitehead, *The Underground* 92). To become a professional, he sheds off the unprofitable sexual drive, which simultaneously transforms Cora into a genderless object. Always referred to as "it," each runaway equals a sum of dollars written on a contract, which is evaluated only for monetary value. If the expense of retrieval soars beyond the estimated price, then the slave catcher would rather keep the cost down by relinquishing the transportation, like his putting a bullet into Jasper's skull after an impersonal check on the balance (Whitehead, *The Underground* 254, 255). To me, this dehumanizing reasoning of a capitalist mind goes beyond the antebellum form of scientific racism in the name of Enlightenment rationality. Dissimilar from the nineteenth-century scientists' debasement of African American people into the "Other" or "the monster" (Beville 45, 46), Ridgeway's sort of dehumanization is pure monetary measurement. A price tag is put on every single fugitive in the slave catcher's eyes, and while field hands were generally considered commodities in plantation economy, the man's alienated horizons



that radically involves a market place wherein ““a man’s activity becomes estranged from himself”” is closer to a postmodern capitalist’s evaluations (qtd. in McNally 147). Re-recognized as commodities in the postmodern society, the laboring subjects’ abilities or qualities are no longer deemed as organic parts of their personalities but things they can ““own’ or ‘dispose of’ like the various objects of the external world” (qtd. in McNally 147). Even Ridgeway’s expertise of slave-catching is estranged from himself when it enters labor economics. So, on this premise, the slave catcher naturally has no personal hatred or fear toward Cora, because both of them are objects expressible only in numeral digits in the monetary calculation. As commodification reshapes the whole perception of the man, such concept as interpersonal relationship goes up in smoke, and every relationship is one of thingness in ““a world of commodities and their movements on the market”” (qtd. in McNally 147). What’s more, Ridgeway’s view of a desexualized commodification of human beings is not confined to himself. Rather, it is adequately inherited by his apprentice Homer, an African American capitalist in becoming.

As an African American boy, Homer is in every way opposite to the pickaninny stereotype in post-antebellum American literature.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to the poorly dressed, unsophisticated, and primitive little black children running and playing on the plantations, Homer is precocious at a young age. His breaking into the scene of Cora’s capture dramatically underlines his peculiar precocity:

A little colored boy, about ten years old, drove a wagon up the street through the crowd, shouting at the two horses. On any other occasion the sight of him in his tailored black suit and stovepipe hat would have been a cause of bewilderment .... More than one person thought what had just transpired was a new wrinkle in the

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<sup>25</sup> For the literal portrayals of black children, see Wright. For the history of pickaninny caricature, with a special focus on the anti-black depiction of black children as uncivilized, wild beings, see Pilgrim.

Friday entertainment, a performance arranged to counter the monotony of the weekly skits and lynchings, which, to be honest, had grown predictable.

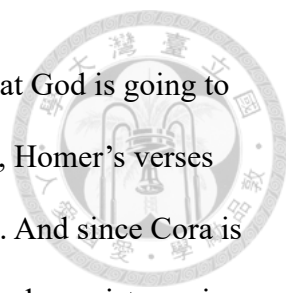
(Whitehead, *The Underground* 225)

Unlike ordinary pickaninnies' servility before white authorities, Homer's movements are dominative and full of strength. Holding the reins tight and dressing himself up in the attire of urban respectability, the African American boy possesses a level of self-esteem unmatched with his slave descent. Further, originally a property Ridgeway purchases from a butcher, he is uncommonly singled out by the slave catcher as a "kindred spirit" and is then privately educated with all kinds of skills to survive in a world of white hostility (Whitehead, *The Underground* 243). Hereby, I argue that the portrait of the young black man displays more than "the psychological complexities of the master/slave relationship," an interpretation Laura Dubek derives from the interviews of Whitehead (76). Instead, Homer's image vividly captures the successorship in exploitative business practices in the current market. Following Ridgeway's footsteps and learning his profit-oriented strategies of business management, the black boy finds the same purpose that the white man has found in his career path of a ruthless capitalist.

Thereby, continuing my argument, I disagree with Dubek's further comment that the boy's self-appointed job of a scribe corresponds with his name's sake—the Greek poet and composer of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Although it may be true that the scrivener boy is part of a juxtaposition of two oral traditions: "the Western tradition that begins with Homer" and "the African-American tradition that begins with the spirituals (and includes the art of signifying)" (Dubek 77), the irony lays in the mismatch between the supposedly objective status of a recorder and the boy's biased stand. Lacking his historical counterpart's retrospective view, the young black man passionately sides with the slave catcher, writing for his boss's current interests. Not so much as "checking"





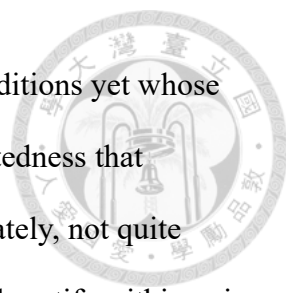


Ridgeway in a way that gives credence to his victim's moral claim that God is going to look in the slave catcher's soul and see what he has done (Dubek 77), Homer's verses endorse the commercialist values stemming from the thriving market. And since Cora is a potential threat to Ridgeway's perspective of commercial capitalism, her existence is entirely erased from Homer's composition, in the allegorical sense, removed from mainstream historical records. It is also perceivable that the boy's disposition contains the elements of a trickster, specifically exemplified in his unpredictable behavior toward Cora, including upsetting winks and defiant grins that implies a degree of mockery. However, unlike the archetypical tricksters in African American folktales who disrupt social norms and overcome repressive hierarchical systems from within,<sup>26</sup> the boy's unsettling demeanor toward Cora usually intensifies when he is taking a part in Ridgeway's misdeeds, which creates the supportive effect of his master's conducts. As a result, the strange little boy should be better understood as an "anti-trickster" figure according to James (Sákéj) Youngblood Henderson's definition of the term based on the First Nations' intellectual understanding of Eurocentrism.

In Henderson, the cognitive legacy of colonization (under the label Eurocentrism) is embodied in the "anti-trickster," known as the twin or the imitator of the trickster among some Indigenous people (58). While the trickster emphasizes the thought of the colonized in dramatic manners, the "anti-trickster" stands for a "cognitive force of artificial European thought," which constantly changes its level of coherence to legitimize the superiority of colonial conquerors (Henderson 58, 71). Even though Henderson's research centers on Aboriginal people, his ideas of the treacherous inclination of Eurocentric parameters inside the anti-trickster offer a postcolonial approach to the unpredictability in Homer's personality. As an anti-trickster character,

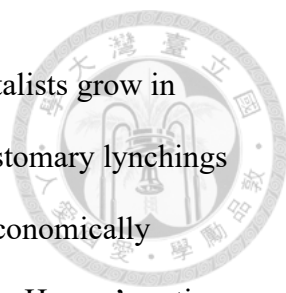
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<sup>26</sup> Examples of African American tricksters include the signifying monkey in African American folklores and Br'er Rabbit in Uncle Remus stories, both speak for the socially oppressed in the narratives. For more on the signifying monkey, see Gates. For more on Br'er Rabbit, see Earl.



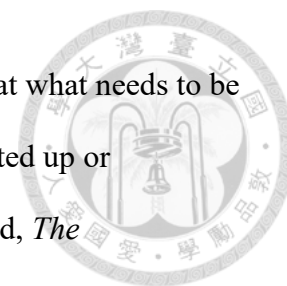
the African American boy is a paradox, born to African American traditions yet whose psychological development follows American entrepreneurs' calculatedness that branches out from Eurocentric thinking. Homer's nature is, unfortunately, not quite "potentially subversive" as Dubek extols (76), for the socially critical motifs within epic composer and trickster are both ripped away from the boy as a character. That leaves him an empty shell with no rebellious energy inside, and, in so doing, renders an indictment of how mainstream culture joins hand with the dominant social discourse to favor the enslaver by multiple means like appropriating the originally confrontational imagery of the trickster to justify Eurocentric thoughts.

To summarize, Homer's mimicry of urban respectability and his endorsement of Eurocentrism characterize him as an anti-bard and an anti-trickster whose songs praise the foul ethos of the hyper-capitalist society. His solidification of new hierarchies that naturalize capitalists' manipulation over proletarian subjects succeeds the antebellum social order initiated by colonizers to legitimize the absolute superiority of Europeans over the colonized, and the masculine over the feminine. Turning back to Homer's entrance scene, the little African American's interruption of the Friday-night execution fully brings out his symbolic significance. In the beginning of the Friday Festival, the North Carolinian crowd assault and victimize Cora, just like they did to all the blacks in the massacre, dispossessed freemen or runaway slaves alike. However, later, Homer breaks into the event against the audiences' expectation, astounding them with his assertiveness of a black capitalist in becoming. Nothing close to the battered black underclass who yield their lives hopelessly on the wheeled platform, the little African American boy places himself into the dominant position alongside white patrollers and slave catchers. Unrestricted by the town's prosecuting laws and hostility toward the blacks, Homer settles into the role of a suppressor amidst the white masses, which may represent the arrival of a new epoch when race is no more the sole determinant of power



relations in the commercial world, and where African American capitalists grow in prosperity alongside their white counterparts. Stemming from the customary lynchings and public assaults in the antebellum period, the persecution of the economically enslaved persists in varied modes in the present. Hints can be found in Homer's anti-trickster involvement in the Friday Festival—when his grand entrance accidentally becomes an emblematic performance that outshines the predictable weekly blackface skits of the same routine. Stoking up the interests downstage, Homer's appearance unites the white audience in a dramatic enhancement of the emotional tension of the ritual. Heightening the enthusiasm of the white crowd while thwarting the captured and rendering them even more powerless on stage, Homer demonstrates how unpredictable methods of frustrating the underprivileged bestows postmodern enslavers with new forces of manipulation. Under the ever-changing methods of domination conjured up by African American and European American capitalists, the well-being of the modern-day underclass are considerably infringed.

While the bond between Ridgeway and Homer shows the legacy of colonization in postmodern America, the discord between Ridgeway and Cora manifests the scramble for power between the dominant class and the marginalized. Like light and shadow, the slave catcher and the runaway dwell in the two sides of the commercialist city, who are born concurrently in the urbanization process. That might be the reason why the author compares the nemeses to a pair of lovers when they have no physical intimacy and not to mention affection (Whitehead, *The Underground* 361). They are both the products of the development of capitalism, with their origins inseparable from each other. Throughout the book, the duo have some of the most brutal physical confrontations; but first, I would like to lay emphasis on the inevitable clash of their creeds, discernable in Ridgeway's preaching to Cora on his belief of the American imperative.



Ridgeway's American imperative—the necessity to “destroy that what needs to be destroyed” and to exterminate “the lesser races” if they cannot be lifted up or subjugated—is essentially the belief of Manifest Destiny (Whitehead, *The Underground* 266). Only the slave catcher's version cuts out the hypocrisy of covering colonization with beautified terms. Never denying Cora's accusation, he directly admits that the conqueror steps upon the colonized, and has no guilt for what his kindred have done. Going beyond social Darwinist doctrines in his creed of survival for the strongest, Ridgeway hails the vanquishment of the disadvantaged per se. And this ideology is also seen in his emotionless neutrality toward Cora's unintendedly causing a young bounty hunter's death in a nocturnal ambush. The vanquishment of the underage hunter, to Ridgeway, is nothing to be mourned for, because whoever perishes by the competitive nature of capitalism deserves his ill fate. Again, the slave catcher's impersonal attitude breaks away from the Darwinist approaches in the nineteenth-century studies of criminology. At the core of Ridgeway's perspective of laws is not quite the Victorian fear of the deviances from the norm among the monstrous “Other” and “human beings” (Beville 45), but pure jungle rules, an alienated ruthlessness that justifies any wrong committed by whoever prevails in the arena of the marketplace. Hence, we may approach the man's creed of survival with Saeed Rahnama's powerful rereading of Lenin in his diagnosis of the latest stage of American Imperialism, where the linkage between imperialism and capitalism is more undeniable than ever. The slave catcher's statement that Europeans are “setting aside their territorial claims” and “slinking away” to let American capitalists take away what is theirs (Whitehead, *The Underground* 266), thus can be a prelude to our era where the U.S. soars into the super-capitalist, claiming its hegemony over the European imperialist powers. As the capitalist nation continues its nineteenth-century territory expansion under Manifest Destiny and gets ready to establish “repressive economic and ideological apparatuses” to a global extent with the

rise of neoliberalism, its dominance of the capital proceeds to spread to everywhere around the world (Rahnema).

In contrast to the man who embraces legitimate injustices within flourishing American Imperialism, the protagonist stays adamant with humanistic values, denouncing his capitalist mindset by restating her counterargument and announcing her subjectivity in front of him who tries to reduce her into a disposable object. Noticeably, when facing the ideological apparatuses of control, Cora reacts in a way quite dissimilar to many people of marginality who would rather submit to imperialists because their minds are colonized in a collective dread. Her undeterred will of resistance is fully expressed in her dialogue with her foe. On the one hand, she critically thinks about the underage bounty hunter as a creation of the socio-economic system that binds the enslaver and the enslaved alike. On the other, she intentionally disrupts the slave catcher's grand talk of the American imperative, with rebuttals and a final visit of the outhouse where she procrastinates to make the preacher of imperialism wait outside the door. By technically positioning her foe in a less dominative condition, the young woman acts in a streetwise sense reflecting the trickster's ethos of destabilizing the suppressive hierarchical system from within.

With her critical mind and street wisdom, the young woman emerges as the real "potentially subversive" character (Dubek 76), fulfilling the promise Homer as an anti-trickster fails to honor. Often speaking in a "liberated voice," her speech continues to challenge "the politics of domination" in Ridgeway's voice that seek to render her a "voiceless and nameless" object (Hooks, "Talking Back" 339). Eventually, these empowering traits help her overcome the slave catcher's ceaseless attempts to tame her thoughts and may as well crumble the extant capitalist ideology. Using her street wisdom, the heroine ultimately prevails in the final battle fought against the slave catcher. Caught off guard by the fugitive woman on the top of the stairs, the capitalist



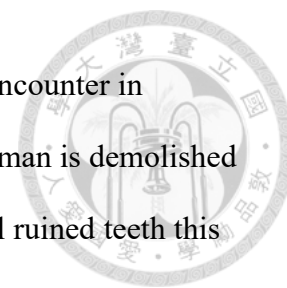


figure loses his balance and falls down from above. As in their last encounter in Tennessee, his purpose of wrecking the liberating soul inside the woman is demolished under her shrewd resourcefulness, and it costs him more than several ruined teeth this time. Mortally wounded by his opponent, Ridgeway's ambition of turning the underground of emancipating dreams into the realm of capitalist nightmares is shattered into pieces. Some readers may notice the underlying sense of succession in the final scene of the slave catcher, in which Homer the scribe remembers and notes down his master's philosophy of "the American Imperative" (Whitehead, *The Underground* 362). Still, I would like to say that Ridgeway's voice is no more commanding than it was in his speeches, and his last words lacks authority because of his complete defeat. As the speaker bleeds in anguish, his address fades into a strengthless whisper that denies its self-legitimacy and cannot reach the fugitive woman any longer (Whitehead, *The Underground* 362). Since authority is entirely ripped away from Ridgeway as the ultimate embodiment of exploiting capital, it is questionable that his successor will restore the Imperative power in the upcoming era unfurled by the impetus of social progress. Furthermore, Ridgeway's death makes Homer's pursuit of an entrepreneurship a vain effort. Losing his employer and his only backer, the anti-trickster's dream of making a career in the capitalist country, of moving from "the margin" to "the center" of those who dominate gets frustrated (Hooks, "Marginality" 342). When capitalist ideas start to lose ground to utopian aspirations in the railway space of collective dreams, the melancholic feelings toward monstrous class formation within urban imaginations may finally be alleviated. Far from the worst scenario conjured up by Ridgeway, in which Cora was fitted into the cotton dress he brought and sent back to Randall as a present, the fugitive protagonist drives her handcar into the unknown full of possibility. Now in the driver's position, she ventures forward into a future point where no railway people have ever been before. Spurred by the "perpetual yearning that is a fundamental aspect

of present, collective survival” in marginal visions of transformation (Farooq 100), the haunting memories of slavery have been drifting away from her consciousness.

Passing by the specters of deceased tunnel builders, Cora arrives at a finishing point where the railway landscape is reshaped under her imagining of the country anew.

“Traveling” as well as “digging” through the tunnel (Whitehead, *The Underground* 362), the exorcism of the traumatic past has been made in the collapse of the current socio-economic structure, rendering an outlook off the underground’s earthly confinement. In the last sight of railroad odyssey, an exit illuminated by daylight appears in front of the fugitive woman, and she ascends from the defunct terminus into an unidentified forest. To me, this scenario of ascending is filled with utopianism, for the unidentified place Cora enters summons the “no-places” coming into being out of the railway people’s shared aspiration of a collective future (Farooq 103). A promised land of redemption, the tranquil place the fugitive protagonist walks into implies a time beyond the present-day America, where one may eventually wash “the soot and grime” of the traumatic past away for a new beginning (Whitehead, *The Underground* 364).

Heading westward in the kind companionship of an elderly African American man, Cora resumes her expedition. Undaunted by the possible obstacles awaiting on the path to the West, the two former slaves charge forward in optimism. Both on the wagon’s driver’s box, they advance in equal position in the ride, unbuckled from the hierarchical relations underlying the Underground Railroad’s transit system. No more subjects of marginality, they move in a team with the other two wagons separately driven by an Anglo-Saxon descendant couple and an Irish descendant. Together, they head toward the land of potential in golden California. Regarding this open ending, Peiling Hu claims that the wagon team’s temporary destination of St. Louis, Missouri, foreshadows the grim hereafter of Cora and Ollie. Because Missouri was one of the racist states in the 1850s, the two traveling there indicate a returning to slavery, which renders their

escapes from the South void (Hu). Nevertheless, I do not think it necessary to interpret the ending in such pessimism. Since the alternative states Cora has traveled through (excluding Georgia) are factually detached from their historical counterparts, we need not assume Whitehead's Missouri to be exactly the one that gave the notorious decision to the Dred Scott case in the antebellum era.<sup>27</sup> Instead, there is a tone of hope in the motion of going west, which is absent from the course of industrialist-capitalist advancement. Advancing in the socialist aspiration of "a collective belonging in motion" in their shared experiences of running north (qtd. in Farooq 95), Cora and Ollie may help to construct an alternative future for the country. Perhaps, the alternate route the travelers take will guide them to a different West at last. Perhaps, this time, a frontier will take shape under a new order other than Manifest Destiny, extending onward not through sacrifice and conquest but rather equality.

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<sup>27</sup> Hu brings the Dred Scott case into her discussion with a special focus on contemporary judicial and social injustices, which persisted in racial segregation and slavery.



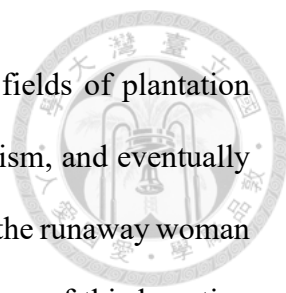


## Conclusion

### Above a Constellation of Stars

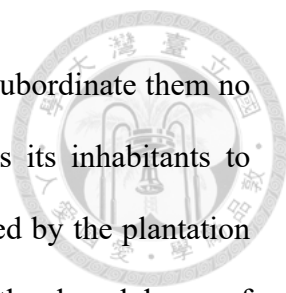
Resonating through a growing volume of neo-slave narratives, Colson Whitehead's alternate history brings the antebellum period into the twenty-first century. Addressing present Americans, his account of a reimagined fugitive journey calls forth an activism for reconstruction of socio-economic system and an exorcism of the traumatic memories of the South. There are, undeniably, moral undertones of his descriptions of the racialized horrors over a wide span of American history. But, I want to stress that Whitehead is not trying to promote a political agenda of polarization through a judgmental preaching on a number of "America's massive sins" already known (Nordlinger 38). Rather than denouncing the United States as an "irredeemable" country, which functions on a misbegotten racism for the selfish purposes of one dominating race (Nordlinger 39), Whitehead's multitemporal present seems more of an economic allegory of the social formation under variable capitalist parameters. Transforming the historical Underground Railroad into a time-rupturing subterranean transit network, the writer introduces the protagonist into the terrains of dissimilar types of economic systems. Directing onward through alternative American states constituted of urban anxieties and dreams, the black heroine's escape directly associates with the universal struggle of the marginalized in the postmodern American city.

To frame my view of the phantasmagoric cityscape unfurled by Cora's flight to the North, I have based my argument majorly on Steve Pile's book-length study of the emotional works of the city. Noticing that the alternative states' varied economic systems bear a close relation to the three emotional works upon which Pile's metropolis operates—dream-work, blood-work, and grief-work—I proceeded to examine these railway stops with a focus upon the correlation between personal memory of the Antebellum South

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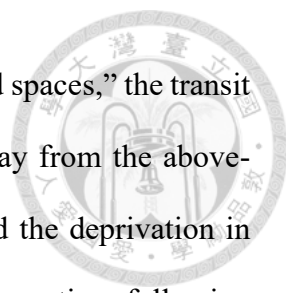
and the development of capitalism. Starting from Georgia's cotton fields of plantation capitalism, through the Carolinas' downtowns of commercial capitalism, and eventually moving to Indiana's cooperative farm of utopian socialist aspirations, the runaway woman experiences an exorcism of the haunting African American past. Aware of this haunting of traumatic memories, which is difficult to expel under the enduring system of capitalism, I started Chapter One with an unpacking of Georgia's and the Carolina's capitalist landscapes. If Georgia presents a return of the suppressed thoughts of enslaved ancestors in postmodern psyches, then the Carolinas demonstrate how those thoughts recur and haunt under the legacy of slavery. Plagued by the thirst of vampire-like capital, the Carolinian underclass fall victims to an economic dismemberment that cuts the labor power away from their working bodies, and then disposes of them once their living blood is sucked up. Not only are laboring bodies commodified and manipulated under the full control of Carolinian elites, but the history of slavery is whitewashed to legitimize the predatory model of economic progress built on structural inequality. Imprisoned in the nightmarish environment of capitalism, it is not a surprise that the once forgotten memories of plantation slaves reenter the female protagonist's consciousness. Experiencing the African American haunting as "an economic haunting" (Collins 286), the protagonist is temporarily caught in a collective melancholia where the ghosts of the African American deceased return to occupy the living minds. Overwhelmed by the traumatic memories of the tortured under plantation capitalism, Cora painfully realizes that, opposite to her assumption, commercial capitalism is no less predatory than its predecessor.

Resuming the runaway journey, Cora makes it to an all-black cooperative farm in Indiana. The farm, also an important station of the Underground Railroad, should be taken as a metropolitan space of utopian affects. Working in a non-hierarchical economic system, the previously enslaved and marginalized thrive within the affective borders defined by



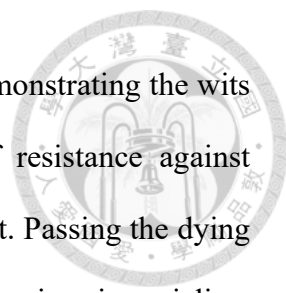
the collective wishes for freedom, where the privileged classes can subordinate them no more. As a transformational space, Indiana's socialist utopia helps its inhabitants to envision a promising future contrast to the dystopian present. Spurred by the plantation operated upon a reformatory model of progress, Cora gets to live out the shared dream of social change. Although the minority farm comes to an end in Ridgeway's quashing of its reform movement, the socialist utopia defined by a "feeling" of urgent idealization instead of a physical location shall last in every reformatory mind (Farooq 104). Holding the dream of collective utopia passed down from the 1850s colored settlements, Cora's vision of the African American past are repainted no more with the imagery of colored bodies' being puppeteered and disposed of by economic authorities. No more possessed by the nightmarish sight of white capitalists' round faces like "an endless field of cotton bolls," which might overwhelm her just like it had once engulfed her slave grandmother (Whitehead, *The Underground* 9, 331), Cora the escapee demonstrates what differences may be brought through an awakening of utopian desires in current metropolises. Coding the urban underclass as African descendant population, Whitehead's economic allegory is thus both historically retrospective and particularly postmodern.

To extend my former points of argument of utopian spaces in the city in Chapter Two, I spend a few more pages on the Underground Railroad's physical structure as a space-time that comes into being out of the railway characters' collective wishes for emancipation. To begin with, I differentiate the Underground Railroad network from the "Tubman Tradition" (Zabel 33). While the Underground Railroad's locomotive shares its utopian dimension of social progress with the train symbol in the literary tradition, the former differs from the latter for it conveys a sense of impotence toward the mundane restrictions as well. Not so much a flying train conducted straightly toward spiritual salvation, the Underground Railroad is a design half-bounded with earthly limitations and half-open toward the potential of liberty. Its double-fold personality should be ascribed to

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its location of marginality. Constituted of “marginal social figures and spaces,” the transit network amply contains the emotionally intense aspects shifted away from the above-ground society (Pile 48). Further, these suppressed emotions toward the deprivation in city life are mainly displaced onto the train engineers. Driving the locomotives following pre-determined schedules, the blue-collar conductors are unable to choose the runaway routes they are taking. And their passive condition fully represents the lack of power of proletarian subjects in city life. What’s more, the drivers in the driving seat who cannot determine their destinations are highly connected to a mysterious group of railway figures: the specter-like tunnel builders. If the ghostly tunnel builders embody the traumatic memories of a deceased minority who were sacrificed to lay the foundations of city infrastructures, then the blue-collar engineers’ driving themselves into the lightless tunnels signals a collective immersion into the melancholic African American past. Their being overwhelmed by melancholic emotions, according to Pile’s discourse of grief-work, can be dangerous for it makes the underground a location where “the only proper concerns of the living circulate around death” (150). Thus, an exorcism of the traumatic past may become possible only through a collapse and rebirth of the Underground Railroad system itself.

Entering the underground complex as a double minority passenger, Cora’s unique identity makes her the chosen one who is not entirely tied to the melancholic feelings inherent in the subterranean system yet is closest to its emotional core of the marginalized dreams. Carrying the momentum of the fugitive will, the woman shall push the system to a future point that marks an ultimate emancipation from this economic haunting of the African American dead. In the finale of the novel, Cora eventually prevails against her arch enemy Ridgeway, who threatens to eradicate the abolitionist network and merge the underground with the exploitative aboveground. Thwarting his ambition to reduce the railroad spaces into one capitalist underground, the fugitive woman destroys the

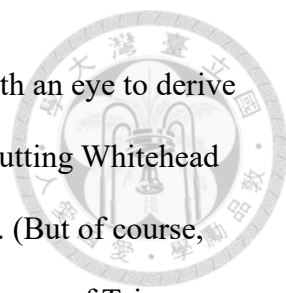


displeasing incarnation of capitalism through her street wisdom. Demonstrating the wits of a trickster, Cora's unexpected attacks show her resolution of resistance against capitalist authorities, which Homer the anti-trickster fails to carry out. Passing the dying slaver catcher and his disciple who refuse to abandon the creeds of American imperialism after their defeat, she drives onward until she arrives at a terminus. Ascending from the obsolete terminal station, her departure from the Underground Railroad system ushers fugitive subjects into an upcoming era in the American future where the distress toward economic inequalities is finally expelled. Completing the unfinished journey of Mabel, her runaway mother who gave up halfway and was then swallowed up by the swamp at the edge of the plantation, Cora goes after the new promises in the West. Marching in a team with the other wagons, she rides together with an elderly ex-slave in a new mode of proceeding—not a “running from” seen in the nineteenth-century slave narratives but rather a seeking for (qtd. in Farooq 95). Their movements, which evoke the Valentine farm's aspirations of “a collective belonging in motion” (qtd. in Farooq 95), push beyond the disempowering memories of fugitive ancestors captured and killed. What waits ahead for them shall be a new city, a new form of social structure whose contours Mabel once caught sight of when she read into the constellations, imagining every light dot as an utopian dream and something bigger lying above the milky way (Whitehead, *The Underground* 352, 353).

In my full-length study of Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*, I delve into the railway landscapes of multiple space-times and examine them with Steve Pile's perspective of the postmodern city. Noticing that Pile's emotional works of city phantasmagorias amplify the dominant themes in Whitehead's *The Colossus of New York: A City in Thirteen Parts*, yet form a more concrete theoretical framework for my study, I amply adopt them to inspect the subterranean transit system as a reflection of the “wildly protean” American city that harbors civilians in its endless motion of things

passing by (Butler 72, 73). Perceiving how the rail images pass by and change in the subjective perception of the protagonist, I find Whitehead's urban landscape functions on the same basis of Pile's postmodern city—as an intermediate space that is equally “personal” and of the “narrative performance” of countless pedestrians who experience it (Shrivastava and Varghese 4). In Whitehead's both personal and social metropolitan space, railway characters of modern-day psyches strive as “runaways,” hoping to find affective connections in the ever-shifting and ever-alienating world (Butler 73).

Through the chasing north of a double minority runaway, Whitehead revisits several of the topics he explores in former writings, most notably, the conflicting models of progression in *The Intuitionist*, the zombification of proletarian subjects in *Zone One*, and the predatory marketing of history in *John Henry Days*. Laying emphasis on the intertextual relations of Whitehead's works, I suggest the writer cautions that the postmodern city is degrading under the ongoing chase of infinite economic growth in the negligence of inhabitants in marginal areas. Still, due to the limited scale of my research and an a fundamental lack of recent studies on Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, I am unable to explore every sphere of the railway device in its full. And since my approach to the Underground Railroad is one of class formation, I inevitably focus more on capitalism and its dynamics with urban desires and wishes, with less focus on the racial situations in American history. Even though I do bridge my study with a few historical links, my purpose is to reveal the lasting power relation between the exploited and the exploiter under varied economic factors, instead of exhausting the historical development of racism and its influence on America's current social environment. Future critical engagements, I hope, will be able to redress this lack on race and history more than I am able to do here. Also, since I locate the novel within the field of neo-slave narratives, my study is largely restricted to American national conditions and the interpretation of Whitehead I offer here does not necessarily come from my personal




identity or stand as a foreign reader. Put differently, I visit the text with an eye to derive the universal value from Whitehead's economic critique, instead of putting Whitehead in the socio-economic context I inhabit for a transnational re-reading. (But of course, difficulty is found in performing such a re-reading due to an insufficiency of Taiwanese studies on Whitehead, which make it hard to relate my opinions with the other—if any—local scholars'.) Looking forward to new approaches that may re-estimate my research topic in diverse dimensions, I sincerely hope that future studies will come up with multi-faceted views of Whitehead's Underground Railroad. Minding that Whitehead's writing of neo-slave narrative inherits the advocacy of equality in slave narratives, building such a collection of studies gains its social significance, too. Enabling the cohort of readers to rethink the postmodern city with their ideas of Whitehead's original text, their reformative visions of postmodernity, decolonization, and marginalization may give birth to a newly found utopian awareness. Converging at their backs, a lift force may raise the collective up against the gravity of capitalist sterility, till they touch upon the stars and the ideal future hidden behind.

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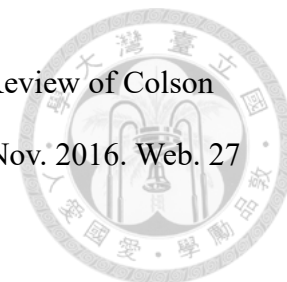
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