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Escaping through the Past, Haunted by the Future: Confronting America through Child of God and the Underground Railroad

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Escaping Through the Past, Haunted by the Future: Confronting America
through *Child of God* and *The Underground Railroad*

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Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William & Mary
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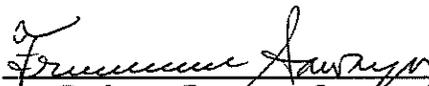


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ABSTRACT

My Master's Thesis is comprised of two essays that review two American literary texts of the late-twentieth century. Through genres of the gothic and historical fiction, these texts confront America's violence of the past and present. The first essay, "Desiring and Dispossessing: Whiteness in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*," investigates the novel's reliance on a gothic genre as an affective strategy to confront whiteness's specter of self-destruction. The second essay, "Escaping Through *The Underground Railroad*," reconsiders the movement of escape in the context of a neo-slave narrative and understands the action as a complicated, miraculous, but processual movement toward unknowable futures. Both essays view fiction as a way to encounter and reconcile the violence of America.

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My portfolio concentrates on two American novels—Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God* and Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*—and their negotiation of liberal contradictions that belie notions of widespread American freedom. While dominant rhetoric purports America to be the site of equality and uninhibited possibility, these claimed virtues are historically and structurally afforded only to select populations of white, heteronormative individuals. While who has counted as normative or white has changed over the long centuries of American history, the persistent presence of exclusion within assertions of democracy and freedom has haunted and continues to haunt America and its exceptional spaces and citizenships.

My essays converge through this framework of America as haunted by its liberal contradictions. While narratives can express these contradictions through gothic haunting, other narratives can express these contradictions through historical retelling. I view these genres that encounter the histories and structures of America—here, the gothic and historical fiction—as genres that recognize these contradictions and negotiate possibilities in spite of them. By either entering history through historical fiction, or gesturing toward history and its structural reverberations through the gothic, both novels give the reader space and time to engage the underbelly of America, specifically its histories of white dispossession and African American enslavement.

Both novels—*Child of God* and *The Underground Railroad*—are contemporary novels that follow a character’s journey of survival across an American landscape. In *Child of God*, the violent histories and structures of white

dispossession haunt the reader through Lester Ballard's ethical and bodily deterioration. In *The Underground Railroad*, the institution of slavery and its persistent after-effects expose the obstinacy of oppression, but also the enduring possibility of movement. In both narratives, the emphasis on the individual and their journey point to my investment in exploring how individual subjects navigate their own forms of freedom and belonging in America despite its unequal and contradictory violences.

Child of God depicts this navigation of freedom and belonging as violent and destructive dispossession when performed within a schema of whiteness. While America purports to be the land of opportunity, *Child of God* demonstrates how an individual's lack of capitalistic production can lead to dispossession and, consequently, a deterioration of the body and ethics. My first essay, "Desiring and Dispossessing: Encountering Whiteness in Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*," argues that the story of a white man turned homeless, wandering necrophile is not just an expression of post-sixties white heteronormative male identitarian trauma but is also a narrative gesture toward the destructive logics of American whiteness. We see the destructive logics of whiteness through the town's dispossession of Lester Ballard from his property, as well as Ballard's own subsequent attempts to perform whiteness through his (dis)possession of women from their bodies for heterosexual pleasure and belonging. While the plot points are unsightly and monstrous, the gothic genre is one way to gesture toward meanings to which it cannot fully refer; in this case, it is arguably the violence of

white American dispossession (in its many iterations) that the novel expresses through the monstrous figuration of Lester Ballard.

The Underground Railroad depicts the navigation toward freedom and belonging through a young female runaway as a processual but always-possible movement. In my second essay, "Escaping through *The Underground Railroad*," I look at Colson Whitehead's recent novel *The Underground Railroad* and the concept of escape as a movement of critical possibility for oppressed subjects in America to navigate their own freedom and belonging. Through my analysis, I come to understand escape as a complicated, incomplete movement that skirts an oppressive configuration toward a more inhabitable space of freedom. This movement, I argue, is rooted in the audacity to pursue an unimaginable or inaccessible alternative reality. I use the narrative of runaway Cora and theories of movement and mobility to understand escape as a literal and figurative motion that forsakes the present reality. This critical analysis of escape extends outward to the possibilities of reading neo-slave narrative and fiction in general as a productive form of escape that audaciously forsakes the present to explore an inaccessible past of an ex-slave and her journey. *The Underground Railroad* highlights the different configurations of oppression outside of African American enslavement while narrating the persistent movement of Cora in pursuing new realities. The narrative thus highlights a subject who does not ever statically belong anywhere, but through her movement demonstrates her will to freedom as one form of belonging in America.

In both of my essays, there is an assumption about the possibility of narrative to challenge and rearticulate America and its freedoms. While Cora's narrative charts her movements toward freedom even when the American state is determined to be her warden, Ballard's narrative demonstrates how these efforts toward freedom and belonging emerge as violent dispossession when structured by whiteness. While *The Underground Railroad* evokes hope and *Child of God* evokes dread, both negotiate what it means to be a subject searching for freedom and belonging in America: their stories demonstrate how "freedom" and "belonging" are historically and structurally contingent and perpetually unstable. By narrating the journeys of individuals in America, these narratives suggest the unevenness of American liberalism and emphasize narrative's place in articulating the troubling intimacy between oppression and freedom in America.

Desiring and Dispossessing: Whiteness in
Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*

In an article for the New York Times, journalist Richard Woodward interviewed author Cormac McCarthy on his “venomous fiction.”¹ Without directly quoting McCarthy, Woodward wrote that McCarthy’s character Lester Ballard—the murderous necrophile in his gothic tale *Child of God*—originated from a real case McCarthy had read in the Sevier County, Tennessee, newspapers.² While some have debated *Child of God*’s claim to indexicality, the endurance of this rumor has everything to do with the horror narrative’s uncanniness to reality.³ In terms of form, the narrative appears familiar to the American literary canon and to reality in general: the main character is a white male, the setting is a real place on a map, and the time period suggests a post-industrial, post-civil rights moment coeval to its 1973 publication. But from the novel’s opening we learn that Lester Ballard is a white Other—a character of “white trash”—that has haunted American whiteness since its colonial inception. Haunted landscapes, grotesque bodies living and dead, and the mundanely “venomous” main character killing *and* struggling to survive all unsettle the reader. I argue that the novel’s irresolvable tension between uncanny reality and gothic horror is a historical expression of white trauma in post-sixties America. The sixties culminated in a variety of civil rights and social justice movements that questioned the authority of whiteness—an order that historically and structurally entails heterosexual

¹ Richard B. Woodward, “Cormac McCarthy’s Venomous Fiction,” *New York Times Books*, April 19th, 1992. Accessed September 2016.

² Cormac McCarthy, *Child of God*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

³ For a discussion of the novel’s ties to real events, see Diane C. Luce, *Reading the World: Cormac McCarthy’s Tennessee Period*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009).

white male dominance.⁴ The sixties were also a culmination and illumination of environmental destruction at the hands of white capitalism, particularly with Rachel Carson's 1962 publication *Silent Spring*. Whiteness of the post-sixties moment reflects a trauma of identity and feasibility. I argue that the destruction of white possession—whether power, people, or the environment—is expressed in McCarthy's novel. White possession is a self-destructive desire that continues to haunt the psyche of whiteness. *Child of God* is an attempt to reconcile the destructiveness of whiteness in the post-sixties moment, its gothicness expresses a perpetual haunting of the destructive white logics in America.

Child of God's gothic narrative relies on othered categories of setting, character, and subject matter to encounter a fractured whiteness in the wake of the Civil Rights movements. The novel follows a dispossessed white man named Lester Ballard in Tennessee Appalachia who, homeless and wandering, gradually transitions into a murderous necrophile stalking the rural landscape and the white community of Sevier County. Ballard is forced to live in Appalachian caves where his pilfered dead bodies signify a decomposing white possession. The narrative of a white male monster performing murder and necrophilia as heterosexual desire (and I argue, for a sense of identitarian belonging), coupled with his bodily struggle to survive is a representation of post-sixties white male trauma. In this gothic tale, white male heterosexual identity that had once seemed a stable center in the American literary canon has grown desperate, violent—an other in itself. The setting of *Child of God* in gothic Tennessee

⁴ Sally Robinson, *Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 2.

Appalachia, the depiction of a poor white community, and Ballard's actions of gothic horror are "others" approachable only through the novel's claim to fiction, its form as an enclosed temporal experience. The novel is an expression of a post-sixties white trauma coming to terms with a split Self, for trauma is a fractured Self grappling with its own identity collapse.⁵ Gothic narratives lend themselves to such an allegorical understanding of a narrative:

The gothic's allegorical turn, which, in complicating the "distinction between reference and signification," veers away from the clarity of denotation toward the ghostly realm of connotation: accordingly, the gothic registers a trauma in the strategies of representation as it brings forward a traumatic history toward which it gestures but can never finally refer.⁶

The shift from denotation to connotation is integral to the gothic; the narrative tactic symbolically gestures toward meaning it cannot fully reference.⁷ Allegory will therefore follow us as we journey through *Child of God*. On the surface, the novel acknowledges the presence and potential violence of an othered class of poor whites, who are othered for their very inability to live up to the whiteness of class and normative heterosexual practices for reproduction. But beneath the surface of the horror of a poor white man turned murderer and necrophile is the horror that whiteness causes its own demise. Ballard's failure to reproduce through his necrophilia-as-total-possession, as well as his spatial existence among trash and old human artifacts, suggests his embodiment of white anxieties involving possession that undergirds normative, white liberal belonging. Ballard's non-reproductive possessive sexuality, as well as his spatial existence

⁵ Eric Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant," *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*. Eds. Robert K. Martin and Eric Savoy (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 12.

⁶ Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant," 11.

⁷ Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant," 12.

among post-possession human artifacts, suggests a haunting futurity of whiteness in which the destructive desire to possess land, bodies, and objects is already a failure. We see this failure in Sevier County's white middle class town's material dispossession of Ballard from his property, and his subsequent excessive performance of whiteness, through murdering and possessing white women's dead bodies, suggests the self-destruction that white (dis)possession unleashes unto itself.

The opening scene of the auction of Lester Ballard's property sets Ballard on a course of violent desire and (dis)possession of white women bodies, but this process is arguably gradual and circumstantial. The auction of Ballard's property puts his whiteness in question. Ballard is witness to this auction and attempts to protest the vanishing of his white, propertied privilege, a privilege that is also tied to his bodily well-being. As Ballard watches the auctioning of his property from the family barn, a noose hangs beside him. We learn through the course of the novel that Ballard's grandfather was a member of the Klu Klux Klan; we also learn that Ballard's father committed suicide by hanging himself with the very rope beside Ballard's figure. The enduring presence of the noose is not only a signal for whiteness's reliance on violent oppression—it is also a symbol for its inability to sustain violent oppression as an identity of mastery. First, the rope represents the haunting of his grandfather's past as a KKK member and his participation in the lynching of Black men and women. Second, the rope represents the new haunting of the *fall* of this violent mastery in the form of his father's ironic suicide by hanging. If we can view the suicide of Ballard's father by

hanging as a form of abortive whiteness, this is further represented through Ballard's loss of property. While Ballard is a white heterosexual male, he arguably does not exhibit whiteness as mastery, thereby challenging his white identity. Ballard verbally negotiates the violent dispossession of his property with the auctioneer, a scene that betrays the split between whiteness (through white capitalism) and poor white identity in America:

What do you want, Lester?
I done told ye. I want you to get your goddamn ass off my property. And take these fools with ye.
Watch your mouth, Lester. They's ladies present.
I don't give a fuck who's present.
It ain't your property.
The hell it ain't.
You done been locked up once over this. I guess you want to go again.
The high sheriff is standin right over yonder.
I don't give a goddamn where the high sheriff is at. I want you sons of bitches off of my goddamned property. You hear? ⁸

Ballard attempts to refuse the local government's protection of private interests over public goods. While the scene puts Ballard's whiteness under question, it also demonstrates the inherent contradictions of whiteness to dispossess continually—even those who benefit from and perform white identity.

The novel's opening scene of the auction, I argue, is an example of white capitalistic desire for (dis)possession and a moment of trauma that compels Ballard to perform his own whiteness by (dis)possessing women of their lives for sexual and identitarian pleasure. Whiteness is bound up in dispossession, as Native scholars Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Glen Coulthard, and Alyosha Goldstein argue. Whiteness is inherent to the structure of the settler nation-state

⁸ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 7.

and depends upon an epistemology of (dis)possession.⁹ As a larger technology of the settler nation-state, whiteness depends on “illegal act[s] of possession,” possessions that are not limited to property.¹⁰ As Goldstein notes,

Whiteness in the United States has been historically constituted not only as a form of property but also as the capacity to possess. This capacity to possess has been invested partly through ownership claims to land and people—the proprietary relations of chattel slavery—and the consequent dispossession that such claims entail.¹¹

Whiteness as a form of mastery relies upon dispossession for possession of property and people. While this mastery is historical and contemporarily structural, it is also embodied through individual white actors on the ground through white identity politics. Moreton-Robinson calls this embodiment

performative reiteration[s] of white possession through white male bodies [...] that enable the white male subject to be imbued with a sense of belonging and ownership produced by a possessive logic that presupposes cultural familiarity and commonality applied to social action.¹²

In her figuration, white possession includes the self, where “possession can mean control over one’s being, ideas, one’s mind, one’s feelings, and one’s body.”¹³ The auction is both an exertion of the so-called logic of white capitalism and its self-destructiveness—for in this instance, whiteness and white capitalism dispossess its symbolic proponent: the white heterosexual male.

⁹ See Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). For a discussion on the foundations of the United States and capitalistic dispossession, see Glen Coulthard’s *Red Skins, White Masks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 35.

¹¹ Alyosha Goldstein, “Possessive Investment: Indian Removals and the Affective Entitlements of Whiteness,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 4 (2014): 1077.

¹² Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 35.

¹³ Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, 49.

Ballard's dubious whiteness through his loss of property is also tied to his material well-being, and much of the narrative presents Ballard going through measures to keep his body alive. Both narrative arcs, we will discover, gesture to the self-destructiveness of (dis)possessive white desire. Following Savoy's conception of gothic allegorical narrativization, we can see the narrative thread of Ballard's attempting to keep his body alive as he wanders the winters of Tennessean Appalachia as a new fragility in the white body politic and white hetero male identity. Where before the white male remained unmarked, the counter-discourses of the Civil Rights Movement marked him for his assumed power and made him aware of himself and his body. As Donna Haraway notes,

From the eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth centuries, the great historical constructions of gender, race, and class were embedded in the organically marked bodies of woman, the colonized or enslaved, and the worker. Those inhabiting these marked bodies have been symbolically other to the fictive rational self of universal, and so unmarked, species man, a coherent subject.¹⁴

While we could contend that the aforementioned marked bodies of women, the enslaved, or the colonized remain sites of irrationalization or primitivization, Haraway importantly historicizes the historical moment when the white hetero male body is decentered and marked (in some form) for their violence and oppression, codified in civil rights acts of the middle and late twentieth century.

Ballard represents the marked body of the post-Civil Rights white hetero male through his bodily vulnerability. Throughout the course of the novel, Ballard undergoes bodily fragility, weathering extreme cold winters, fighting for food, bartering with the local impoverished white class. Ballard meanders through the

¹⁴ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 210.

Tennessee Appalachia, struggling to sustain himself without shelter or an income. He is stripped to his bare life. The reader experiences his visceral body, witnessing his defecation in the woods, his wiping of his green snot on his sleeve, his wading in frigid water to fish, and his shivering himself to sleep in an abandoned, dilapidated house. Ballard's reliance on (dis)possessing women is therefore not only about whiteness and white male identity, but also about the desperate desire for bodily pleasure and belonging in a situation of severe discomfort. Although the narrator is removed from Ballard's consciousness—emphasized by the contrast between the third person narrator's lofty language and the scarcity of dialogue from Ballard—we witness the material elements Ballard endures as a homeless wanderer. First, he seeks refuge in an abandoned, dilapidated shack. Later, after the shack burns down, he resorts to a cave. In the description below, Ballard's body is vulnerable to the elements in the inconsequential shack:

Ballard has come in from the dark dragging sheaves of snowclogged bracken and he has fallen to crushing up handfuls of this dried or frozen stuff and cramming it into the fireplace. The lamp in the floor gutters in the wind and wind moans in the flue. The cracks in the wall lie printed slantwise over the floorboards in threads of drifted snow and wind is shucking the cardboard windowpanes. [...] When he has the fire going he pulls off his brogans and stands them on the hearth and he pulls the wadded socks from his toes and lays them to dry.¹⁵

This description is a reminder to a humanist reader that “fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy” are just that—fantasies.¹⁶ Whiteness bases its mastery in these fantasies. The desperate condition Ballard endures as a white hetero male demonstrates the historical contradiction of whiteness as both

¹⁵ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 66.

¹⁶ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xv.

mastery yet exclusionary to a poor white class (an exclusion that is deflected through white supremacy). Perhaps it is no wonder that in desperate conditions Ballard comes to rely on heterosexual possession not just as an escape from his physical vulnerability but as an identitarian performance of belonging and meaning.

As we witness Ballard's journey of dispossession and survival, we experience a Tennessean Appalachia that harbors waste, white poverty, and sexual deviancy. The setting of Tennessean Appalachia is a participatory move into Southern gothic, an American genre that explores what is repressed in American history. Slavery, among other (inter)national atrocities, haunts the nation. There is some historical appropriateness in using the South as a setting for a poor white character: more than any other region in the United States, the American South lagged behind the rest of the country in standard of living from 1870 to 1970.¹⁷ But while the poor white class is often relegated to the distinct history of the American South, the poor white figure is very much a national question of white capitalism and national identity. Larry Griffin tells us that this conceptual reliance on the South as distinct from the rest of the country is intended to displace national anxieties of racism to a spatio-temporality of slavery and segregation in the South:

The idea that the South exists on a visibly lower ethical plane is...in the minds and words of Americans who must make sense of the senseless, and who do so by latching on to emotional and moral imagery they can

¹⁷ See Robert Gordon's *Rise and Fall of American Growth* to glimpse American standard of living increase from 1870-1940, during which time the rural areas of the American South remain far behind.

understand, here the history of racial barbarism of the Deep South.¹⁸ Fiction that inhabits the South relies on this spatiality to approach what remains unsaid or unutterable about the nation. For *Child of God*, the southern spatiality confronts the contradiction of whiteness as mastery by offering a white world that is anything but masterful. The narrative sketches a world that is littered, figuratively and literally, with impoverished and uneducated white people, ruined buildings and decomposing bodies, junkyard and trash, and an indifferent nonhuman world that lamely echoes the people who live and die within it. *Child of God* is an expression of trauma, where “the imminence of the ego’s violation”—or the fracturing of identity—“is signifiable only through the tropic turn toward the hypothetical face of the Other.”¹⁹

Child of God offers the reader spatio-temporality—through the presence of posthuman objects and poor whites—of a future where whiteness’s mastery is overcome by its own dispossession and failure to possess. The threat of a post-whiteness future is exhibited both in the poor white rural world that Ballard moves through (which contrasts with the town) as well as the nonhuman world that affects a posthuman inevitability. Even before *The Road*, McCarthy toys with the prospect of humankind as disconnected from the nonhuman world, a disconnection that is inevitably tied to a failure of whiteness to completely possess. For example, from the opening scene we read the sounds of the auction brush against gothic Tennessean Appalachian atmosphere:

¹⁸ Larry J. Griffin, “Southern Distinctiveness, Yet Again, or, Why American Still Needs the South,” *Southern Cultures: The Fifteenth Anniversary Reader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 11.

¹⁹ Eric Savoy, “The Face of the Tenant,” 12.

Among the pines on the ridge the sound of the auctioneer's voice echoed muted, redundant. An illusion of multiple voices, a ghost chorus among old ruins.²⁰

While the description of the auction represents the initial fracturing of Ballard's white hetero male identity through a loss of property, the scene also provides a gothic setting that challenges white mastery over land. The nonhuman world in the above description is anything but penetrable or plentiful—masculinized anthropocentric caricatures that subscribe to the American master narrative of belonging to and possessing the natural world. For one, the simple topography of “pines on the ridge” describes the nonhuman as above and away, immense and inaccessible. While this immensity and inaccessibility was part and parcel to a Romantic tradition of the sublime, in the context of Ballard's loss of land the sublimity of the nonhuman has no relationship with Ballard or the community. The auctioneer's voice merely “echoes, muted and redundant” against the mountain forest. This echoing represents a tension between the human and the nonhuman, for the latter is not a sympathetic character that listens and bears witness to the former. Rather, a different relation is established between the nonhuman and the human that hinges on the spatio-temporal: the auctioneer's echoes are “a ghost chorus among old ruins,” where both human voices and their intended audiences are “ghosts” and “ruins,” respectively. The language implies that it is the human that haunts the nonhuman. Hauntings imply a past that refuses to rest, and in this case it is the natural world that lives long after the anthropocentric, dispossessing white man. American whiteness as mastery not only includes socio-political hierarchies of power but also this supposed mastery

²⁰ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 5.

over the nonhuman.

If the auctioneer's voice is "redundant," it is because the repetition of buying and selling land, of creative destruction upon which (white) capitalism relies for life and vivacity, is redundantly destructive. As Glen Coulthard notes, white capitalism craves continual dispossession for its continuation; this very fact implies that whiteness threatens all, even those who ascribe to and perform white identity and embody a white belonging.²¹ The auction scene demonstrates the self-harm of whiteness that is entangled with a self-destructive capitalist system and the irrelevance of humans. Embedded in this fear is the dread that humans cannot sustain themselves on a system meant to dispossess. Listen to the auctioneer attempt to sooth potential bidders about the potential investment in the property through its questionable timber:

Now they's good timber up here too. Real good timber. It's been cut over fifteen twenty year ago and so maybe it ain't big timber yet, but looky here. While you're a laying down there in your bed at night this timber is up here growin. Yessir. And I mean that sincerely. They is real future in this property. As much future as you'll find anywhere in this valley. Maybe more.²²

The auctioneer could be right—perhaps the timber on Ballard's property will grow again. But we are haunted by knowledge of deforestation as permanent destruction; the uncertainty of nonhuman recuperation and growth haunts the white desire to possess. The specter of a nonhuman environment unable to provide endures. The gothic horror of Lester Ballard's narrative gestures to this unspeakable—that whiteness's capitalistic desires to possess are already unsustainable.

²¹ See Glen Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*, introduction.

²² McCarthy, *Child of God*, 5.

The trash-filled environment through which Ballard moves gestures toward a posthuman spatio-temporality in which whiteness is no longer the master of the nonhuman. Ballard is not a master of the nonhuman; he is subject to his own “bonds of materiality and embodiment,” hunting for food and struggling for warmth in the winter.²³ In particular, scenes of trash and waste emphasize a potential posthuman spatio-temporality that challenges white American mastery:

Ballard descended by giant stone stairs to the dry floor of the quarry. The great rock walls with their cannellured faces and featherdrill holes composed about him an enormous amphitheatre. The ruins of an old truck lay rusting in the honeysuckle. He crossed the corrugated stone floor among chips and spalls of stone. The truck looked like it had been machine-gunned. At the far end of the quarry was a rubble tip and Ballard stopped to search for artifacts, tilting old stoves and water heaters, inspecting bicycle parts and corroded buckets.²⁴

In this scene, Ballard is investigating an abandoned quarry. Quarries are areas where parts of the earth are carved out in order to extract types of rock, like limestone or marble. Quarry sites reflect the extractive aspects of capitalism. Quarries are often left abandoned, and the quarry Ballard visits is no different. Ballard navigates the quarry waste for useful tools for survival. The narrator describes the scene not only in language that contrasts Ballard’s impoverished status but that elevates the abandoned scene to a posthuman beauty. The quarry is composed of “giant stone stairs” and “great rock walls” that “composed about him an enormous amphitheatre.” The massiveness of the quarry is paired with human waste: “ruins of an old truck” which is “rusting in the honeysuckle”; the image is of delicate flowery greens overtaking a rusting vehicle, left to the elements. Interestingly, the truck “looked like it had been machine-gunned,” a

²³ Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?*, xv.

²⁴ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 38-39.

comparison that positions man as self-destructive against his own man-made objects, but objects that remain long after the possessor's death. Ballard "search[es] for artifacts," looking among the trash for something useable. The word "artifact" places these contemporary items like stoves, water heaters, and bicycle parts in a distant past. We are left to imagine Ballard as existing in a potential posthuman moment where no humans, let alone white Americans, are technological masters dominating their natural world. Instead, we watch as Ballard scrounges the ruins of old capitalistic sites of extraction.

In the shadow of Ballard's own dispossession, the scene suggests how white capitalistic possession is invariably connected to a posthuman potential. And Ballard is not the only white male character threatened with dispossession: Ballard's friend the dumpkeeper confides this future dispossession to Ballard: "They about to carry us off out here."²⁵ Like Ballard, the dumpkeeper is presumably unable to afford his property; he, too, will be dispossessed of his land, and the question of his future is suspended between the possibilities of excavating the trash and leeching off Sevier County's white middle class population. The figurative and literal intimacy between the small, poor white community and the residue of trash and exhausted environmental extraction suggests a claustrophobic, limited sense of the futurity of whiteness. If Ballard, the dumpkeeper, and the waste of old human artifacts and old quarries are ghosts of past possessions, their excess threatens the livelihood of the middle class white community and whiteness at large. Lester Ballard and the posthuman world through which he moves signifies a potential futurity of whiteness' own

²⁵ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 37.

dispossession. After the course of the novel, the specter of the poor white community transgressing into violent and dispossessing acts is an eerily legitimated fear. A futurity of posthuman embodied in the dispossessed poor whites and the trash-riddled spaces they inhabit gesture to a self-destructive whiteness, whose desire to possess is its own demise.

The white system of American capitalism strips Ballard of his central signification of whiteness—property. This seemingly self-harming action of white capitalism is subsequently allegorically embodied in the figure of Lester Ballard, who haunts the white community for violent possession of female bodies for pleasure. I argue that the body and narrative trajectory of Ballard toward murderous necrophilia are not only allegories for the self-destructiveness of whiteness, but that Ballard performs a kind of whiteness, highlighting the instability of principles of possession for meaning.

Child of God is a gothic narrative that attempts to confront the all-consuming nature of capitalist America and its foundation of violently (dis)possessing white heteropatriarchy. More than a kitsch genre, the gothic is a narrative technique or “cognitive structure” that is a response to a crisis of the self in identity or knowledge and is reconciling a repressed Other.²⁶ The reader who encounters gothic stories cannot deny its sense of the improper, the unreal, of depicting a “backward” world. But this appearance of unreality is in fact part and parcel of the “reality” of the master narrative. This unreality is the return of the repressed and is uncanny, for the uncanny is something that is both familiar

²⁶ Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 17.

and unfamiliar. The word 'uncanny' is translated from the German *unheimlich*, and as Savoy points out there is almost a linguistic indistinction between the translations of the word that include "uncanny" and "haunted." Being haunted is, therefore, encountering the uncanny that is at once the Self and the Other. Uncanniness/hauntedness is intimately related to the gothic, especially the American gothic in which the structural condition of America depends on the repression of what has made and continues to make its (re)construction possible: colonization, slavery, violence, and revolution. Savoy elaborates on how the identity of "America" depends on forgetting these past/present/future violences, and the gothic tradition's demonstration of the nation's continual failure to forget:

The failure of repression and forgetting—a failure upon which the entire tradition of the gothic in America is predicated—will be complete in those conscious eyes. Such a return is not merely monstrous and unthinkable, it is uncanny. And the writing of the uncanny is the field or, more precisely, the multivalent tendency of American gothic, an imaginative requirement by which, as Leslie Fiedler pointed out, "the past, even dead, especially dead, could continue to work harm."²⁷

The return of repressed narratives (narratives that include people and places) is monstrous *and* uncanny. Monstrous Ballard, the "white trash" of that makes up him and his community, the trash that surrounds them and gestures to the posthuman are monstrous because of their repression and their incongruence in the national narrative of civilization as possession. Yet Ballard and his world are also uncanny for their undeniable, inarguable presence in America. Poor white communities are othered because the master narrative of (white) America depends on their very repression and othering; the poverty of white people makes them an outlier, rather than the very rule of whiteness. As we see in the

²⁷ Savoy, "The Face of the Tenant," 4.

figure of Ballard, this repression on which the idea of America depends threatens to undo itself.

The narrative event of the auction not only puts Ballard's identitarian whiteness into question through dispossession and bodily fragility; the event also precipitates Ballard's unsuccessful heterosexuality. First, the narrative depicts Ballard struggling to perform a successful heterosexuality. These failed heterosexual encounters speak to what Mason Boyd Stokes calls "the growing critical emphasis on whiteness as a form of textual, political, and sexual anxiety."²⁸ Indeed, Ballard's tenuous heterosexuality implies a tenuous whiteness, and vice versa. This precarity of whiteness embodied through the othered narrative of poor white "degenerates" (economically, bodily, and sexually) demonstrates that an anxiety of white mastery and identity coalesce in the overlapping failures of white heterosexual male possession. Indeed, Ballard's poor class status—demarcated by his dispossession in the opening scene—threatens his ability to carry out heterosexual relationships, and thus threatens his whiteness. Lisa Lowe links themes of desire and sexuality to oppressive power structures that whiteness facilitates. She writes that "intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government."²⁹ Though Lowe is speaking in the context of specific historical colonial and slave histories, it remains true that "intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family" are expressions of national discourses of power that are continually structured through whiteness-as-

²⁸ Mason Boyd Stokes, *The Color of Sex: Whiteness, Heterosexuality, and the Fictions of White Supremacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 12.

²⁹ Lisa Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.

oppression, Native colonization, Black bodies, and racialized and gendered exploitation. Desire, while personal, is also global. Power desires, too.

Despite his homeless dispossession, Ballard continually desires to belong within a heterosexual schema of whiteness—a desire both personal and political that is present in one of the first instances in the novel. Shortly after his dispossession, Ballard wanders the poor white community to which he belongs, unassumingly searching for food, drink, and companionship. When a woman offers Ballard a view of her breasts for a price, Ballard is unable to match it.

You want to see em.
Sure, said Ballard.
Gimme a quarter.
I ain't got one.
She laughed.
He stood there grinning.
How much you got?
I got a dime.
Well go borry two and a half cents and you can see one of em.
Just let me owe ye, said Ballard.
Say you want to blow me? the girl said.
I said owe, said Ballard, flushing.³⁰

In this scenario, Ballard's desire to look at the woman's breasts in a heterosexual act of visual consumption—as an object of desire that the white heteropatriarchy has constructed women to be—is subverted by his status of poor dispossession. Noticeably, the woman is in power in this situation, and she reverses the patriarchal power practices of sex by playfully proposing (through the guise of a clarifying question) that Ballard blow *her*, the echoing connotation being that Ballard needs money. In this scenario, Ballard's poverty makes him unable to consume a female body for pleasure, thereby destabilizing whiteness's robust

³⁰ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 29.

male-centered heterosexuality and placing the woman in a moment of power in which she, rather than a man, is in control of the situation through capital, and thus controls the possibilities of sexual practice. In this historical moment of the twentieth century, “when sexual relations are expected to provide personal identity and individual happiness apart from reproduction,” the failed heterosexual exchange renders Ballard unable to perform a completely white identity.³¹ If Ballard wishes to connect with women for a sense of belonging—a belonging constituted by the identity category of normative white heterosexual male—white poverty and dispossession (or that which borders on the non-white) thwart this desire for heterosexual performance.

In another scene, Ballard’s ability to fulfill a heterosexual whiteness is further questioned when we watch him witness a middle class Black man and a white woman having sex. Ballard desires what the Black man experiences—to have sex with a white woman—a desire that, at the current moment, Ballard has not yet achieved. During one of his post-dispossession wanderings, Ballard stumbles upon a car parked in a deserted turnaround in the wilderness. It is parked, still running, and the windows are fogged. When he stealthily approaches, he realizes that a young couple is having sex. Ballard starts masturbating to the two young lovers, and it is a beat later when he realizes that the man is black and the woman white. This scene not only reveals a desperate white male heterosexual distanced from the sexual act which he desires to

³¹ John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, eds. D’Emilio and Freedman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), xi.

embody—it also demonstrates the white anxieties of Blackness supplanting whiteness in successfully performing dominant male heterosexuality:

Ballard had his ear to the quarterpanel. The car began to rock gently. He raised himself up and chanced one eye at the windowcorner. A pair of white legs sprawled embracing a shade, a dark incubus that humped in a dream of slaverous lust.

It's a nigger, whispered Ballard.

O Bobby, O god, said the girl.

Ballard, unbuttoned, spent himself on the fender.

O shit, said the girl.

On buckling knees the watcher watched. The mockingbird began.

A nigger, said Ballard.

But it was not a black face that loomed in the window, that looked so enormous there behind the glass. For a moment they were face to face and then Ballard dropped to the ground, his heart pounding. The radio music ended in a muted click and did not start again. The door opened on the far side of the car.

Ballard, a misplaced and loveless simian shape scuttling across the turnaround as he had come, over the clay and thin gravel and the flattened beercans and papers and rotting condoms.

You better run, you son of a bitch.

The voice washed against the mountain and came back lost and threatless. Then there was nothing but silence and the rich bloom of honeysuckle on the black midsummer night air. The car started. The lights came on and swung around the circle and went down the road.³²

In this scene Ballard haunts a couple's intimate moment. His masturbation can be interpreted as an attempt to imagine himself into a moment of heterosexual intercourse with a white woman. Ballard is at first in awe when he discovers the man is black, but that doesn't deter him from masturbating to their sexual moment. When Ballard is found out, it's telling that the radio is cut off, a disturbance in the sexual moment's narrative continuity. Indeed, when the black male character steps outside the car and tells Ballard to run, any chance Ballard has of hauntingly indulging in heterosexual fantasies through masturbation is exposed. This scene in the novel reveals how a reproductive black

³² McCarthy, *Child of God*, 20.

heterosexuality and classed mobility through the symbol of the car supplants Ballard's own failed heterosexuality, class depravity, and geographical dependency. The scene further deteriorates Ballard's identification with the dominant identity of whiteness.

Ballard's final encounter with a woman before his transgression demonstrates how the tenuousness of his whiteness culminates in his failed heterosexual encounters with white women. It is Ballard's very homelessness and classlessness that moves him through the forest, whether to travel or to hunt. It is his wandering and his position in the forest that makes him suspect to a white woman. When Ballard happens across an unconscious woman barely clad in a nightgown, he has no impulse to kill or rape her. Instead, Ballard's first approach is to communicate with her. When Ballard wakes her up, she responds caustically:

What do you want, you son of a bitch? she said.
Ain't you cold?
What the hell is it to you?
It ain't a damn thing to me.
Ballard had risen and stood above her with the rifle.
Where's your clothes at? ³³

If anything, the woman is suspicious of Ballard. What is he doing there? And what is she doing there? Once she gets her bearings, which takes her a while, she calls Ballard a "son of a bitch" and grabs a rock. Ballard sternly tells the woman to put the rock down. She draws the rock back, and Ballard takes a step toward her. She launches the rock at Ballard's chest, and then buries her face in her hands, a gesture suggesting that the woman is in an emotional and fragile

³³ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 42.

state. In an act of revenge, Ballard pulls down the woman's nightgown and snatches it from under her legs, and leaves her naked in the freezing woods. Later, the woman accuses Ballard of rape and Ballard is brought into the town police station. Once in person, the woman again accuses Ballard, smiling with apparent self-satisfaction of having brought him there (though there are two other men who she wants the police to find, too). Ballard defends his innocence and insults the woman for being an "old whore," and the two get into a physical scuffle that ends with Ballard "almost crying" when he is restrained on the ground and the woman is still attempting to kick him.³⁴ In a sequence of events that culminates in arguably the most vulnerable moment for Ballard in the novel, Ballard is misunderstood, rejected, and racialized by the false accusation of rape. The moment of the accusation and Ballard's eventual acquittal challenge Ballard's whiteness on the one hand, yet reinforce it on the other. What emerges is the liminality of Ballard and the poor white class to which he belongs: they both assume and perform a white identity even as they are victims of whiteness.

Ballard's vulnerable body and identity—both tied to a failed whiteness—and his circumstantial wanderings prompt Ballard to transgress ethical ways of being by murdering, raping, and hoarding bodies. Ballard attempts to re-possess his self by taking back the narrative of his life, performed by possessing women's dead bodies. Desire—both for pleasure and belonging—is manifested as violent (dis)possession. The desire to possess is both a personal and political desire, for while Ballard wishes to possess heterosexual pleasure and companionship, he is simultaneously participating in larger practices of possessing female bodies for

³⁴ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 52.

white male heterosexual pleasure. Ballard thus attempts to perform white male identity through the extremist practice of white (dis)possession of female bodies.

Ballard's desire to possess transforms him into a literal haunt. He begins to stalk the community for women to kill, for female bodies to rape and hoard. But it is the condition of his homelessness that arguably sets Ballard on the path to violent transgression, for it is by accident that Ballard happens upon a dead couple mid-coitus in a running car, a circumstantial moment in which Ballard first performs sex with a dead woman.³⁵ Ballard is on his way back from squirrel hunting, focused only on sustaining his bodily vitality. In a scene that betrays Ballard's tentativeness toward the whole thing, Ballard a) inspects the scene, b) leaves, and c) returns to copulate with the dead female. He finishes, steals their wallets, leaves—and returns minutes later to steal the woman's body from the scene along with her tube of lipstick. Clearly not a planned act, Ballard's necrophilia is circumstantial but substantially performative; he steals the lipstick for the chance to make her up as he would an actress. He brings the body to his new residence of an abandoned, crumbling house with “a solid wall of weeds high as the house eaves” and where “from the road travellers could see the gray shake roof and the chimney, nothing more.”³⁶ Later he buys the body a new dress and lingerie, and even the narrator—seemingly humoring Ballard—gives the woman's active verbs by describing her as “dancing” as Ballard hoists her to the abandoned shack's attic. Ballard becomes the creator of his own white narrative. Sex with dead female bodies becomes a performance not just of

³⁵ Presumably from carbon monoxide poisoning.

³⁶ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 14.

whiteness but of normative intimacy, pleasure, and belonging: “A crazed gymnast laboring over a cold corpse. He poured everything into that waxen ear everything he’d ever thought of saying to a woman. Who could say she did not hear him?”³⁷ With his first dead woman, Ballard is able to write his own narrative that surrounds itself with his own heterosexual pleasure and belonging. Ballard’s pleasure and belonging reinforce the principle of (dis)possession that undergirds whiteness; at the same time, his excessiveness threatens white identity and the literal livelihood of whiteness. While the poor white class is often othered and dismissed, Ballard forces the middle class white community of Sevier County to confront the menacing presence that threatens to fracture white identity.

Whiteness is simultaneously what is seen and unseen: it is unassumed “invisible” mastery on the one hand, and on the other white skin is a visible signifier in America that connotes privilege. The tension of visible and invisible, white skin and white master, culminates in the figure of Ballard as both white and not white. As scholars Robyn Wiegman and Sally Robinson point out, whiteness depends simultaneously on its visibility and invisibility to remain seen and unquestioned.³⁸ Scholar Sally Robinson further emphasizes how the unmarked body of the white male heterosexual, while unseen insofar as “hidden by history” also depends on an embodied visibility: “what calls itself the normative in American culture has vested interests in *both* invisibility and visibility,” and studying whiteness is not about making visible, but about the “identity politics of

³⁷ McCarthy, *Child of God*, 88.

³⁸ We saw this in the liberal outrage against Donald Trump’s 2016 Presidential election win.

the dominant.”³⁹ Robinson thus notes that whiteness’ dependency on visibility/invisibility is historical and structural, where the invisibility of whiteness is the condition of citizenship, but the mastery of whiteness is contingent on its visibility. As opposed to revealing whiteness, it is the work of demonstrating how the unmarked body (particularly the white male heterosexual) is dependent on a relationship between visibility and invisibility. Whiteness depends on the visibility of othering of poor whites while erasing its hand in that poverty and otherness.

Ballard is an unassailable figure in the schema of whiteness. In the last scenes of the novel, when Ballard is taken to an institution and dies while in custody, his body is dissected for science. But nothing is gained from looking at his dead brain; no one knows why or how Ballard was transformed into a murderous necrophile. The biological dissection allegorically narrates the inability to understand Ballard’s violent dispossessing measures; what lingers is Ballard’s own dispossession as a factor in his downfall.

Child of God refuses to present a rational or explainable world. The narrative’s “noncommittal strategies of the allegorical,” of gesturing to a representational meaning, is never fully complete: whiteness never fully recognizes its (self) destructive (dis)possession. Savoy claims that “the overarching tendency of the gothic has been toward a suspension between the immediacy of terrible affect and its linguistic and epistemological unaccountability.”⁴⁰ This linguistic and epistemological unaccountability is due to the narrative’s refusal to commit to a full representation of Ballard as an

³⁹ Robinson, *Marked Men*, 1, 3.

⁴⁰ Savoy, “The Face of the Tenant,” 14.

exception *and* rule of whiteness. The poor white class signifies not the mastery of whiteness but the illusion of it—whiteness's logic of dispossession dispossesses itself. In the final scene, the narrator speaks of a farmer who unknowingly unearths the bodies Ballard kept underground. Even as the novel ends and Ballard is dead, whiteness's dispossession continues to be haunted by its own corpses.

Escaping Through *The Underground Railroad*

“Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth,” says the freeman orator Lander to the black crowd. “Nothing’s going to grow in this mean cold, but we can still have flowers.”⁴¹ The idea that delusions are useful speaks to Colson Whitehead’s creative transformation of the historical Underground Railroad into a literal phenomenon in his recent book *The Underground Railroad*. In his story about a slave woman’s escape from slavery, runaways board underground trains in scattered and hidden tunnels beneath the homes of abolitionists, its tunnels extending beneath state borders unseen. These tunnels are complete with locomotives that convey runaways far and away to places further north or further west. But what is the story’s usefulness in depicting a literal underground railroad rather than the *real* historical one? Why is a story of a young woman’s attempts to escape her plantation, her slave-catcher, and her legal status as slave sewed together by Whitehead’s mysterious underground railroad tunnels?

To some degree, Whitehead’s literalization of the Underground Railroad is a commentary on the nature of history-telling itself. As postmodernist thinking has informed us, there is no such thing as historical objectivity, and often how we tell a history—particularly as it relates to national identity—it is compromised by how we want to remember. Popular white American opinion of the Underground Railroad as a historical phenomenon continues to be framed as both a reprieve

⁴¹ Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*. (New York: Doubleday, 2016) 285.

from our national history of slavery as well as white America's inherent goodness despite slavery by narrating their historical participation in this resistance.

Whitehead's literal underground railroad suggests that how individuals choose to tell those stories leaves a deeper impression in national memory, rather than the historical facts we rely on for objective, measurable truth. Whitehead challenges the dominant national narrative of the Underground Railroad's ability to facilitate slave escapes to freedom during antebellum America through the Railroad's literalization. Despite the smoothness and wonder of the underground railroad in the beginning of the novel, Cora's escape and her journey toward freedom are never fully complete. The literalization of the Underground Railroad is thus partly a commentary on stubborn interpretations of the end of slavery as the beginning of freedom and independence for African Americans, as well as the complication of the movement of escape in general.

In my essay, I want to use the movement of escape as a framework to investigate how the runaway slave narrative and the novel form itself theorize escape and invigorate escape as a relevant movement of resistance. Through an analysis of both the text and the text-as-object, I argue that escape is constituted by an audacity that depends upon the pursuit of the unimaginable. Escape, as Whitehead's novel shows us, is not a finite process, nor is it a lone maneuver. By no means am I arguing for escape as an ultimate form of resistance, nor am I suggesting that escape is the only movement toward freedom. But escape is one method of empowerment and survival that allows for new situations and new futures. I want to use escape as a unifying theme to approach Whitehead's *The*

Underground Railroad not only to complicate the movement of escape (in the context of historical slavery and as a general, ahistorical movement), but also to reinvigorate escape as a methodology for resistance. Ultimately, I aim to argue the central role of “delusions” in escape—delusions of the possibility of an alternative reality, delusions of reading, delusions of historical revisionism—in effecting new futures of freedom. I argue that engaging delusions are required to escape, delusions of difference that result in real changes of scenery, affect, or situation. It is through delusion that Cora decides to escape, and through delusion that we read her escape. Delusions, I intend to demonstrate, are necessary to escape. If “escape” is a central theme of Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*, by corollary the novel argues for the pursuit of the inconceivable to make escape possible.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Lander claims that he and the rest of the free black community in Indiana may be living a delusion—a delusion of imagining and performing their freedom within a nation of enslavement. Yet, he orates, “we can still have flowers.” Lander recognizes that in their historical moment, they never will *be* free—not in the ways they dream of, where slave catchers don’t stalk their trail or past horrors don’t haunt their moments alone. But they believe some freedom can be lived, and by believing they escape a current reality to perform an alternative. Despite the community’s “delusional” quality, this kind of performance of freedom and incomplete escape in a nation of slavery speaks to José Esteban Muñoz’s formulation of disidentification. Disidentification and my analysis of escape are not so distinct; Muñoz formulates

disidentification as “working on and against” dominant structures of power to survive and make room for oneself through self-representation. As Muñoz elaborates, “spectacles [of disidentification]...offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency.”⁴² Both disidentification and my theorization of escape do not presume ultimate resistance and/or freedom from oppression; both assume that resistance is inevitably tethered to those forces it is trying to resist. Thus Lander’s community and Cora’s movements of escape are performances of resistance that are inevitably shaped by and contingent upon the dominant capitalist liberal state of America that continues to define slaves as non-citizens, as property, and as capital. This indistinct silhouette of freedom speaks to Michel Foucault’s description of freedom as a continuum of relations, for “freedom is never anything other—but this is already a great deal—than an actual relation between governors and governed.”⁴³ Freedom formulated as a relation suggests that there is no pure embodiment of freedom, let alone pure, complete escape. But freedom-as-relation allows room for movement, for performing new relations, for performing escapes to unknowable alternatives.

I want to focus on the meanings of “escape” to understand the possibilities of the kind of movement that Lander labels “delusions.” I conceive of escape as a movement, where movement is “a simultaneous change in space and time that

⁴² José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1.

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 63.

subjects or objects experience actively and/or passively.”⁴⁴ Under this definition, movement and thus escaping is clearly physical: Cora physically escapes from the Randall Plantation using the underground railroad. But escape, as the book demonstrates, is not a discrete movement, and not always physical movement. As Aristotle noted, movement is “a sort of imperfect actuality; for the reason that the potentiality, whose actuality, is incomplete.”⁴⁵ Movement is never a fully completed action, for the potential to move is never exhausted. If movement is never complete, then today’s popular connotation of “escape” as a discrete and completed action should be complicated, and Whitehead complicates it through the runaway protagonist Cora. Cora’s journey is a tale of escape in many different forms that include the mental and physical. Escaping, whether mentally or physically, is a politics of transgression, where escape’s “power [...] derives not from the act itself but from the boundaries that are being transgressed.”⁴⁶ Transgressing boundaries could thus be one definition of “escape.” The boundaries between slave states and non-slave states are literally mapped onto the nation, and Cora’s underground transgression of state boundaries performs escape as transgression. Not only does Cora cross town, state, and regional borders, but she moves against the flows of capital. During the nineteenth century, movements of African Americans consisted of forced movement on foot. Thousands of African Americans walked hundreds of miles from the Old South of

⁴⁴ Michelle Lelièvre and Maureen Marshall, “‘Because Life it selfe is but a motion’: Toward an Anthropology of Mobility,” *Anthropological Theory* 15 (2015): 440, doi:10.1177/1463499615605221.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, “Movement and the Infinite,” *Aristotle’s Physics*, trans. Richard Hope (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 43.

⁴⁶ Tim Cresswell, “Introduction: Theorizing Place,” *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility: The Politics of Representation in a Globalized World*, eds. Ginette Verstraete and Tim Cresswell (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 20.

Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina to the New South of Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.⁴⁷ Cora's movements of escape—from Georgia, to South Carolina, North Carolina, and Indiana move directly against the flows of capital. Cora denies the fiction of her body as capital through her own political transgressions-as-escape through boundary-crossing and covert movement against the flows of capital. While I think Cora's physical escapes on the underground railroad are performances of freedom, I want to avoid confining myself to a self-explanatory argument that escape is transgressive. Rather, I want to stress that while transgressive, escape as a literal and figurative movement is complicated, perpetually unfinished, and is intimately dependent upon delusions, or "a persistent false psychotic belief regarding the self or persons or objects outside the self that is maintained despite indisputable evidence to the contrary."⁴⁸ The novel is not weighted by its choruses of escape; rather, it is the miraculousness of escape—figured in the unimaginable underground railroad—that lingers throughout the novel. The possibility of escape and its contingency on delusions, the miraculous, and pursuit of the unimaginable reminds readers that the movement is a site of work and possibility.

Cora's movements of escape are unplanned, opportunistic, and desperate, but they are also progressive iterations, each with their own freeing and limiting outcomes. Each discrete movement of escape creates new places of

⁴⁷ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*. (New York: Perseus Books, 2014).

⁴⁸ *Merriam Webster*, s.v. "Delusion," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/delusion>.

possibility, of growth and discovery—each one a different iteration of freedom; but these moments are always haunted by Cora’s legal status of slave, and she is literally hunted throughout the novel by a slave-catcher. One might be quick to read *The Underground Railroad* as a metaphor for the never-ending struggle for African American freedom. My focus on the movement of escape in the novel risks this reading. However, alongside these movements of flight are moments in which Cora sows new belongings outside of the plantation. Cora’s story is the necessity to move for survival. But her will to survive and be free generates her own personhood, purpose, and belonging through movement. Cora is not displaced as much as she challenges Western understandings of belonging as sedentary.⁴⁹ In performing freedom in these various places of America, Cora demonstrates how belonging does not have to be geographically mapped, but can exist as a moving process.

Implicit in my investigation of escape is first that escape is not a discrete movement, and second that the will to escape results in new ways of being. Whether in South Carolina, North Carolina, or Indiana, Cora experiences different Americas and different possibilities. While her physical movements of escape are not always planned or ideally performed, they make her growth possible—a growth we see culminate in the penultimate scene of her peddling a manual handcar. While Western ideologies of belonging revolve around stasis and being rooted “in place,” Cora’s journey challenges this assumption by showing how her different modes of belonging—with each looking different in

⁴⁹ Cresswell, “Theorizing Place,” *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility*, 26.

different places—hinge on her movements of escape.⁵⁰ In a country whose enslaved population is geographically mapped and whose constitution marked her both a person and property, Cora continually attempts to make belongings by performing iterations of freedom.⁵¹ I argue that it is precisely these flights of movement that allow Cora to experience new possibilities and make new belongings—if not outside of the institutions of slavery and racism—beyond, through, and despite them.

For a book titled *The Underground Railroad*, the story curiously spends less time transiting these dark tunnels and more time dwelling above ground amidst the inexplicable freedom of Cora the runaway, the fugitive slave. As a question of content, the story concentrates on Cora's attempt to make a life outside of slavery in various and distinct states, even while that life is shadowed by the fear of a return to slavery. Readers of the novel might find it peculiar that I am choosing to focus on escaping as opposed to place-making and survival. While the novel spends much time in the different cities of antebellum America, the novel is largely characterized by the tension of a slave catcher on her trail and the hauntings of a national institution that wills Cora back to her objectified status. I argue that escaping is a productive lens through which to understand Cora's journey that embraces the terror, empowerment, and unknowability of such a movement.

⁵⁰ Cresswell, "Theorizing Place," *Mobilizing Place, Placing Mobility*, 12.

⁵¹ Paul Finkelman, "Slavery in the United States: Persons or Property?" *The Legal Understanding of Slavery: From the Historical to the Contemporary*, ed. Jean Allain (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013), 119. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199660469.001.0001.

According to Merriam Webster, the word “escape” means to flee a place, or “to get away from”; but the word also has clear power-relational denotations, and its second definition is “to avoid a threatening evil.”⁵² Indeed, it is the arrival of a threatening evil on the Randall Plantation that compels Cora to accept Caesar’s offer to escape through the underground railroad. Certainly there is the weight of her mother’s mysterious disappearance from the plantation several years before that suggests to Cora that flight is possible. But the “threatening evil” that ultimately compels Cora to say “yes” arrives with the death of their slave owner James Randall and the arrival of the new master (his brother) Terrance Randall—a violent and twisted slave owner as his replacement. In a previous encounter Terrance Randall branded Cora with his cane as punishment for shielding a boy from a beating. When he arrives at his deceased brother’s plantation, he eyes Cora possessively and gropes her breast.

When Terrance got to Cora, he slipped his hand into her shift and cupped her breast. He squeezed. She did not move. No one had moved since the beginning of his address, not even to pinch their noses to keep out the smell of Big Anthony’s roasting flesh.⁵³

Terrance’s sexual territorialization of her body is clear. His presence immobilizes movement in the vicinity: the slaves’ stillness despite the burning body demarcates who has the power to make movements—and end them. The sudden malevolent presence of Terrance Randall is enough to push Cora to accept Caesar’s audacious offer. Cora knows that if she stays, she will have to become his.

⁵² *Merriam Webster*, s.v. “Escape,” accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/escape>.

⁵³ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 47.

But Cora's decision to escape with Caesar should not be understated. Indeed, the word "escape" connotes a kind of easy slippage—as if one always escapes through a conveniently trap door. But I want to complicate contemporary connotations of escape. To escape is to suspend knowledge of your current worldview—to forsake your current reality—for the coterminous possibility and unknowability of an alternative reality. In the above scene, the stillness that accompanies Terrance Randall's sexual violation of Cora's body, as well as the burning slave body in the distance, demonstrates how slaves' movements are disciplined and regulated. As property, slaves should not move of their own accord: Cora and Caesar's decision to escape flies in the face of this reality.

Even Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, could not imagine a world outside one in which her body was not an object—one to be transferred, exchanged, harvested, and exploited. For Ajarry, she could not help but believe that "to escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the principles of your existence: impossible."⁵⁴ The institution of slavery had been Ajarry's reality, had defined her limits of perspective and her hesitation toward movement. At the start of the novel, the reader learns that slavery had moved Ajarry her whole life, from her home on the Gold Coast of Africa to Liverpool, England, then to Charleston, South Carolina, and to finally Georgia. Ajarry is moved not only across the Atlantic but also from buyer to buyer, from plantation to plantation. As the narrator tells it, "You would have thought Cora's grandmother cursed, so many times was she sold and swapped and resold."⁵⁵ Ajarry finally settles in Georgia,

⁵⁴ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 8.

⁵⁵ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 5.

where “she never drew a breath off Randall land for the rest of her life. She was home, on this island in sight of nothing.”⁵⁶ A description of a home as a plantation that remains “in sight of nothing” is a somewhat discordant description for contemporary tastes. But for Ajarry, possessing the opportunity to make a home with partners and children is an opportunity to create a world for herself; indeed, this very creation of “home” is her escape. The subsequent narrative of Ajarry and her life on the Randall Plantation with three husbands provides an original counter example to Cora’s narrative, demonstrating that physical escape is not the only way of “escaping” the institution’s dehumanizing logics. Rather, Ajarry’s homemaking on the plantation rears against the dehumanizing process of forced movement through capitalistic exchange. In her world, Ajarry performs home-making despite the years of forced movement of the slave trade that defined itself against that very possibility.

While Ajarry necessarily complicates what “escape” can look like, it is Cora’s narrative that takes up the space in *The Underground Railroad*, and my analysis of escape as a methodology of resistance follows her journey. While “escape” as a performance of physical or psychological movement away from a threatening evil is inevitably shaped and limited by the institution of slavery and is never a complete movement, it is the movement’s orientation to an inconceivable destination that cradles the movement’s possibility for new futures. Cora experiences this impulse to pursue the unknowable with the arrival of Terrance Randall. When Cora initially rejects Caesar’s proposal to escape, she thinks first

⁵⁶ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 7.

it's a trick on her, then she realizes: "it was a trick he was playing on himself."⁵⁷

For Cora, the proposition to escape the plantation was about as real as a joke, as real to her as it was to Ajarry. But after Terrance Randall's public sexualization and territorialization of her body, Cora recognizes that this change is oriented toward a worse reality. After being groped by Terrance Randall, standing among her fellow slaves, Cora escapes the moment through her imaginative faculties:

She had not been his and now she was his. Or she had always been his and just now knew it. Cora's attention detached itself. It floated someplace past the burning slave and the great house and the lines that defined the Randall domain. She tried to fill in its details from stories, sifting through the accounts of slaves who served no master but himself—it wriggled free like a fish and raced away. She would have to see it for herself if she were to keep it.⁵⁸

In this moment, we witness Cora attempt to imagine a world outside her own, where slaves "served no master but himself." The world she tries to imagine is beyond the Randall Plantation, beyond its violences and clean architectural lines of the great house. Cora attempts to imagine an alternative reality, but she notes that she cannot hold on to it; it remains unknowable, and she concludes that "she would have to see it for herself if she were going to keep it." Escaping is not merely about possessing the physical means but about possessing the determination to imagine that an alternative way of being could exist. Writing on the revolution and Haiti, Greg Becket notes that the ex-slaves' creation of a new world outside of slavery was miraculous for the very fact that it occurred within a context that defined itself strictly against the possibility: "For the founding condition of these societies was slavery, and the basic principle of slavery is that

⁵⁷ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 27.

⁵⁸ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 48.

the slave is not a human and therefore lacks the capacity for action or creativity.”⁵⁹ Much like the greater Haitian Revolution, Cora’s decision to escape the plantation is a small revolution that demonstrates the audacity to imagine the an unknowable alternative. Cora’s initial escape from the Randall Plantation is a small revolution that is part of a larger, covert network of the underground railroad. Her revolution is at once local and global: it is against Terrance Randall and his attentions to own her body for labor and sexual pleasure; and it is against a social institution that defines how her body will move—and how it will not.

The act of imagining is itself an escape from the confines of the enslaved perspective. This imaginative escape is therefore a movement, a “change in space and time” that is immaterial but results in a material, physical escape. But Cora’s imaginative movement to grasp a different reality remains incomplete—indeed, it is this incompleteness that compels her to decide to leave. Thus, while this imaginative moment is an escape, it remains a process. Cora can’t quite picture “slaves who had no master but themselves,” and the idea “wriggle[s] free like a fish and race[s] away.” Cora’s reliance on the word “slave” reveals some of the incompleteness of her reverie because she cannot quite imagine a different category of being. Much like Aristotle’s notion of movement as “imperfect actuality,” Cora’s imaginative escape is imperfect and in process. While physical escape is crucial to Cora’s discovery of another reality and way of being, I want to emphasize how Cora’s imaginative escape begins the process of her physical movements of escape.

⁵⁹ Greg Beckett, “The Ontology of Freedom: The Unthinkable Miracle of Haiti.” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2013), 55.

Cora's physical escape on the underground railroad as a determination to pursue the unknowable begets the reader's experience of the miraculous in the novel. Whitehead demonstrates how a literal underground railroad can exist in historical fiction and be made "real." While the readers of today understand this to be a fiction, it is an exercise in the absurd to read a historical fiction novel about a *real* underground railroad and entertain that reality. Cora's first experience with the underground railroad in Georgia results in awe, and readers simultaneously experience the self-aware absurdity of the underground railroad taken seriously:

The stairs led onto a small platform. The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in alternating pattern. The sheer industry that had made such a project possible. Cora and Caesar noticed the rails. Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus. Someone had been thoughtful enough to arrange a small bench on the platform. Cora felt dizzy and sat down.⁶⁰

Cora is amazed at the effect of the tunnel's size, depth, and style. She can barely assimilate the scene into her reality, for the railroad "presumably" leads south to north, with the source "inconceivable" and the terminus "miraculous." Cora can hardly believe someone had the means and determination to carve and construct the underground railroad, let alone to be "thoughtful enough to arrange a small bench on the platform." It seems real, the underground railroad. The text balances this (im)materiality of the story, where it is at once real and unreal, thinkable and unthinkable. For the rest of the novel, both the reader and Cora

⁶⁰ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 67.

never learn the story behind the underground railroad, continuing this otherworldly quality.

She never got Royal to tell her about the men and women who made the underground railroad. The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died for them...Who are you after you finish something this magnificent—in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light. The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart.⁶¹

In wondering about the underground railroad, Cora marvels at it: its inconceivability is largely what makes it magnificent. Each branch of the railroad has its own character and history, adding to the authenticity of the structures. One branch in Indiana is dilapidated and overgrown; Cora calls it the ghost station. Another in Tennessee is decorated with “imported white tiles,” “fresh flowers,” and stocked with “a cut-crystal pitcher full of water, a basket of fruit, and a big loaf of pumpernickel for them to eat.”⁶² The invisible labor supporting the structures is both a sign of hope and the incomprehensibility of resistance. But the railroad’s magnificence has a materiality, with its “million tons of rock and dirt” excavated: it’s a “miracle...made with sweat and blood.” As a reader, we understand how such a feat could be impossible and know that such a feat was never achieved. But if we move past our skeptic posture to honor the narrative, we begin to feel as Cora feels—grateful, amazed, and hopeful that a community of toilers could come together and hold “the secret triumph...in your heart.”

⁶¹ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 303-04.

⁶² Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 259.

Perhaps the unthinkable underground railroad can exist—for one form of it or another did exist. When Cora emerges from the railroad and arrives in Charleston, South Carolina, it seems that her dream has been fulfilled. In this world, Cora is called Bessie, lives in a dormitory for free black women. She buys her own clothes at the colored shops, and attends the free black socials on the green. Perhaps most profound, Cora learns to read and write, an activity that most states legally forbade slaves to do. She is not a slave in the world of Charleston. Escape, we believe, is possible.

Still, there is the lingering sense that even the miraculous escape has an inextricable indebtedness to the knowable world and thus to the specific nation of America and its slavery. One way to consider Cora's escapes from slavery as a disidentificatory (and thus incomplete) performance of escape is to emphasize the coexisting symbol of the railroad in both modernizing narratives of America with the miraculous, unknowable existence of the underground railroad as political resistance to those modernizing narratives. While "escape" might have denotations of complete flight from evil, escape also has linguistic roots in disidentificatory subversion. "Escape" comes from the Medieval Latin meaning to "out-cloak."⁶³ During the medieval period of its usage, the cloak held sacral and noble associations; to "out-" something means "in a manner that exceeds or surpasses and sometimes overpowers or defeats."⁶⁴ To "out-cloak" someone, then, is to pass or exceed their own symbolism of power. But to "out-cloak" is

⁶³ Monica Chiellini Nari, "Cloak," *Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages*, ed. André Vauchez (James Clarke and Company online, 2005).

⁶⁴ *Merriam Webster*, s.v. "Out-" accessed December 5, 2016, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/out>.

also to don the cloak itself—in a way, to adopt the same symbols of power in order to surpass that threatening evil. The railroad is a Western symbol of modernity, a modernity that defined itself against the African American savage or primitive Indian. But this modern invention is used in the novel to subvert these narratives of modernity, demonstrating that their smooth movement from point a to point b is not uncomplicated or transformative; rather, Cora’s narrative uses the modern machine to show its limitations, that modern narratives of progress and freedom are not uncomplicated, are contingent and in process, and most importantly dependent upon the formation of an other to exploit and even kill. Through her own narrative of complicated escape, the underground railroad works on and against modern narratives of progress and freedom.

Through Cora’s journey across the country, both the reader and Cora learn that escape is not a simple, discrete movement—that captivity can manifest itself in different, residual forms, even after an initial escape. When Cora is hired at the Museum of Natural Wonders, she believes she is there to clean. But when she arrives, the curator from Boston explains her role: to supplement the exhibitions on Africa and slavery in the Americas. Cora’s work as museum object allows her the perspective to note the symbolic similarities that undergird the two exhibitions—the Southern plantation and *Darkest Africa*: “Three large black birds hung from the ceiling on a wire. The intended effect was that of a flock circling over the activity of the natives. They reminded Cora of the buzzards that chewed the flesh of the plantation dead when they were put on display.”⁶⁵ Cora’s observation of the uncanniness between the exhibition of the African native as

⁶⁵ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 110.

prey in the museum with the master's exhibition of the dead slave on the plantation quivers with the constructed nature of both. It is not Africans who are predetermined as prey, but the white society that constructs the vultures and narrates a scene of primitiveness. By making this connection, Cora implicitly signifies how freedom can be compromised when white America has the power to control the display of knowledge and meaning.

Cora's additional museum experiences further elucidate her reconciliations regarding what her escape from Randall Plantation ultimately signifies. In her Typical Day on the Plantation exhibit, Cora "burn[s] with shame twice a day when she strip[s] and [gets] into her costume" which is the "coarse, authentic negro cloth." The performance of slave ties her to her supposedly past slave status, and the costume's accuracy causes her shame for that dehumanized moment in her life that is resurrected again for spectators. Of course, Cora does not yet know her journey does not end in South Carolina and that a slave-catcher is on her trail. Still, Cora's performance as a slave for a white audience fills her with shame; even though she is not chattel in that moment, her employment requires her to perform as chattel slave for the sentiments of white America. Cora's body may not be exploited for labor and sex in the ways a female slave would, but in this moment her black female body is exploited to perform these connotations for a white imagination that secures itself on white dominance over the blackness. On the point of her shame, Cora remains silent. But at one point, she confides to the curator Mr. Fields the inaccuracies of the plantation set, and the moment furthers this exploitation of the black body.

Mr. Fields did concede...but countered that while authenticity was their watchword, the dimensions of the room forced certain concessions. Would that he could fit an entire field of cotton in the display and had the budget for a dozen actors to work it. One day perhaps.⁶⁶

In this moment, the exploitation of a violent and dehumanizing institution for the white imagination has no bounds. Even as a supposedly free black woman, Cora's white-designated labor subjects her to that continual performance of slave for white spectatorship and pleasure. Her objectified status in the Museum of Natural Wonders is not to discredit her real escape from the Randall Plantation and not to equate slavery's physical and sexual violence with a visual and imaginative objectification. But the narrative moment suggests that Cora is not quite completely free, and that escaping to that reality where "slaves who served no masters but themselves" is still in process. Even more than that, the moment suggests that her past status as slave is ardently preserved in a white imagination that will try to keep her there as such, behind glass in a museum.

That Cora's escape is processual and incomplete, like any movement, is all the more clear with the sudden arrival of slave catcher Ridgeway to retrieve Cora and Caesar and bring them back Georgia and plantation bondage. Ridgeway is an infamous slave catcher who failed to find Cora's mother, Mabel, when she ran away from Randall Plantation. His past failure makes him all the more determined to find Cora and return her to Randall in chains. The novel is somewhat of a chase novel because of Ridgeway's presence, making the theme of escape all the more pertinent. When Cora hears talk of a slave catcher in town, Cora does what she only knows she can do: attempt to escape yet again

⁶⁶ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 110.

through the underground railroad. But this escape attempt is less smooth and breaks the veneer of enchantment that had previously shrouded the underground railroad as sublime escape. Cora arrives at the “station” and waits underground for a train to arrive, but no stops are planned. While she is hidden beneath the conductor’s house waiting uncertainly for any train to pass through, she hears the house above ransacked and lit on fire, eradicating the presence of her only guide in South Carolina. After what feels like hours of waiting, a train finally comes through—it is a maintenance train. The conductor collects her reluctantly, explaining that he is only able to take her to North Carolina. The underground railroad’s affect of sublimity and appearance of seamless escape is thus complicated by Ridgeway, a metaphoric figure of the movability of the conditions that keep runaway tied to the insoluble realities of historical and structure of violence, a movability that keeps escape an incomplete, processual movement.

But North Carolina turns out to be not so dreamlike as South Carolina; despite her escape from Ridgeway, Cora emerges in a volatile environment and is forced to remain in hiding. In North Carolina, there is no free black community supported by white missionaries. The community, in fact, is systematically killing all of their black residents, as well as any white sympathizers who stand in their way. Cora’s presence not only risks death for herself but for the Wells family—the reluctant inheritors of the station who feel they have no other choice but to confine Cora to their attic until they hear of a possible train coming through. Cora recognizes that this world does not offer her the same freedoms she had in South Carolina: she is forced to lay in the attic with a piss pot, forbidden to move

for fear that she make noise and alert their neighbor who is a patroller or the Irish maid Fiona who doesn't know the Wellses' house is part of the underground railroad. Cora spends her days reading the Bible—an ability she owes to South Carolina—and watches the town folk in the park across the street outside her window where they lynch black people. During this time, Cora has flights of imaginative pleasure and real despondency. Weeks go by, maybe months. She asks the station master Martin Wells if he is keeping her there against her will; he concedes, but says he is compromised. They are all dead if they are discovered.

Despite her confinement in the Wellses' attic, Cora metaphorically flees the confines of her attic by attempting to understand the nature of her situation in North Carolina. In one of many moments to herself, Cora experiences simultaneously hopeless frustration in recognizing that the white people of North Carolina, and of greater America, are all afraid—of her, of the patrollers, of the whole system of slavery:

Cora rarely thought of the boy she had killed. She did not need to defend her actions in the woods that night; no one had the right to call her to account. Terrance Randall provided a model that could conceive of North Carolina's new system, but the scale of the violence was hard to settle in her head. Fear drove these people, even more than cotton money. The shadow of the black hand that will return what has been given. It occurred to her one night that she was one of the vengeful monsters they were scared of: She had killed a white boy. She might kill one of them next. And because of that fear, they erected a new scaffolding of oppression on the cruel foundation laid hundreds of years before. [...] The whites were right to be afraid. One day the system would collapse in blood.

This is an impressive revelation for Cora, who is trapped in an attic hiding from a murderous white community with a view of lynched black bodies. She understands that their genocidal violence is driven out of a deep-seated fear of a

population of people they've inherited as slaves. Cora watches the people outside and understands that they aren't free, either. Despite her confinement, the attic position gives her literal and figurative perspective. In this moment, Cora temporarily escapes the foreboding doom of the white community not only by understanding that the fear behind the violence but by perceiving the unsustainability of such violence. Cora not only understands the white community from a new perspective, but she also moves toward a futurity where she claims what will happen: "One day the system would collapse in blood." Her flight away from her victimhood to a potential future liberation demonstrates how—even in confines—escape is necessary for survival. Despite her physical immobility, Cora's move away from the "threatening evil" of her North Carolina present toward an unknowable but certain future is arguably an iteration of escape as a movement. Her mental movement grants Cora an incorporeal escape from her confines in the attic, as well as a prophetic future escape for slaves in America.

But Cora's immaterial escape from her depressing confinement toward an unknowable but certain future is not a literal escape from her conditions of runaway, and I want to pause again on the incompleteness of the movement of escape, manifested in Cora's thoughts in the North Carolina attic. With the recognition of white fear comes Cora's own self-doubt as a runaway and skepticism about her ability to ever experience freedom:

An insurrection of one. She smiled for a moment, before the facts of her latest cell reasserted themselves. Scrabbling in the walls like a rat. Whether in the fields or underground or in an attic room, America remained her warden.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 172.

In this moment Cora experiences both clarity and hopelessness at her situation, and her movements of escape begin to appear as lowly forms of hiding and fleeing. Cora notes the irony of her “free” runaway status and her interminable imprisonment as a Black person in America through the space of the attic: “What a world it is, Cora thought, that makes a living prison into your only haven? Was she out of bondage or in its web: how to describe the status of a runaway?”⁶⁸

While Cora may experience a mental escape from the white violence that imprisons her in the attic by articulating an unimaginable future of slavery’s collapse, she remains skeptical and pessimistic that America will ever be anything other than her warden. In this moment, Cora grapples with the continuum of freedom and the incompleteness of escape from her slave status.

Despite the incompleteness of her “escapes” on the underground railroad, Cora’s ability to see beyond white violence to the nature of its fear is one insight she gains from escaping to new realities. With her incomplete escapes brings new insights. For example, as a museum object in South Carolina Cora perfects her “evil eye” gaze on spectators behind the museum display glass in Charleston, viewing them as “weak links” that make up an inevitably strong chain.⁶⁹ Cora understands that complicity is as much a part of the slavery institution as the slave masters and drivers and master’s wives who take pleasure in the violence. To see the white fear behind the violence—whether active or passive—is another moment in which Cora understands her own power

⁶⁸ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 179.

⁶⁹ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 126.

to return a critical gaze, whether that be an evil eye or a hidden view of the North Carolina park lynchings.

In addition to Cora's attic "escape" to a prophetic, inevitable future of slavery's collapse, Cora also escapes into the past through the attic's almanacs.

They were obsolete, last year's weather, but Cora adored the old almanacs for containing the entire world....Martin's father had needed the almanacs to plan for the full moon—the books held prayers for runaways. The moon grew fat and thin, there were solstices, first frosts, and spring rains. All these things proceeded without the interference of men. She tried to imagine what the tide looked like, coming in and going out, nipping at the sand like a little dog, heedless of people and their machinations. Her strength returned.⁷⁰

The history of the almanac's conveyance of runaways to freedom, told through the phases of the moon, gives Cora strength for its past telling of cyclical, calculated slave escapes. Cora's movements toward the past and the future connote her escapes from the present to unknowable, inaccessible, but miraculous temporalities of resistance. Even while imprisoned, Cora's time in the attic does not prove hopeless; it signifies the productive impulse to flee from threatening evil even if the physical body remains caged.

Eventually, slave catcher Ridgeway discovers Cora in the Wellses' house, and she is brought to Tennessee in chains, to be returned to the Randall Plantation. In a moment of miraculous circumstance and audacity, Ridgeway and his men are ambushed by a group of free and runaway blacks there to save Cora. Cora's escape from a certain return to the Randall Plantation is predicated on an unthinkable possibility in which free black men provide the means for such

⁷⁰ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 183.

a movement. This instance reminds the reader how “escape” can be collective, co-constituting, and subject to chance.

When Cora arrives in Indiana by way of a brightly lit railroad, where a free colored population blooms and ex-slaves farm and share a community library, Cora notes how the community is an “impossible treasure...too big, too prosperous,” and thereby predicts the vulnerability of this performance of freedom within a nation of enslavement.⁷¹ There—in a place that feels like the truest freedom Cora has reached—a white mob ambushes the free black community, and Ridgeway’s presence to capture Cora once and for all is a true development of terror. The book is not about one movement, then, but many movements of escape with each place a different version of freedom and oppression.

If Cora’s attempts to be free from American slavery are fictional mediators for comprehending escape as a complex and incomplete movement of resistance, the practice of reading *The Underground Railroad* offers the contemporary reader an escape from reality, allowing the reader to engage the past that is always already informing the present. The contemporary neo-slave narrative genre offers readers a way to negotiate and re-remember African American trauma and resilience. Similar to my formulation of escape through Whitehead’s narrative as committed to imagining the unknowable or inaccessible, the neo-slave narrative as an “escape” pushes readers to engage the unthinkable—in this case, it is the unknowable slave subjectivity. The neo-slave narrative genre’s audacity to approach the unthinkable and represent

⁷¹ Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad*, 276.

enslaved subjectivities in fiction is part of a longer history of the nineteenth-century slave narrative genre. Slave narratives were written and published by ex-slaves from the 1820s to the 1860s for the purposes of depicting (to a comparatively modest degree) the horrors of slavery. Under the supervision of white abolitionist editors, these writers crafted their narratives to rouse a white readership by first narrating the author's realization of their slave status, the horrors of the "peculiar institution" experienced, and their long journey and struggle out of bondage. These ex-slaves recounted their escapes "in retrospect, after having triumphed over the brutalizing circumstances of their youth."⁷² Proof of their escape from slavery emerged in the form of the printed autobiography that revealed their miraculous literacy and physical escape, bound together in the singular materiality of a book. The writers of these autobiographies by no means simplify their free status or narrate their story as a complete escape from bondage. But as one scholar notes, the slave narrative is not simply a tale of miraculous escape; it also acts as resistance through narration. By telling one's slave experience, one performs their voice and thus their personhood.

The strident, moral voice of the former slave recounting, exposing, appealing, apostrophizing, and above all *remembering* his ordeal in bondage is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative....the slave's acquisition of that voice is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes and casts himself upon a new and larger landscape.⁷³

⁷² Charles H. Nichols, "The Slave Narrators and the Picaresque Mode: Archetypes for Modern Black Personae," *The Slave's Narrative*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Charles T. Davis (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 283.

⁷³ Robert Burns Stepto, "I Rose and Found My Voice: Narration, Authentication, and Authorial Control in Four Slave Narratives," *The Slave's Narrative*, 225.

As their “only permanent achievement,” the ex-slave’s published voice lends credence to an escape narrative that legitimates their flight and asserts their personhood. The ex-slave’s voice is the only reverberation of their slave subjugation and their tenuous freedom. The narrative, then, is an expression of personhood and an assertion of human rights that may not be read on the free (or unfree) black body.

The tension between a past slave status and a tenuous freedom in the present continues in contemporary neo-slave narratives. While not all neo-slave narratives narrate antebellum escapes from America’s peculiar institution, all post-Civil Rights narratives negotiate modern slavery and contemporary African American identity.⁷⁴ Unlike its forbearers, the neo-slave narrative does not have the abolition of slavery as its political cause. Rather, neo-slave narratives confront our historical amnesia of slavery as part of the fight for future liberation. In a postracial era, stories like *The Underground Railroad* engage a politics of recognition by narrating a violent, national past, the traumas of those oppressed, and the latter’s resiliences.⁷⁵ Salimishah Tillet specifically argues that to re-tell slavery in a post-civil rights era is a movement to “reimagine the possibilities of American democracy in the future,” and that telling an untold or deliberately-forgotten history is a gesture toward democratization.⁷⁶ But do neo-slave narratives simply represent untold, forgotten, or repressed pasts to assert African American citizenship? In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-*

⁷⁴ Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.

⁷⁵ Salimishah Tillet, *Sites of Slavery: Citizenship and Racial Democracy in the Post-Civil Rights Imagination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 9.

⁷⁶ Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 2.

Consciousness, Paul Gilroy emphasizes in particular the master-slave relationship that continues to contour African diasporic experience.⁷⁷ In Gilroy's formulation of Black identity, slavery is not an outmoded history to "get over"—but rather is the very condition of African American identity and thus continues to inform it. Indeed, it is the master-slave relationship that Gilroy claims neo-slave narratives mediate for the present and future. Gilroy suggests that neo-slave narratives attempt to elucidate and thereby challenge the coeval formations of modernity and African American inferiority:

The desire to pit these cultural systems [of enlightened Euro-American thought and the supposedly primitive African slave] arises from present conditions. In particular, it is formed by the need to indict those forms of rationality which have been rendered implausible by their racially exclusive character and further to explore the history of their complicity with terror systematically and rationally practiced as a form of political and economic administration.⁷⁸

Returning again to the original formation of the African American slave not only claims this slave history as American (and therefore complicates modernity), but it negotiates iterations of the master-slave relationship that persist in contemporary post-Civil Rights America. In the post-Civil Rights era, liberal inclusion and the progress narrative of civil rights tend to pronounce slavery irrelevant. Yet Tillet signifies that African Americans today are continually precluded from a citizenry with the same freedoms and rights. Tillet calls this inside-outside status "civic estrangement," defined as

both ascriptive and affective. As a form of an ongoing racial inequality, civic estrangement describes the paradox post-civil rights African Americans experience as simultaneous citizens and "non-citizens," who

⁷⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁷⁸ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 220.

experience the feelings of disillusionment and melancholia of non-belonging and a yearning for civic membership.⁷⁹

While Cora's condition of "civic estrangement" is in the extreme (her status as chattel slave within a liberal democratic state) today African Americans are continually excluded from national rights of equality and freedom—their bodies continually deemed expendable, exploitable, or both. The master-slave relationship thus persists, albeit in varying iterations and severities. Whitehead's novel offers Tillet's conception of a democratic aesthetic, while at the same time linking the past slave status with a present one. Escaping through *The Underground Railroad* is to engage a past and present African American slave status and to revalue the applicability of movements of escape for the future.

The novel suggests a revaluation of escape by emphasizing the kind of movement it engenders as an alternative way of being. *The Underground Railroad* details an alternative movement of being and becoming predicated not on historical rootedness in place but on a Deleuzian rhizomatic movement that is incomplete, processual, and horizontally linked. Like the rhizome, Cora's journey "has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, intermezzo."⁸⁰ The novel's status as historical fiction—and particularly the neo-slave narrative genre—challenges the arborescence of "objective," and even accurate history, and the novel denies the completeness of knowledge with the untold mystery of the underground railroad. Cora's movements of escape are rhizomatic, "with its gaps, detours, subterranean passages, stems, openings,

⁷⁹ Tillet, *Sites of Slavery*, 3.

⁸⁰ Deleuze and Guattari, "1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine," *A Thousand Plateaus*, 358.

traits, [and] holes.”⁸¹ As opposed to centralized power structures of the state or the plantation, the extensive physical and social network of the underground railroad represents a horizontal, social dialectic in which “collective mechanisms of inhibition” prevent anyone from seeking or gaining more power than the other.⁸² Although we know next to nothing about the underground railroad other than the handful of train conductors and station masters we met along Cora’s journey, the very fact of the underground railroad’s unknowability signifies the breakage between political resistance and state-recognized structures of power. Though we never learn who constructed the railroad, and only glimpse individual conductors who have their own, humble lives, we understand that the railroad’s architects took a chance to pursue the unthinkable, to imagine a different reality for America by helping slave bodies to escape.

Cora’s movements of escape are bound up in the miraculous, and this miraculousness of escape characterizes the continual possibility of movement and escape. Hannah Arendt specifically notes that this miraculousness—the ability of an individual to create pursue a different reality within larger society—makes up the human condition:

Every act, seen from the perspective not of the agent but of the process in whose framework it occurs and whose automatism it interrupts, is a ‘miracle’—that is, something which could not be expected. If it is true that action and beginning are essentially the same, it follows that a capacity for performing miracles must likewise be within the range of human faculties. [...] It is in the very nature of every new beginning that it breaks into the world as ‘infinite probability,’ and yet it is precisely this infinitely improbable which actually constitutes the very texture of everything we call real.

⁸¹ Deleuze and Guattari, “1227: Treatise on Nomadology—The War Machine,” *A Thousand Plateaus*, 415.

⁸² Deleuze and Guattari, “Nomadology,” 358.

In Arendt's formulation, the "miraculousness" of escaping oppression is one representation of the very capacity of individuals to pursue "infinite probability," even if this probability is unknowable, or appears as impossible or unimaginable.

If escaping to new realities depends upon the pursuit of the unknowable and miraculous, fiction arrives as one site where escape is performed and re-performed. Hélène Cixous writes on the political connotations of reading through its deliberate escape from present reality:

We annihilate the world with a book. [...] As soon as you open the book as a door, you enter another world, you close the door on this world. Reading is escaping in broad daylight... We don't always think of this because we no longer read; we used to read when we were children and knew how violent reading can be. The book strikes a blow, but you, with your book, strike the outside world with an equal blow.⁸³

Fiction is often a site of censorship precisely because it provides realities that are otherwise inaccessible, and therefore have the potential to disrupt the so-called realities of the present. In this way, the outrageousness of Whitehead's literal underground railroad and the novel itself are two ends of the same spectrum: imagining and pursuing alternative realities. Through historical fiction, the contemporary reader exists in both a past and present continuum of African American oppression. But the novel does not suggest cyclical oppression as much as it suggests infinite possibility of movement, of the many iterations of both oppression *and* freedom. This theme emerges particularly with the novel's open-ended conclusion of Cora arriving in an unknown place, hitching a ride with an ex-slave heading west to St. Louis. If Cora's story of escape is the exception to the rule, we can appreciate the ways in which the novel depicts the complexity

⁸³ Hélène Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing*. Translated by Sarah Cornell and Susan Sellers. (New York: Columbia University Press), 1993, 19-20.

of escape and its predication on a faith that another, unknowable reality could be in reach. The specter of the miraculous looms in the figuration of the railroad and in Cora's continual escapes. *The Underground Railroad* reinvigorates the possibilities of what "escape" can mean; the novel asks its contemporary readers to consider again a communal, rhizomatic network of evasion and escape as one way to pursue unknowable, freer futures.

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