

“ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL, UNLESS WE DECIDE YOU ARE NOT A MAN”:
IRONY AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION IN COLSON WHITEHEAD’S
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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Anne Hallmann

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Supervisor: Dr. J.C. Kardux

Second reader: Dr. S.A. Polak

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Introduction

One of the seminal genres in African American literature is the slave narrative. These texts were first “published in the 1760s in the United States,” but the amount of published slave narratives only “reach[ed] a fevered pitch” by the mid-nineteenth century (Murphy xix). The authors were formerly enslaved people who used these autobiographical accounts, among other reasons, to convey the details of slavery to a white audience during a time when slavery was still legal (xx). The “slave experience” was both a description of the “physical, intellectual, and spiritual perseverance” of slaves, and of “America’s betrayal of its own democratic ideals” (Spaulding 1). This dual experience is also central to modern texts which “recall, recast, and reinvent the slave experience” (1). Thus, a genre which addressed the problem of slavery was a source of inspiration for an updated genre which uses diverse literary methods as “revisions” of the traditional autobiographical, first-person narratives (2). Famous modern examples of the slave narrative tradition include Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved*, in which the ghost of trauma returns in a physical body, which gives the novel a distinct gothic inflection, and Ishmael Reed’s 1976 novel *Flight to Canada*, a highly satirical postmodern text with a nineteenth-century setting that includes airplanes and televisions. As A. Timothy Spaulding points out, these texts were “rejecting realism” in order to both “question the nature of historical representation” and “claim authority over the history of slavery and the historical record” (2).

Colson Whitehead’s 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad* harks back to these contemporary reinventions of the slave narrative genre. This novel, which is set in 1850, deals with the story of slave refugee Cora, a girl of about sixteen years old. The narrative starts off in a realist manner, but soon includes fantastical or speculative settings and events, which are clearly at odds with the realist historical fiction that it seems to adhere to at first. The narrative is also interspersed with short chapters focalised by, for example, a slave catcher, and

throughout, an ironic, distanced third-person narrator can be detected from time to time. This novel blurs the distinction between past and present, and facts and fiction, using irony to criticise racial injustice in contemporary American society.

In this thesis, I will investigate both the narrative and structural level of *The Underground Railroad*, using Linda Hutcheon's theoretical concepts of irony and historiographic metafiction to analyse how the novel criticises American exceptionalist rhetoric by exposing how slavery and white supremacy are woven into the nation's foundation and reverberate to this day.

The first chapter will lay out the main theoretical framework for my analysis of the use of irony in these novels, namely Linda Hutcheon's theory of irony in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994). Studying irony as more than an "isolated trope" (2), Hutcheon focuses on its "critical edge" (4), which engages with political and/or social issues. As she points out, "irony always has a target" (15). Distancing herself from "intentionalist" theories of irony (111), which focus on the ironist, Hutcheon argues instead that ironic meaning is achieved through the complex interplay between the ironist and the interpreter, but that, in the end, it is the interpreter who "enables the irony to happen" (85). Hutcheon's theory of irony is useful for this analysis because it sheds light on the way *The Underground Railroad* uses irony's edge to engage with the reader in a political and social sense, for instance by playing with expectations through subversions of historical reality in the narrative. Hutcheon also coined the term historiographic metafiction, a type of postmodern fiction which aims to expose the constructed nature of both history and fiction within its own texts, for example through the use of intertextuality. This genre is highly self-aware on purpose, and aims to convey that "history is not the transparent record of any sure 'truth'" (*Politics* 129).

Hutcheon's theories of irony and historiographic metafiction will provide the main framework for analysing the novel, but since the irony in the novels is specifically directed at

American racial injustice in the past and present, I will also draw on A. Timothy's Spaulding's definition of the postmodern slave narrative in his 2005 book *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. The postmodern slave narrative shares with historiographic metafiction a critical view of historiography, but its solution is different: the "historical indeterminacy" of postmodern fiction in general is replaced by "a narrative authority rooted in a sense of communal identity" (Spaulding 19).

The second chapter will focus on the narrative level of *The Underground Railroad*. The novel has a distinct two-part structure. The first part is written in a historically realist manner and depicts protagonist Cora's life as a slave on a cotton plantation. However, this section already introduces irony markers that set the tone for the rest of the novel, and its use of double consciousness also foreshadows Whitehead's thematic emphasis on the market aspect of slavery. The shifts in focalisation in this first part of the novel have a distancing and ironic effect which returns later in the text, when three characters' racial prejudice and actions are explored in their own chapters, which are interspersed between Cora's journey from state to state. The second part of the novel is introduced by the literalised metaphor of the underground railroad, which conveys Cora to new places she inevitably has to flee from again. These places in different states are anachronistic, but always presented against a mid-nineteenth century backdrop. These speculative states, representing both a geographical space and a cultural landscape, each convey an element from American post-abolition history, and are invariably unsafe for Black people, albeit in different ways. This second chapter will switch the order of the novel, and begin with an analysis of the speculative states and end with a section on focalisation on the plantation and in other places in the novel.

The third chapter will examine the larger structure of *The Underground Railroad*. It will contextualise the genre of the slave narrative and its postmodern variant to which this novel belongs. The postmodern slave narrative is known, as Spaulding argues, for its re-

formation of the past to reclaim authority over it. This re-formation takes place by using for example non-realist genres and conflating time periods. In my analysis of the structure, I will draw on both Spaulding's views on the postmodern slave narrative's re-formation of the past with Linda Hutcheon's theories on irony and historiographic metafiction.

Chapter 1: Theories of Irony and Historiographic Metafiction

This thesis will focus on theorist Linda Hutcheon's work as a framework with which the novels can be analysed. The first two sections of this chapter will discuss the workings of irony itself. The third section of this chapter will investigate Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, a postmodernist type of fiction that has a specific manner of engaging with history and fiction.

1.1 Irony

In her book *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Linda Hutcheon attempts to theorise the concept of irony because, in her view, it is generally seen as "saying one thing and meaning another". Hutcheon argues that it is a more complex rhetorical device, and that irony is an "asymmetrical" figure of speech, because it is "unbalanced in favour of the silent and the unsaid" (35). Moreover, she argues that "intentionalist" theories about irony focussing on the ironist are not able to capture completely what irony is as a rhetorical device.

Therefore, she wishes to focus on the other end of ironic expressions, namely the interpreter. The main point she makes in her book is that irony cannot exist without interpretation, which changes the role of interpreter from passive recipient to creative agent. However, when irony is viewed solely from the perspective of the interpreter, it would be as uneven as a theory which chooses to regard the ironist's intention as a final authority on whether or not an ironic expression has been made. Hutcheon posits that there are in total five elements which, when put together, create irony: its critical edge, its semantic complexity, discursive communities, ironists and interpreters, and contextual framing and markers (149-150). The most relevant elements with regard to this thesis are contextual framing and markers of irony. Therefore, the other elements will be only briefly summarised below.

Hutcheon's theory of irony distinguishes itself from other theories by defining the "edge" of irony, an "attitude or a feeling" which accompanies an ironic utterance (37). She describes irony's edge as the single quality which distinguishes it from other "rhetorical and structural strateg[ies]" (53). This edge means that irony has "its targets, its perpetrators, and its complicitous audience" (38). Irony's edge is more than a matter of style or rhetoric – it creates "social interaction", but in a "polemical" way (38).

The "defining semantic condition of irony" according to Hutcheon, is "the power of the unsaid to challenge the said" (57). However, the said and unsaid are not directly, or only, related to one meaning, Hutcheon argues; rather, together they form a network of "plural and separate meanings" (55). The said and unsaid are not part of an "either/or" model: an utterance needs both aspects equally in order to become ironic.

In Hutcheon's view, irony cannot be understood across cultural boundaries, as it depends on "a common memory shared by the addresser and addressee" (94). This common memory stems from the ironist and interpreter both belonging to a similar "discursive community" and thus sharing the characteristics that are needed to understand irony in a specific setting. She argues that this community does not simply recognize irony, but in fact "enables the irony to happen" (85). As a reviewer of *Irony's Edge* rightly pointed out, however, Hutcheon's concept of discursive community is "rather loosely defined" (Handwerk 143). Gary Handwerk believes this loose definition to reflect the "limits to how fully we can theorize irony's operation" (143). However, this looseness can be explained more specifically, if we take into account Hutcheon's notion of how discursive communities work. She posits that individuals are like a constellation of numerous factors (their class or gender, for example) and the ironist and interpreter potentially sharing enough of these factors for the latter to understand irony at all is in her view "some kind of miracle" (85).

Irony needs both an ironist and interpreter to exist. Out of these two, Hutcheon stresses the importance of the interpreter, and thus sees irony mostly as a “strategy of interpretation” (111). According to Hutcheon, both ironist and interpreter have the power to attribute irony, and for both this is an “intentional act” (113). Yet, if irony is meant but not understood, it has not succeeded as a rhetorical strategy. However, utterances can also be ironic without any deliberate action on the (unwitting) ironist’s side to make them so, for example due to context that the speaker is unaware of. In that case, it is the interpreter who forges ironic meaning. Because both ironist and interpreter can attribute irony, Hutcheon argues, “the complexity of the potential interaction of interpreter, ironist and text in making happen *has* to be part of any consideration of irony as the ‘performative’ happening it is” (117, italics in original).

1.2 Irony’s Contextual Framing and Markers

For the purpose of this thesis, Hutcheon’s fifth element of irony – contextual framing and markers – is the most useful. The other four elements (irony’s edge, semantic complexity, discursive communities, ironists and interpreters) are more abstract and would demand a different analysis (149-150). For example, an investigation into discursive communities or the role of the interpreter would necessitate an analysis of the novel’s reception, perhaps by comparing reader reviews on online reading platforms, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. Since context is the most textual element of the five, it is therefore the most applicable in the literary analysis of the two novels which is to follow.

Hutcheon defines context as “the more specific circumstantial, textual, and intertextual environment of the passage in question” (137). The circumstantial aspect is about the real-life circumstances of an ironic utterance, a “social and physical context,” for instance, how an ironic utterance shows a difference between itself and the real world that the reader knows (137). The circumstantial aspect can be weighted on the side of either uttering or interpreting:

it can reflect on an ironic discord within the text or an ironic discord between the text and the world as the reader knows it. The textual aspect is about “the text of the utterance as a whole” (137). An ironic utterance needs to be placed within the context of the text in which it appears in order for it to make sense to the reader in the first place, or simply to acquire extra meanings. The third aspect of context comprises the intertexts that are connected to the original text (138).

While the second aspect depends upon the reader’s interpretation of the text in which an utterance occurs, the first and third aspect (circumstances and intertexts) are more likely to be missed or misinterpreted. These aspects rely on the reader’s knowledge both of the real world and other texts. This knowledge, in turn, depends upon the reader’s discursive community. If a reader is from a vastly different community (through nationality, religion, ethnicity, for example) than the author of an ironic utterance, then s/he may lack the background knowledge which is needed to understand the irony. Given Hutcheon’s argument that irony is attributed by the interpreter, the similarity between the discursive communities of the ironist and interpreter is not merely a facilitator but a “need”, for similar discursive communities have a higher chance of a “mutual acceptance of the conventions of signalling” (142).

Hutcheon argues that irony is “a tension between communication and concealment” (144). Therefore, it is crucial that aside from context, there are also markers present which can be recognised as markers of irony, in order to signal to the interpreter that a certain utterance is a stylistic strategy, rather than simple “deception” (144). Markers have two functions: firstly, the “meta-ironic” function, which signals to the interpreter that an utterance is “potentially ironic” so that the interpreter will be expecting irony and therefore less likely to miss it. Secondly, the function of markers is to “structure” the context of an utterance more specifically, “in such a way that irony and its edge come into being” (148).

Hutcheon also specifies the categories within the structural markers of irony. These categories are “(1) various changes of register; (2) exaggeration/understatement; (3) contradiction/incongruity; (4) literalization/simplification; (5) repetition/echoic mention” (149-150). The markers are not just important as a means of getting at a hidden ironic meaning – they are also part of ironic meaning, for irony is a “semantic and evaluative happening”. Even if the markers are present, Hutcheon posits that irony is not irony until the discursive community recognises and then “activates” it “in a particular shared context”. In order to be recognised as markers, there needs to be a context (circumstantial, textual or intertextual) to frame them as such, for “[n]othing is an irony signal in and of itself” (152). In the end, it is the combination of “contextual signals” and “specific textual markers” – the outside and inside of a text – that work together to make the interpreter aware of irony (136).

1.3 Historiographic metafiction

Another theoretical concept this thesis will borrow from Linda Hutcheon is historiographic metafiction, a term she coins in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, which investigates “the problematizing of history by postmodernism” (xii). Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as a type of postmodernist fiction in which the complex relations between fiction and history are foregrounded. Historiographic metafiction is fiction which engages with history and expresses a self-awareness of the construction of history through text. Fiction of this type does not have historical fiction’s traditional aim of transporting the reader to an historically accurate time and place to tell a story about that specific setting. As Hutcheon puts it, “history is not the transparent record of any sure ‘truth’” (129). Hutcheon theorises that just like postmodernism as a movement, the genre “uses and abuses the very structures and values it takes to task” and as a result, there is simply “unresolved contradiction” (106).

Thus, while historiographic metafiction may be formally or thematically compliant with the rules of historical fiction, it only uses these rules to subvert notions of (historical) authenticity. Historiographic metafiction is “historical ... in an ironic and problematic way”, often using history as a device to criticise or to satirise (129). Hutcheon thinks of postmodernist literature as a movement that can bring playful possibilities as well as deliver serious criticism. In her view, it is actually through the playfulness of parody or irony that a serious evaluation can be made. She argues that some critics were labouring under the misconception that “authenticity of experience and expression are somehow incompatible with double voicing and/or humor” (134). Because of this misconception of equating “ironic” with “trivial”, the “basic seriousness” of a parodic text may be missed completely (134).

Hutcheon first demarcates the characteristics of historiographic metafiction by contrasting it with two elements of Georg Lukács’ definition of historical fiction. Lukács sees the protagonist in historical fiction as a “type” (Hutcheon 113), a reflection of “all the humanly and socially essential determinants” of an era (Lukács qtd. In Hutcheon 113). However, Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction instead shows “the ex-centrics, the marginalized, the peripheral figures of fictional history” (114), as Shirvani puts it in his review of *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, because of postmodernism’s “appreciation of difference” (291). Individual characters in postmodernist fiction are not types, but are shaped by their specific, rather than universal, circumstances. If a type is present in postmodernist fiction, Hutcheon argues, it is only there in order to be “ironically undercut” (114).

The second – although highly contested – characteristic Lukács attributed to historical fiction is that detail is not important beyond “achieving historical faithfulness” (Lukács, qtd. in Hutcheon 114). Historiographic metafiction, on the other hand, does include detail, not to achieve faithfulness, but to do quite the opposite, namely to highlight the unreliability of what is seen as historical fact. The first technique for using detail in this type of fiction is that

details can be altered or fabricated, but are presented seamlessly in the narrative as if they were true, which brings about a dissonance with what the reader thinks to be historically accurate. This can have an ironic effect, and it implicates the audience: those readers “in the know” will understand the deliberate misrepresentation, whereas others may not. A second way in which historiographic metafiction deals with detail is that it “incorporates, but rarely assimilates” pieces of information – details are made to stand out and thus draw attention to the artificial nature of both history and the work of fiction that presents history (114). In this case, it is less the content of the details than the simple fact of their presence in the text that matters. Thus, the use of detail is a technique borrowed from the stylistic framework of historical fiction, and implemented in historiographic metafiction in order to arrive at the opposite result that historical fiction attempts to achieve, for it eschews authenticity and calls attention to the constructed nature of such fiction.

Historiographic metafiction also rejects a reliable point of view. According to Hutcheon, there are two methods which are used to convey instability. There is a host of different narrators, or there are “deliberately manipulative narrators” (160). Both methods go against commonplace realist narration, albeit in different ways, and in both cases, the result is unreliable, instable narration which leads to the reader’s heightened awareness of subjectivity in fiction.

Another important characteristic of postmodernism in general and historiographic metafiction in particular is intertextuality. Intertexts can be used in postmodernist texts for either their content (the specific text which is used or abused to a certain effect) and simply for their presence itself: recognisable intertexts spark an awareness on the reader’s end about the “inescapable textuality” of history in fiction (129). It “directly confronts the past” of both textualised history and fiction (118). In Hutcheon’s view, Shirvani points out in his review, intertexts are not used for either “discarding or recuperating” the past and how it is valued;

rather, the past is a tool in and of itself (Shirvani 294). Postmodern intertextuality “uses and abuses ... intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony” (Hutcheon 118). Thus, intertexts and parody go hand in hand in postmodernist fiction, for “literally incorporating the textualized past into the text of the present” is a postmodern method for parody (118).

Historiographic metafiction also foregrounds the inaccessibility of the past. It does not deny any real past, but it problematises the notion of access to it. In Hutcheon’s view, this problem is a problem of “the nature of reference” (144) because historiographic metafiction is “both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical” (142). The problem with narrativising history is that it becomes less clear what the text is referring to: “the textualized trace or the experience itself” (153). Hutcheon argues that the question of reference is further problematised in postmodernist art by its “overdetermination of the entire notion of reference” (153), historiographic metafiction being just one manner in which to deal with referentiality in works of art. Thus, it is not history itself which is treated as problematic by historiographic metafiction, but rather our perception of it.

Chapter 2: Ironic Focalisation and Self-Conscious Anachronisms in *The Underground Railroad*

In his 2016 novel *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead presents a reimagining of the slave narrative genre. The novel starts out in a realist manner, as Whitehead describes the daily cruelty and hardship of slaves' lives on a plantation in the United States. While the description of the plantation is recognisable as realist historical fiction, the author includes other focalisations than that of main character Cora. The inclusion of these focalisations has an ironic effect, and also serve as a first signal to the reader that the novel deploys non-realist devices. Moreover, these focalisation choices reflect historiographic metafiction's problematisation of a reliable point of view in historical fiction. When Cora successfully flees the plantation, she travels through several anachronistic places which give a twist to the historical setting of the novel. The effect of these anachronistic places is double. Firstly, the content of these anachronisms emphasises the continuing legacy of slavery, and allow an exploration of the scope of the abuse of Black people in history, which has also taken the form of economic, scientific, and medical abuse. Secondly, the inclusion of these anachronisms is in itself a signal that the novel presents a critical, self-conscious view of history, which is the central project of historiographic metafiction. Moreover, these places also use historiographic metafiction's intertextual echoes to connect the horrors of slavery to post-slavery eras, as well as to other events in world history. Therefore, this chapter will argue that *The Underground Railroad* uses devices that are in line with Hutcheon's theories on irony and historiographic metafiction, namely the shifts in focalisation and the insertion of later events in American history into an 1850s narrative, in order to show that current racist rhetoric and practices in the United States are connected to its history of slavery.

2.1 Anachronism as a Form of Irony

Only the first two chapters of *The Underground Railroad* are grounded in the reality of a cotton plantation in mid-nineteenth century Georgia. After that, as protagonist Cora manages to flee and spends time in other states, the novel introduces modern elements into the historical setting, such as a skyscraper, an elevator, and certain historically grounded but anachronistic medical experiments and procedures. Moreover, examples of racial injustice and violence in twentieth-century American history are also transposed to the 1850s setting of the narrative. Each of the states Cora passes through on her flight north is, according to Whitehead in an *NPR* interview, its own “different state of American possibility ... like *Gulliver’s Travels*” (Simon). The common factor of the states in the novel is that they are all “firmly united in [their] commitment to the systematic dehumanization of African Americans,” albeit with different methods (Li 2). Since Whitehead at first adheres to the framework of historical fiction, but then subverts it by making the novel take an anachronistic turn, this novel is a clear example of historiographic metafiction, which Hutcheon describes as “both intensely self-reflexive” texts which “paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (*Politics* 5). Thus, on the one hand, *The Underground Railroad* engages with real historical events, yet, on the other hand, the novel sways from this framework by planting these historical events from post-slavery eras into an 1850s background, urging the reader to recognise the shared root of different expressions of oppression in American history.

Whitehead has said in an *NPR* interview that he diverged from the realist historical setting he used in the first two chapters of the novel because “not sticking to the facts allowed [him] to combine different forms of racial hysteria” (Gross). These states of “American possibility” do not just explore the impact of racism on Black people, but also its roots in white people. An analysis of the description of race relations in the different states in the novel will yield more insight into how the novel’s deliberate anachronistic representation of

historical events invites us to reflect critically on the current United States. Although the deliberate departures from the historical narrative each have their own function and meaning within the text, it goes beyond the scope of this thesis to explore them all in the same depth. One of the novel's states, Indiana, will be studied in detail, while the others will be investigated more succinctly below.

After her first ride on the underground railroad, Cora disembarks in South Carolina and is brought to a city which is uncannily modern compared with the novel's mid-nineteenth century setting. In the beginning of the chapter, Cora visits the Griffin Building. This "remarkable edifice served as a monument to her profound change in circumstances. She walked down the sidewalk as a free woman" (87). As this passage, focalised by Cora, suggests, she initially assumes that in South Carolina technological advancement is directly linked to her advancement in freedom. However, as the chapter progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the newfound freedom she enjoys is restricted from the start, as well as heavily monitored by white people. Thus, despite its restricted freedoms for Black people, South Carolina is de facto a segregated state. In short, within this social experiment in the name of former slaves' uplift, the power balance is askew from the start, and the system provides no opportunity for the Black citizens to create a life outside of the restrictions imposed on them by white people.

Apart from this structural imbalance, the situation in South Carolina becomes increasingly grim as Cora is strongly urged to undergo sterilisation, which is presented positively to her, as a "gift" and a way to "take control over [her] own destiny" (113). For "imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit", as well as for Black women who have already given birth to two children, this "gift" in fact becomes mandatory, "in the name of population control". Ironically, this "gift" is a double form of exploitation, for the procedure has been "perfected" involuntarily on "the colored inmates of a Boston asylum" (113). This forced

sterilisation is an example of eugenics, “the science of breeding better human beings” (English 1). In her book *Unnatural Selection*, Daylanne K. English elucidates how ubiquitous eugenic theory was in the twentieth century. Eugenics influenced American legislation, and thus had an impact on American citizens’ lives, for “at least 60.000 compulsory sterilizations [were] being performed between 1907 and 1964 for explicitly eugenic reasons” (10). As Cora gradually sees through the sterilisation scheme, she contextualises it as a type of institutional theft, linking it with the “stolen bodies” of the enslaved labouring on the “stolen land” of the Native Americans. Forced sterilisation, she recognises, is a method for “stealing futures”, since it prevents childbirth and, more symbolically, eliminates “the hope that one day their people will have it better” (117).

Shortly after the sterilisation incident, an agent of the underground railroad informs Cora and her friend Caesar about a rumour that the local doctors are studying Black men who think they have “blood ailments” and are being treated for their illnesses (121). In fact, these men are unwitting participants in “a study of the latent and tertiary stages of syphilis” (121). This rumour is also grounded in twentieth-century American history. As Susan M. Reverby explains, the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study was an experiment that ran from 1932 to 1972 in Tuskegee, Alabama, in which Black men were recruited to take part in research on “bad blood”, a euphemist term for syphilis. It entailed that the health of around four hundred men – who were unaware they had syphilis – was tracked and measured against a control group of around two hundred men who did not have the disease (1). The researchers “provided aspirin and iron tonic, implying through deception that these were [the] cure” (1). At the beginning of the experiment, a cure was not yet available, yet the experiment even “continued into what is usually considered the curative penicillin era of the post–World War II years” (Reverby 1). In 1972, news articles about the unethical study appeared and it was put to a halt in the same year.

The inclusion of eugenics and the infamous Tuskegee medical experiment frame the novel's South Carolina as a representation of a Southern state in the Jim Crow era. The level of control in the outwardly modern state is so high because it is actually a very large, carefully set up experiment: everything is tracked and recorded, and Black people's lives, livelihoods, bodies, and reproductive rights are completely under the control of the white population. Therefore, this place is ultimately a dystopian technocracy. This technocratic system forms an ironic contrast with the opening chapters: for although South Carolina initially appears to provide quite the opposite from the brutal life on a plantation in almost every way, it is gradually revealed that modernity merely provides a different manifestation of the systemic abuse and dehumanisation of Black people.¹

The South Carolina chapter presents a world that is in some ways much more familiar to the twenty-first century reader than the slave plantation in Georgia. It can be argued that the large leap in time at the beginning of the novel serves as a hint that this novel will show that racism and racial abuse are deep-rooted and impervious to the mere passage of time or scientific and technological progress. This leap in time serves as a first indication for the novel's aim to unravel the notion of a trajectory of linear progress from chattel slavery to the post-civil rights society of today.

Whereas the South Carolina chapter initially seems utopian, Cora's subsequent arrival in North Carolina, to which she flees, is markedly dystopian. The North Carolina station where she disembarks is actually the caved-in station of a closed line on the underground railroad, but station agent Martin Wells conveys her to his house anyway. He shows her the long line of bodies hanging from trees by the side of the road, which is ironically known locally as "Freedom Trail", which leaves Cora to wonder how she came to be in this "hell"

¹ It is important to note that the narrative is set before the Civil War and abolition, which causes all anachronistic events to be fused into an era in which slavery was still legal. Chapter 3, section 4 deals with the novel's absence of the Civil War and abolition in more detail.

(153). The North Carolina of the novel is a white separatist supremacist state, mirroring “towns in Oregon”, Whitehead explained in an *NPR* interview, which “when they were being settled, were settled on a white separatist-supremacist ideal” (Gross). It is a place where, the text wryly states, “the negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes” (156). Cora is given refuge under a false ceiling in the attic of white abolitionist Wells and his wife, who is not an abolitionist and reluctant to take in Cora.

Cora’s hiding place in North Carolina is a clear reference to Harriet Jacobs’ famous *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), one of the few women’s slave narratives, in which Jacobs relates how, after she escaped from slavery, she was forced to hide in the small garret attached to her grandmother’s house for nearly seven years – also in North Carolina (Farooq 89). Since the descriptions of Harriet’s and Cora’s hiding places are very similar, Cora’s hiding place is an obvious intertextual reference to Harriet’s refuge. Moreover, Whitehead explicitly mentions Jacobs in the acknowledgments section of the novel. However, Cora’s particular circumstances give an ironic twist to the intertextual reference. Whereas Harriet is hidden in the house of a beloved family member, Cora resides in the house of reluctant strangers. The hole in the roof through which both women can look outside provides a very different view. Harriet is able to see and hear her free children, which comforts her in her isolation. Cora, however, can only see the town square, which once a week hosts a minstrel show. Minstrel shows are a type of blackface performance, Stephen Johnson explains, in which white actors “applied coal-black make-up ... and behaved in front of an audience as if they were African Americans” (2). According to Johnson, “beginning in the 1840s,” blackface performances became minstrel shows, which were more specifically “a stand-alone evening’s entertainment” which “increasingly became associated with an alleged ‘authentic’ depiction of southern plantation slave culture” (6). After the minstrel show, the “true purpose” of the gathering is revealed: a Black person is hanged in front of an enthusiastic audience (158).

Thus, Cora's view is the opposite of Harriet Jacobs' comforting view: the weekly lynching is a preview of what will happen to her if she is discovered. Moreover, the novel uses this example to emphasise the connection between different types of injustice. In this scene, the minstrel show's false representation of slavery in the South (in which a slave refugee, having lived in the free North, returns to his former enslaver "begg[ing] after his former position") is directly followed by the lynching of a Black girl (158). This connection is an implicit warning against what was called the "manipulat[ion]" of "truth" in the South Carolina chapter: it shows that false representations can be used as both a justification for and instigation of racialised violence (116).

Cora's time in the attic is also more implicitly a reference to the story of Anne Frank, the Dutch Jewish girl who spent over two years in hiding during the Nazi occupation in the Second World War. Whitehead has confirmed that this connection was intentional. In a *WBUR* interview, he explained that by "playing with time, by mixing what was real and not real," he was able to create this "overlap with Nazi Germany" (Sullivan). By referencing the Second World War, Whitehead aimed to "[open] up the dialog between Cora's story and all kinds of oppression at different moments in history" (Sullivan). This specific example refers to Nazi Germany, but the connection to other kinds of oppression of Black Americans is, of course, present throughout the novel, such as the Tuskegee reference mentioned above.

Whereas the South Carolina chapter gradually reveals the hidden horrors of the highly controlling, eugenicist state, the North Carolina chapter starts out very grim and remains that way for the rest of the chapter. The irony in the North Carolina chapter is therefore also decidedly dark. For example, the trail of the bodies of murdered Black people that Cora sees is called the "Freedom Trail"², for that is how the white inhabitants of the exclusionist state view their systematic slaughter of Black people: as a means to assert their own 'freedom'.

² In an interview with *WBUR*, the author has explained that the "Freedom Trail" is "not a true thing", i.e. not a historical reference (Sullivan).

Moreover, Madhu Dubey explains, “the term *Freedom Trail*” is in fact “commonly used with reference to tours of Underground Railroad and civil rights movement historical sites” (125, italics in original). Whitehead’s relabelling of the term therefore creates a dissonance between a reader (who may know the tours and) who may have positive associations with the “Freedom Trail” as a sign of Black liberation, and the novel’s use of the term as a practice of Black genocide.

Another example of irony is an anecdote about a white abolitionist who sheltered Black people. After they were discovered, all the people on the property were burnt alive, to the point where “it was impossible to pick [the abolitionist’s] body from those he had harbored, as the fire had eliminated the differences in their skin, levelling them” (166). Although “under the new legislation” of this place, white people who were lynched “were merely hung, not put on display”, in this case “nobody made much of a fuss over the breach in protocol” and the white man was – as an exception – hung on the Freedom Trail, next to the Black people he had sheltered. This vivid ironic scene points out the root of racist ideology, namely differences in skin colour. In this case, all the people are “level[ed]” in death, since they have become indistinguishable from each other (166). Thus, the absurdity of the anecdote arises from the fact that while the scene shows literally how the differences between Black and white are merely skin-deep, the white slave patrollers’ response to this “levelling” does not take this into account at all.

Cora is being transported through Tennessee after she is caught by slave catcher Ridgeway, who aims to deliver her to the plantation she fled from at the beginning of the novel. The part of the state they pass through has been demolished by fire, “a sea of ash and char” (200) for “three million acres” (206). The wildfire, as well as an infectious disease which is spreading through the state, mimic “biblical plagues” (Preston). The chapter is an opportunity to relay other examples of racial injustice in American history. During their

journey, Ridgeway tells Cora about American settlers appropriating land belonging to Native Americans, and the novel also mentions the Trail of Tears. However, while Ridgeway acknowledges these events, he transfers culpability from the white settlers to the Native Americans, claiming they “deserved what they got” (204).

Lumbly, the first station master of the underground railroad, told Cora before she embarked on her first train ride that each state she would see is “a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things” (68), and that if she passed through several states, she would experience “the breadth of the country” (69). This remark is made before the reader is led through Whitehead’s imagined states, and when Cora reflects on it in Tennessee, she realises the bitterly ironic meaning to its full extent: each state in the novel shows a different “custom” of racism and injustice. Tennessee in the novel is a lifeless place, and the “red sky made her dread the rules of this next territory” (205). The landscape in this chapter reflects the country’s original sin of its dispossession and dislocation of Native Americans, but also the deep state of despair Cora is in, since she knows terrible punishment and probable death await her if she is taken back to the plantation she fled. However, she is saved by three Black men, who overpower Ridgeway and his associates and bring her to their place of residence in Indiana.

In Indiana, Cora arrives at the Valentine farm, a collective and seemingly liberal farm where she makes her home. The farm is a place where free Black men and women as well as slave refugees join together in farm work and education, hold political debates and have poets and musicians visit for entertainment and education. The farm is described, seemingly by the narrator, as a utopia and a “symbol of colored uplift” (249). Comparing her situation at the Valentine farm with that in South Carolina, Cora retrospectively recognises that the latter only offered “false promises” (252). However, the farm is increasingly under threat, due to the

presence of white settlers in the area. The white settlers' "mounting resentment" of Black people (265), the narrator both posits and warns, "always ended in violence" (249).

In the narrative present at the farm, the residents are about to hold another in a series of debates, about either going "to places that didn't share a border with slave states" and starting a new farm there, or staying in Indiana and becoming less of a "target" by rejecting people like Cora, "the runaways, the lost" (249). These debates allude to the historical debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois about what the post-slavery future of Black people should look like. Washington believed that "thrift and industry" were key in the process of Black people gaining equality in American society, and that only after those were attained "culture and citizenship" should follow (Bauerlein 107). Du Bois, however, opposed most of Washington's arguments for the improvement of Black people. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), he called for the "Talented Tenth", a group of well-educated "exceptional men" in the Black community, to lead their communities in order to lift up others and thus create better chances for all (Du Bois 189). Moreover, Du Bois argued that Washington's plans were merely accommodationist and obstructed Black people from gaining "political power" and "civil rights" (39).

The two characters in Whitehead's novel who represent the opposite ends of the debate are Mingo, a former slave who bought his own freedom and that of his family, and Elijah Lander, a wealthy, biracial, freeborn man from Boston who gives abolitionist speeches. Mingo preaches a Washingtonian "gradual approach" for the advancement of Black people, by "proving [their] thrift and intelligence" (284). He believes that an "accommodation" between the people of Valentine farm and the white people in the area should be reached, which will only be possible if the farm starts excluding slave refugees, armed underground railroad agents, and those with a criminal past (284). In his view, it is "too late" for some former slaves to be saved (283). Lander is described as being successful, but a rare exception.

Instead of “rising alone” in the world, he “wanted to make room for others”, since, the narrator adds ironically, “people were wonderful company sometimes” (254). Unlike Mingo, his aim is to attempt to save everyone, regardless of their personal history. Lander’s use of his leadership to bring about the advancement of others matches Du Bois’ idea that the Talented Tenth should help lift up other Black people.

The problem of Valentine farm is that its success is entirely dependent on white people’s conscious or unconscious acceptance. Because white neighbours see light-skinned John Valentine as “one of theirs”, they accept his marriage to a Black woman and his subsequent employment of Black people, but only under the assumption that they are Valentine’s slaves (263). Moreover, the farm itself cannot exist without the loan that John Valentine has negotiated, as a free Black man who is assumed to be a white plantation owner and slaveholder (248). Speaker and activist Elijah Lander, who also has one Black and one white parent, received a university education through the help of his parents’ powerful friends, finding “a small corner of American success where his race did not curse him” (254). His success is, however, also largely dependent on the goodwill and acceptance of white people, from his education to his career as a speaker, which is only made possible by the presence of “white dignitaries” who give “long-winded introductions to his speeches” (254). As Li points out, these introductions are, for example, reminiscent of the “authenticating documents that routinely preceded antebellum slave narratives” (6).

Another reason for the neighbouring whites’ acceptance of the farm and its leaders is economic. The farm’s financial situation is an example of a larger theme in the novel, which Adam Kelly points out in an article on irony in Colson Whitehead’s novels. In Kelly’s view, *The Underground Railroad* continuously reminds the reader of the economic aspects of slavery and racism. For example, the link between the farm and the white settlers close by is “mediated

through the market”, for white-owned shops depend on the Valentine clientele, who in turn sell their home-made wares in markets, presumably also to these same white neighbours (22).

Whereas the beginning of *The Underground Railroad* showed a world in which this market economy was inextricably connected with the abuse of enslaved Black people, the Indiana episode near the end of the narrative shows a world in which the white population’s racism is in direct conflict with their economic interests, since the farm generates income for white shop owners. In the course of the chapter set in Indiana, the text gradually reveals that the harmony between the Black and white population was tentative at best, since it relied predominantly on the whites’ misconceptions of what Valentine farm actually was. This reluctant tolerance of the Black farm ultimately withered when the farm became “too big, too prosperous” according to its white neighbours (276).

Although South Carolina was a “false” utopia, since it was at its core a mere instrument of white supremacy, the state of Indiana with its depiction of Valentine Farm is initially a clear vision of a true utopia, the terms of which are decided by its Black inhabitants rather than white outsiders (252). It is described as a “haven” and a “place of healing”, since it is a place where Black people can educate themselves and find a “purpose” after fleeing slavery (265). At one point, Cora ponders how at Valentine farm, “everything ... was the opposite”, since work, childrearing, and education are sources of “pleasure” rather than “suffering” (272). However, ironically, although Valentine farm is indeed a restorative place, the very elements that make it successful are also what makes it untenable as a long-term settlement. Firstly, its steady growth and success went hand in hand with the “mounting resentment” of neighbouring white settlers (265). Secondly, the farm provides shelter for slave refugees in a world where the Fugitive Slave Law is “a legal fact” and visits from slavecatchers “ransack[ing]” the farm are irregular, but not “unheard of” (277). Therefore, it is not surprising that the destruction of the farm at the end of the chapter proves the

experiment to be as “impossible” as Cora had initially understood it to be (276). In this way, Valentine Farm fulfils both meanings of the word utopia, as both the “good place” that it clearly is to its inhabitants, as well as the “no-place”, the place that cannot exist (Thaler 609).

However, it is not sufficient to view Valentine Farm merely as a failed utopian experiment. As Nihad M. Farooq points out, Valentine Farm represents a “rethinking of racial utopia” (87). Farooq argues that in *The Underground Railroad*, utopia is a “condition of necessary and perpetual movement that inspires structural revolution and change” (87). A farm may appear to be an illogical figure for perpetual movement, since growing crops is a long-term task and commitment. However, it is merely illogical on a practical level, for the farm’s “treasures” go beyond education, work or purpose (Whitehead 276). Farooq regards the farm as a type of “marronage”: the practice of communities made up of slave refugees living independently, outside of “local colonial settlements or plantations” (93). This community, which exists at a distance from white supremacist violence, enables the inhabitants to start “dreaming” of the future (247). This utopian dreaming is focussed more on the community than individuals: the debates centre on the future of the farm as a whole, on “present, collective survival” (Farooq 100). The farm’s existence may be “impossible” in the long term (Whitehead 276), but it also “inspired the planning of structural revolution” (Farooq 100).

2.2 Narration and Focalisation

One of the methods through which *The Underground Railroad* deploys irony is in the narration and focalisation. In the first two chapters, some characters make a few brief racist remarks and have racist thoughts, which the reader mostly has access to through Cora’s focalisation. Some of these racist utterances are clearly ascribed to a specific character, but much more often the source is difficult to identify without further inspection. The main

narrative of protagonist Cora is also interspersed with chapters by other focalisers, three of whom are white characters with racist beliefs.

For the most part, these racist views are presented side by side with the non-racist majority of the narrative: there is no external narrator who adds context or explanations to these views, and the racist views are often articulated outside of directly quoted speech. The result is what at first sight seems to be a seamless implementation of a different ideology in between passages focalised by Cora. For example, when Cora is ill, another enslaved woman, Mary, tends to her, and it is described as follows, without a clear source or context that indicates to whom the thought belongs:

[Mary] still maintained a reservoir of maternal feeling after the loss of her five children – three dead before they could walk and the others sold off when they were old enough to carry water and grab weeds around the great house. Mary descended from pure Ashanti stock, as did her two husbands. Pups like that, it didn't take much salesmanship. (39)

This excerpt shows how ambiguous the focalisation in *The Underground Railroad* can be. Mary is first described, it is unclear by whom, as a mother who suffered many great losses but is still capable of maternal feeling towards a girl in need, yet in the next few sentences her children are described as a marketable pure-bred animals – “pups”, without any indication that there has been a shift in focalisation. The sentences before and after this excerpt describe Cora's physical discomfort, which makes this excerpt a brief interlude which is presented seamlessly within Cora's focalisation, without definite proof that these conflicting views of Mary are in fact Cora's views.

It may be argued that this and other examples of racist thought in fact demonstrate Cora's “double consciousness”, a term that was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. He defined this concept as a “sense of always looking at one's self

through the eyes of others” (8). Du Bois theorised that Black people are acutely aware of how white people regard them, and that this view is internalised and consequently creates a mental struggle between their individual sense of self and their sense of self as seen through a white person’s eyes (8). The focalisation of the excerpt about Mary could be an example of double consciousness, for it shows both the fellow slave’s perspective (Cora seeing Mary as a mother who has suffered greatly due to the loss of her children) and the enslaver’s perspective (the dehumanising view of Mary’s children as profitable animals). The omission of signalling to the reader who is the focalising agent in this excerpt can be argued to exemplify Cora’s double consciousness, for in this case, the seamless switch to a dehumanising appraisal is apparently fluid and subconscious, and fully internalised by Cora.

This seamlessness between racist and non-racist thought is made possible by free indirect speech, for it is the use of the third person (both singular and plural), the lack of quotation marks, and the lack of explicitly named focalisers which create uncertainty in the interpretation. This style characteristically creates ambiguity about the identity of the focalisers, since the boundaries between external narrator and internal focaliser are blurred. This seamlessness requires the reader to take a more active role in interpretation. It is a method which draws attention to itself as being polyphonic and artificial, for if strongly opposing ideas were easily ascribed to the characters who hold them, there would be no tension within the text and no uncertainty in the reader’s interpretation – and no irony, for irony is “a tension between communication and concealment” (Hutcheon, *Irony’s Edge* 144).

One can conclude that *The Underground Railroad* contains opposing views, which cannot easily (or conclusively) be attributed to one source. Yet, irony cannot merely be created by the presence of two opposing views. The example of double consciousness has shown that two opposing views within the same person are not inherently ironic: in the case of double consciousness, it is the logical result of prolonged exposure to another person’s

view of the self. More specifically, Hutcheon posits that irony needs to be conveyed through structural markers. Her categories of these markers are “(1) various changes of register; (2) exaggeration/understatement; (3) contradiction/incongruity; (4) literalization/simplification; (5) repetition/echoic mention” (*Irony’s Edge* 149-150).

The first two chapters of *The Underground Railroad* show most of these markers. The changes of register are most visible in the descriptors of the slaves. For example, in one paragraph, the same character is described as a “prime buck” as well as a “young man” (27). The racist descriptors for the slaves are also a form of repetition or echoic mention: dehumanising words like “pickaninnies” or “n-----” are used throughout the chapter (39). Contradiction and incongruity are also used implicitly. Whitehead often places two opposing statements close to each other, and this contrast has an ironic effect. For example, Cora’s friend and fellow slave refugee Caesar spent most of his life with his parents, enslaved to a woman on a small farm, a life which came with more liberties than Cora had, such as a dwelling of his own, and the absence of physical violence. Caesar’s owner sees slavery “as a necessary evil given the obvious intellectual deficiencies of the African tribe” (49). Yet, within the same paragraph, it is stated that she taught Caesar and his parents “their letters” so that they could read the Bible and “receive the word of God with their own eyes”, which is in direct contradiction with her firm belief of their cognitive inferiority (49). Apart from these small-scale irony markers, the whole chapter about Cora’s life as a slave can be viewed as an irony marker in itself. The setting is historically consistent with regard to technology, slang, and the details of life as a slave on a plantation. However, the examples of irony and uneditorialised racism (be it internalised as double consciousness or left unresolved) indicate that the novel will include perspectives other than Cora’s.

Although Cora is the main character in the novel, her narrative is interspersed with six chapters narrated from other perspectives. Three of these can be labelled as sympathetic to

Cora's lot: those of her grandmother Ajarry, her fellow slave refugee and friend Caesar, and her mother Mabel. However, the three other chapters contain focalisers who are antagonistic to Cora's flight to freedom. These three focalisers have several things in common: they get to know Cora personally during her journey, they are white, and they all subscribe to the ideology of white supremacy. These chapters also contain very little direct dialogue, and predominantly reflect the characters' minds, specifically their thoughts on race.

Slave catcher Ridgeway, one of the three white focalisers, firmly believes his profession is not merely a way to make a living, but also a way of "serving a nation rising to its destiny" (76). This is a reference to the historical concept of "Manifest Destiny", a term that was coined in 1845 by journalist John Louis O'Sullivan to justify westward expansion of the U.S. across the continent (Johannsen 7). Ridgeway shares the widespread belief that citizens of the United States were destined to spread "to distant parts of the continent". This "new spirit of optimism and self-confidence" was rooted in an era of far-reaching "technological and economic developments" (Johannsen 13). Ridgeway fully accepts this ideology, and subscribes to the "unstoppable racial logic" that "the white man" was "destined" to rule over others, thinking that "if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent" (80). Therefore, Ridgeway sees the (figurative) underground railroad as "a criminal conspiracy devoted to theft of property" (81).

Dr. Stevens is the second white focaliser, the doctor who treats Cora in South Carolina, and urges her to consider sterilisation, which is already mandatory for many women in the state (113). The short Stevens chapter shows him as a medical student, robbing graves in order to have enough cadavers on which he could practice procedures. As medical anthropologist Lynn Morgan points out about the historical practice of grave robbing, "there was a predatory dimension to anatomical dissection, in part because the cadavers ... belonged disproportionately to the poor, black, and downtrodden" (66). Thus, the novel uses this

specific phenomenon to serve as another example of the broader context of a long history of the abuse of Black bodies in the name of science. It is important to note that racism was not the impetus for the theft of Black corpses, but it was a facilitating factor. This chapter also deploys dramatic irony, as Stevens thinks he “disapproved of racial prejudice” while the reader is introduced to this character as an advocate of eugenics on the basis of race (139). Stevens also exemplifies the many forms of that white supremacist thought and actions based on this ideology, both in history and in the realm of this novel.

Ethel, the third white focaliser, is the wife of local station master and white abolitionist Martin Wells. Martin hides Cora in his house, to Ethel’s dismay. The chapter focalised by Ethel gives an insight into her particular view of Black people. She dreamt as a child of “delivering savages to the light” as a missionary (191). “Slavery as a moral issue never interested” her, and she thinks of Cora in her hiding place as a “termite in the attic” (195). At the end of the chapter, Ethel is taking care of Cora when she is ill, an act of charity which is ironically undercut by her view of Cora as “a savage to call her own, at last” (196).

In its use of shifting focalisation and contradictory ideological perspectives, *The Underground Railroad* exemplifies the instability of narration that Hutcheon sees as characteristic of historiographic metafiction (*Poetics* 160). Out of the six chapters which are focalised by a character other than Cora, three of these are focalised by Black people who know Cora: her grandmother Ajarry, her friend and fellow slave refugee Caesar, and her mother Mabel. Yet, the three white focalisers discussed above all believe in (a variant of) white supremacist ideology that dehumanises protagonist Cora and poses a threat to her life and liberty. These three views stand in stark contrast with the main narrative, which follows Cora’s travels as a slave refugee searching for freedom.

The effect of these three white characters’ focalisation is multiple. Firstly, it thwarts expectations of a novel in the style of a first-person slave narrative, which are raised at first by

the summary on the novel's jacket, which only mentions Cora's journey, and the long opening chapter, which details Cora's life on the Georgia plantation. In chapter 3, I will analyse the (neo-)slave narrative aspects of the novel in more detail. Secondly, these three white characters' perspectives give the reader more insight into the pervasiveness and the multiple manifestations of white supremacy: racially ideological, scientific, and religious.

The choice for the inclusion of these three white focalisers can be framed by Hutcheon's ideas on "the subversion of stability of point of view" in historiographic metafiction (*Politics* 160). This subversion is achieved through "two major forms". The first consists of using "overt, deliberately manipulative narrators" and the second holds "no single perspective but myriad voices, often not completely localizable in the textual universe" (*Politics* 106). *The Underground Railroad* falls into the latter category since it uses multiple focalisers. The result is a novel of "myriad voices": for this novel shows the breadth of the system of slavery, from the Black victims and survivors of its horrors (Cora and her family and friends) to its passive white supporters or upholders (Ethel and Stevens) and its staunchest white supporters, for whom the racial ideology that justifies slavery is the core of their life's purpose (Ridgeway). The result is historiographic metafiction's typical "unresolved contradiction" (*Politics* 106).

It is also worth noting that Whitehead has chosen these three white focalisers, rather than other white characters whom Cora meets on her journey, such as white abolitionists who help her along the way. According to Madhu Dubey, Whitehead's novel "decenter[s] ... abolitionist discourse on slavery and freedom" by its creative use of geography, but I propose that this decentering also applies in the novel's choice of white focalisers (122). Giving a voice to Ethel, Stevens, and Ridgeway rather than to well-meaning white abolitionist characters is a way to criticise "the romance of the Underground Railroad as an inspiring model of interracial solidarity and principled white opposition to slavery" (Dubey 122).

Whitehead does not deny white abolitionist contributions (he includes such characters in the novel, after all), but he chooses not to re-emphasise this part of the “popular legend” of the Underground Railroad. Instead, the chapters of these three white focalisers help to highlight how the story of Cora finally reaching freedom is a laborious struggle against the harsh odds of systemic racism and constant persecution, rather than a story of individual success which does not engage as much with the pervasiveness of white supremacy.

Chapter 3: Genre, Text, and History in *The Underground Railroad*

This chapter will focus on the novel's overarching structure, which can lend more insight into the way in which *The Underground Railroad* problematises history. The novel is a modern take on the slave narrative genre, and an investigation into the development of this genre will help put *The Underground Railroad* in a broader African American literary tradition. The novel's use of irony and historiographic metafiction will also be explored on a larger scale, such as the recurrent theme of distrust of the written word, and how irony is used to expose inconsistencies in white supremacy, as well as being the engine that sets the plot in motion. This chapter will conclude with an analysis of the novel's choice of temporal structure and how this choice is both a literary device and an invitation to the reader to approach American history in a non-linear way. This chapter will investigate how *The Underground Railroad* problematises history with the use of irony and historiographic metafiction, and how this problematising attitude is present in the novel's structure and recurrent reflections on the meaning of freedom and equality in historical texts.

3.1 Genre and the Postmodern Slave Narrative

Before I investigate how *The Underground Railroad* critically engages with the expectations of its genre, I will define the genre itself more clearly. The original slave narratives were texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which detailed the "conditions of slavery", as they were described by formerly enslaved Black people who managed to escape slavery (Spaulding 8). Yet, "these texts often veiled [its] most disturbing aspects", Spaulding argues, since they were aimed at a "primarily white audience" in order to advocate the abolition of slavery (8). For example, in her 1861 autobiography *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs explicitly addressed the white reader several times and made her aim clear:

“Reader, it is not to awaken sympathy for myself that I am telling you truthfully what I suffered in slavery. I do it to kindle a flame of compassion in your hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered” (Jacobs, ch. 5).

After abolition, the slave narrative remained a part of the African American literary tradition, but from the 1970s it took on a different form. This new form is sometimes called the “neo-slave narrative”, a term that was coined in 1987 by Bernard W. Bell, by which he meant “residually oral, modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom” (Bell 289). Over a decade later, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy classified these texts more specifically as “contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative” (Rushdy 3). Both the term neo-slave narrative – as well as the type of narratives published that could be classified as such – broadened and evolved over time, so that in the twenty-first century, the term came to mean “a variety of styles of writing”, such as “realist novels grounded in historical research ... speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes” (Smith 168).

Within the genre of the neo-slave narrative, A. Timothy Spaulding distinguishes the postmodern slave narrative. This type of text is “an alternative and fictional historiography based on a subjective, fantastic, and anti-realistic depiction of slavery”, borrowing from genres like gothic fiction, science fiction, or fantasy (2). Spaulding defines the postmodern slave narrative as “transgressive”, “reinvesting popular forms often regarded as escapist or ahistorical with an overtly political dimension” (123). He argues that these non-realist narratives “force us to question the ideologies embedded within the ‘realistic’ representation of slavery” in both fiction and history (2). Moreover, Spaulding argues, by foregoing realist narrative conventions, Black authors “claim the authority to re-form history from their present perspective” (19).

Spaulding also links the postmodern slave narrative with Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction. In response to Hutcheon, he argues that postmodern historical fiction generally holds a "refusal ... to treat the past as a real event untainted by the effects of narrative representation" (18). Furthermore, he takes this to mean that postmodern historical fiction does not offer "any viable narrative constructions of the past" after it has discarded the notion of history as knowable and untarnished. For Spaulding, this is the heart of the difference between a general type of postmodern historical fiction and the postmodern slave narrative. In his view, the former's "historical indeterminacy" is countered by the latter's use of "narrative authority rooted in a sense of communal identity". The postmodernist slave narrative's non-realist elements in fact create "an authoritative and overtly political re-formation of the past". In these texts, Spaulding argues, slavery is "one of the continuing grand narratives of Western domination that links the contemporary author to the historical subject" (19). Thus, the postmodern slave narratives' incorporation of this grand narrative of slavery is quite the opposite of postmodern historical fiction's general rejection of the knowability of history.

This framework for neo-slave and/or postmodern slave narratives helps to identify genre in *The Underground Railroad*. The novel adheres to most traditional slave narratives in its basic plot: an enslaved character's life as a slave is described, until she manages to flee slavery, endures hardship on this journey, and ultimately reaches freedom. Apart from this narrative thread, the novel can clearly be classified as a postmodern slave narrative, as defined by Spaulding. It is fluid with regard to genre, or as *Guardian* reviewer Alex Preston describes it, the novel is "science fiction meeting fantasy and a picaresque adventure tale" (Preston). These elements of other genres serve to strengthen the novel's many depictions of racial injustice and violence, for these deliberately anachronistic events are connected to an antebellum background, so that "each time period informs the other in a mutual interchange, a

mutual commentary” (Spaulding 27). This structure shapes a political stance which confronts the modern reader with the notion that the legacy of slavery resonates today, and is not merely “a distant and containable moment” (27).

“Every novel by Colson Whitehead is an affront to genre,” Stephanie Li argues in her article on what she calls “genre trouble” in Whitehead’s oeuvre, focussing on *The Underground Railroad* in particular (1). Li states that her concept of “genre trouble” is loosely modelled on Judith Butler’s notion of “gender trouble”. To Butler, gender is constituted in “acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires [which] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (185). The phenomenon of drag overturns this idea of a gender core, and therefore causes “gender trouble”. Similarly, Li argues that “genre too establishes expectations that lack any essential truth” and that subverting these expectations causes genre trouble (1). Li has based her concept of genre trouble on remarks Whitehead himself has made in an interview for *Guernica*, in which he described his method of writing as “wearing ...drag”, describing that he makes his “own kind of version” of genres (Shukla). Whitehead has described his method of literary drag in the *Guernica* interview as “avoiding certain expectations of plot and a certain kind of narrative satisfaction” (Shukla). Derek Maus typifies Whitehead’s attitude to genre as an “intentional flirtation ... one that involves first suggesting and then frustrating the easy interpretations they seem to offer to both writers and readers” (1). Thus, Whitehead makes his novels recognisable enough to fit in a certain genre, but deviates from these genre expectations enough to show their limitations.

In her analysis of Colson Whitehead’s portrayal of history and fantasy in *The Underground Railroad*, Li argues that the novel suffers from “genre trouble” since is “never quite clear what is meant to be historical and what is meant to be imaginative” (12). The consequence of the blending of fantasy and history, Li argues, is that “Whitehead threatens to make history as curious fiction rather than the foundation of our present turmoil” (10).

Although the mixture of history and fantasy may cause some readers to be confused about what is historically accurate and what is fictionalised, this observation is true for almost any historical narrative, even fiction which is attempting to be realist. Moreover, I argue that the choice to mix history and fantasy appears to be the crux of Whitehead's specific method of exploring "the foundation of our present turmoil", rather than a distraction from it (10).

According to Matthew Dischinger, fantasy in *The Underground Railroad* in fact "provides a path to *engage* the particulars of history and seek symbolic justice" (86, italics in original).

Spaulding calls the postmodern slave narrative's non-linear treatment of time its "most fundamental re-formation of the historiography of slavery" (25). Texts like these, he argues, "challenge our impulse to bury the past with willful ignorance of abstraction" (25). Thus, conflating time periods in a postmodern slave narrative goes beyond mere entertainment or narrative gimmicks: it is a crucial aspect of contemporary explorations of the slave narrative genre.

Li argues that the simultaneous existence of the anachronistic elements infused into the antebellum background is a "mishmash" which "makes for striking generic disorder but significantly curtails metaphorical extrapolation or symbolic meaning" (3). Her assessment of anachronism in *The Underground Railroad* seems to assume that this literary device is used rather loosely. However, it is important to note that only such elements as are pertinent to the novel's project are changed, and that the majority of the universe that Whitehead has created is firmly rooted in the mid-nineteenth century. An example will serve to explore Whitehead's method further. South Carolina, a portrayal of a twentieth-century Jim Crow state, contains a skyscraper equipped with an elevator, which, according to the white population, symbolises its civilized society and technological progress. This skyscraper houses a doctor's office which rolls out programmes of eugenics and medical experiments as the chapter progresses. The anachronistic presence of the skyscraper is therefore symbolic of the state's cognitive

dissonance between its self-proclaimed racially “enlightened” attitude and its deeply racist, unethical and cruel practices of eugenics and medical experiments on unwitting participants (91). However, apart from the skyscraper, there are no other anachronistic examples of scientific discovery and advanced technology (such as electricity, cars, modern plumbing, or modern medicine) or other indicators that the narrative has departed its antebellum setting. In fact, most details in the South Carolina chapter emphasise the historical setting, such as mention of a “washboard”, a “saloon”, and a “buggy” (91, 93, 94). The other states are set up similarly: only the elements that are symbolic of the chapter’s main theme are anachronistic, whereas the (less significant) backdrop remains that of roughly the mid-nineteenth century in terms of language, custom, and technology. Another example of this method is the debates at Valentine Farm in Indiana, which are modelled after the debates between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois. These debates centered on the best course for the progress and education of Black people about half a century after abolition, but they are made to fit into the novel’s antebellum realm in which the presence of slave refugees at the farm makes it a target, since the Fugitive Slave Act allowed slave catchers to raid the farm.

These selective anachronisms can therefore be viewed as a signal to the reader that what has been altered in each new place is significant to what that specific chapter aims to convey. It can be argued that this method decreases rather than increases the “generic disorder” Li observes, for the absence of unnecessary anachronistic details creates sharper boundaries around what is significant. Moreover, as the example of the skyscraper has shown, these anachronisms are in fact rife with symbolic meanings which enhance the novel’s central theme of slavery’s continued influence throughout American history.

3.2 Historiographic Metafiction in *The Underground Railroad*

Hutcheon's term "historiographic metafiction" describes a type of postmodernist fiction in which history is represented "in an ironic and problematic way" (*Politics* 129). Unlike historical fiction, this genre does not aim for historical accuracy in literature, but instead it approaches history as a construct rather than objective fact. The framework of historical fiction is evoked, but simultaneously subverted. This problematising attitude towards history and fiction is present in *The Underground Railroad*, but also typifies the rest of Whitehead's oeuvre. Derek Maus points out that historiographic metafiction is "ultimately ... the closest thing to an overarching structure running through all of Whitehead's work" (10) because the author consistently deploys what Hutcheon calls a "rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (*Poetics* 5). Yet, Maus argues, Whitehead's "scrutiny", which can take the form of a "satirical intention toward the status quo ... has rarely, if ever, resulted in a specific prescription for change" since "his novels tend to with ambiguous or even incomplete resolutions" which is also a "trait" of historiographic metafiction (10).

Historiographic metafiction's critical approach to the written word shows itself in *The Underground Railroad* in several ways. One of them is through protagonist Cora. She acquires basic reading and writing skills in a South Carolina classroom, but her many months in the cramped hiding space in North Carolina provide her with ample time to read by herself. She spends most of her time reading almanacs and the Bible. She does not enjoy both types equally: the "contradictions" in the Bible with regard to slavery "vexed her" (182). One passage of the Bible states that slave owners should "be put to death", while another states "slaves should be submissive to their masters in everything – and be well-pleasing". Cora discusses these contradictions with Ethel, the wife of the abolitionist who hides Cora in their house, who claims that "where the Scripture condemns slavery, it is not speaking of negro slavery at all" and refuses to discuss the text's inconsistencies on slavery any further with

Cora. Cora feels that the “blame” for the contradictions lies with “the people who wrote it down”. “People always got things wrong,” she thinks, “on purpose as much as by accident” (182). Cora’s thoughts on the matter reflect a common motif in historiographic metafiction: the focus on the constructed and ideologically inflected nature of texts.

In Cora’s view, “getting things wrong” is an integral part of a text, which is why she loves almanacs instead, since they are self-explanatory and do not require interpretation: “the tables and facts couldn’t be shaped into what they were not” (183). The almanacs provide information about the best conditions for a slave to flee, which is why they are present at the abolitionists’ house in which she hides. Cora’s love for almanacs is deeply ironic, because it is a type of book that is not meant to be “read” in a conventional way at all, merely to be consulted with a specific aim, like a dictionary. Nevertheless, Cora loves to read and be read from them. Taken in tandem with Cora’s view of the Bible, her love for almanacs is in fact completely logical, because the laws of nature that an almanac describes are free from “the interference of men”. However, next to these objective “tables and figures”, the almanac contains “vignettes and parodies” which Cora finds “confus[ing]”, some of which portray Black people as “simple darkies” (183). The presence of Black stereotyping within the otherwise objective, factual almanac functions as a signal that the portrayal of minority figures in a text inevitably reflect the prejudice of the society in which it was written, and that any text which contains prejudice requires a critical approach.

Another text that appears a few times in *The Underground Railroad* is the Declaration of Independence. It is introduced first at the plantation, when a slave called Michael is summoned to recite the text from memory, something he learned from a previous owner. The narrator describes Michael learning words he “didn’t understand and, if truth be told, the master only half understood” (32). It then concludes with Michael’s quick progress in recitation, which is summarised ironically as follows: “They made miracles ... The

Declaration of Independence was their masterpiece. ‘A history of repeated injuries and usurpations’” (32). This final sentence becomes ironic in the context of slavery, for the Founding Fathers’ rebellion at the “tyranny” of the English King is contrasted with the history of chattel slavery in America, which was marked by extreme violence and subjugation. Moreover, it is not merely the difference in scale of these “injuries and usurpations” which is ironic, but also the fact that many leaders of the American Revolution were themselves slave holders, such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington (Einhorn 1).

The Declaration of Independence reappears when Cora is working at South Carolina’s “Museum of Natural Wonders”, as an actor in historically inaccurate tableaux of Africa, a slave ship, and a plantation. The lack of truth in the museum’s representation of American history makes Cora ponder about the white settlers who came to the continent “for a fresh start” (116). She thinks about the words “created equal” in the Declaration of Independence, and how “*all men* did not truly mean all men”, given the colony’s “massacres” of Native Americans and its centuries of slavery (117). She returns to the claim of equality later, in North Carolina, thinking that she “wasn’t sure the documents described anything real at all” (180). The Declaration surfaces again in Cora’s discussion with Ethel about the inconsistencies in biblical passages that refer to slavery. After Ethel argues that the Bible approves of enslaving Black people, Cora thinks to herself: “slavery is a sin when whites were put to the yoke, but not the African. All men are created equal, unless we decide you are not a man” (182). The second part of the last sentence serves as an ironic comment to the famous line from the Declaration of Independence in the main clause: it is a repetition of Cora’s earlier conclusion that equality is either a hollow phrase or predicated on exclusion. This ironic rewriting contrasts the natural “unalienable Rights” which are encoded in this concept of equal creation with the conscious decision to deny other humans their humanity as a justification for their enslavement. This passage from the novel presents quotes from both the

Bible and the Declaration of Independence side by side as two founding texts of the United States of America. This passage critically approaches these two founding texts, and reminds the reader that any text is a construction, written by a human being, and therefore is prone to subjectivity and inconsistency, and serving an ideological purpose.

When the Declaration of Independence appears again in *The Underground Railroad*, it is in the Valentine farm classroom, where Cora continues her education together with the children on the farm. She does not recognise the text when she encounters it this time, for “the children’s pronunciation was crisp and mature, so distant from Michael’s stiff recitations back on Randall”. The children are “bold and confident” as they “sang the promises of the Founding Fathers” (239). When Cora asks the teacher afterward how much the children understand of the text, the latter replies that they may not understand it fully, but that they will, adding “the Declaration is like a map. You trust that it’s right, but you only know by going out and testing it yourself” (240). Cora’s reported incredulity at this reply shows that she has not lost her wariness of the written word in general, and the Declaration of Independence specifically. The two recitations – of Michael and the schoolchildren – are different in style, but similar in their lack of comprehension of the text. Michael had barely any comprehension of the text, since that was not the point of his learning a parlor trick, but the children are taught by their teacher to “trust” that the text is “right”, without taking a close, critical look. According to Michel Feith, the recurrent references to the Declaration in *The Underground Railroad* “betray skepticism toward the philosophical and moral foundations of the nation” (151). As Cora reflects, neither of the recitations “described anything real” to the people who recite the text: to them it is “an echo of something that existed elsewhere” (180).

Another aspect of historiographic metafiction is its use of historical detail. Hutcheon argues that historiographic metafiction “incorporates, but rarely assimilates” historical details

(*Poetics* 114). This technique is also present in *The Underground Railroad*, in the form of the slave notices that precede each chapter that recounts Cora's sojourn in a certain state. These slave notices were advertisements that slave holders used when a slave ran away, with a description of their appearance and an announcement of a reward if the slave was returned to their owner. In his *NPR* interview, Whitehead says "I like being a mimic when I'm writing. But then sometimes you can't compete with the actual historical document", which is why he included a shortened version of four of these historical advertisements (Gross).

The advertisements are printed in a different font to the narrative, which mimics a nineteenth-century newspaper's font, and they all describe slave refugees similar to Cora: young and female. The first four advertisements are indeed incorporated, but not assimilated within the narrative: it is not made explicit what their source is, and they do not refer to any events or characters within the text, but they are connected to Cora, since they all describe young female slave refugees such as herself. Whether the reader is aware they are historical or fictive, the slave advertisements serve as reminders that Cora's journey is based on historical fact. They also hint at what Whitehead calls "the banality of evil" in an *NPR* interview, a term Hannah Arendt coined to describe Nazi leader Adolf Eichmann's attitude towards his own role in the Holocaust. As Whitehead says of American slavery: "there was a process for everything. There was a system" (Gross). Another example of the banality of evil in the novel is the murder of slave refugee Jasper in the Tennessee chapter. Cora and Jasper have both been captured by slave catcher Ridgeway, and will be brought to their owners, where they will likely be horribly punished for their escape before being killed. On their journey, Jasper often sings "hymns whose central theme was the wrath of God and the mortifications awaiting the wicked" (205). In order to get "silence and a restful mind", Ridgeway kills the man, but only after having calculated first that the "lost bounty was ... very small" (212). The murder of Jasper is calculative, not even based on white supremacist ideology, but on "reasoning" and

a balancing of the different expenses which are involved in “deliver[ing] the man to his owner” (212).

The Underground Railroad is a work of fiction which draws on genres such as science fiction, fantasy, and the picaresque novel. Yet, the slave advertisements are snippets of history remind the reader that slavery was not only real, but a pervasive and continuing presence in American society. Not all the advertisements are historical, since the fifth advertisement is a fictional one describing Cora, presented in the same font and register as the first four. This advertisement precedes the final chapter set in an abstract “North”, which implies that she may have reached a place where she can live freely. It starts off similar to the others, describing her appearance and “devious” character, and that she was last seen “among the outlaws of John Valentine Farm” (298). However, the first line already contains a minor editorialisation which signals that this advertisement is different: it describes Cora’s “master” as “legal but not rightful”. The last three sentences are: “She has stopped running. Reward remains unclaimed. SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY” (298). I see this fictional advertisement not as an advertisement that was written and published in the realm of the novel, but as a signal to the reader which is placed just a few pages before the end of the novel. The first half of this advertisement, which mimics the historical documents, serves as a reminder that Cora’s fictive story of enslavement and escape, in spite of its non-realist elements, is firmly rooted in history. The second half of the advertisement deviates from the historical advertisements and proclaims Cora’s freedom and self-ownership, and is a reminder of the novel’s project as a postmodern slave narrative: namely, that rewriting the history of slavery can reclaim that history.

3.3 Irony in *The Underground Railroad*

As I suggested in chapter 1, Hutcheon posits that irony's "edge" is what differentiates it from other rhetorical styles: irony has "its targets, its perpetrators, and its complicitous audience" (*Irony's Edge* 38). She also points out that interpretation, rather than intention, is an important part in establishing irony. Although *The Underground Railroad* contains many brief examples of irony in each chapter, this section will explore irony and its functions on a structural level.

The most common function of irony in *The Underground Railroad* is to bring to light absurdities within white supremacist thought, incongruities in characters, and flaws in reasoning. Cora's own focalisation in the beginning of the novel is interspersed with racist ideas which are not countered or dismantled directly; rather, most often they are highlighted with irony markers such as repetition or exaggeration, which serve to call the reader's attention to a specific issue. These examples of irony as criticism can be classified as containing an "edge", because they have a clear target (the prejudiced white characters) and a clear goal (exposing the flaws of racial prejudice).

Yet the novel is not only focussed on dismantling white supremacist thought: for example, it also shows the racial blind spots of well-meaning white abolitionists like South Carolina's Sam. In one paragraph, the narrator states that "Sam's saloon did not serve colored patrons", but in the next Sam says that "[y]ou get to know the real life of a place" by working in his saloon, because he "enjoyed conversation" with his patrons (120). These statements are clearly at odds with each other: the town has both many white and Black citizens, so Sam's saloon cannot provide the "real life" of this town if it only serves white people. Irony's "edge" here is that Sam is an abolitionist who risks his life for Cora, but still subconsciously only includes white people in his view of "real life" of the town, which is a de facto segregated place, a fact he appears to forget in his own more fortunate position as a white man (120). While Sam's blind spot is the target of this example, Sam himself may not specifically be

irony's target here. The novel does repeatedly use specific individuals to point out the irony in white people's thinking, but in my opinion, this method is ultimately aimed at showing the many expressions and effects of white supremacy. It achieves this goal by giving many specific examples of how it functions on an individual level as a restrictive framework, so that the reader is presented with a wide array of white characters whose thinking shares a common root: the inability to truly see beyond their own more fortunate circumstances as white people in a white supremacist society.

Another function of irony in *The Underground Railroad* is aimed at exposing the breadth of slavery beyond white characters, and how it is an inescapable, systemic part of life in the novel. For example, Cora's first sojourn after her escape is in South Carolina, where she is able to purchase her own comfortable clothing, instead of the "stiff" textiles she had to wear as a slave (92). The "soft cotton" of her new dress "thrilled her" and is a marker of her improved circumstances (88). The second time she marvels over the "supple" cotton dress which is "like nothing she had worn before", the paragraph closes with the statement: "[c]otton went in one way, came out another". This focalisation is probably Cora's, since she until very recently was made to pick cotton and understands the origin of the product she is now able to buy for herself: she knows at what human cost cotton "went in" the line of production, and now also knows how it feels to (be able to) buy a finished product made of slave labour (92). In this example, the novel sketches a world in which there is no evading the exploitation of slave labour: one is either exploited or using the products of that exploitation, and in this wry ironic example, Cora is both.

In Whitehead's novel, irony is also present at the core of the plot. The novel opens thus: "The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no. This was her grandmother talking" (3). The chapter then details her grandmother's life and death, which can be summarised with the following sentence: "to escape the boundary of the plantation was

to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible” (8). This sense of the impossibility of escape is Cora’s initial reason for declining Caesar’s offer, but when plantation owner Terrance Randall “cupped her breast” at an inspection (47), Cora realises that “now she was his”, and therefore at increased risk, so she changes her decision about fleeing (48). Her change of heart is supported by the fact that her mother Mabel successfully fled the plantation about five years before the narrative present, and was never caught. When Cora disappears from the plantation, plantation owner Randall hires “infamous” slave catcher Ridgeway to track her down and bring her back (41). Since Ridgeway was also unsuccessful in finding Cora’s mother in the past, he takes Cora’s escape as an additional “personal injury” (222). If Mabel had not been able to escape, Ridgeway “wouldn’t have obsessed so over Cora’s capture”, Cora realises later (301).

Thus, Mabel’s escape is not only Cora’s initial inspiration for running away, but also the reason for Ridgeway’s relentless efforts to capture her. However, both of these plot-driving actions are based on the false assumption that Mabel’s flight was successful, since the penultimate chapter reveals to the reader that when Mabel took a rest in a marsh after running for a long time, she realised she could not leave her daughter behind for good and decides to return. Shortly afterwards, she was bitten by a deadly poisonous snake, “and the swamp swallowed her up”, which is why her body was never found and it was generally assumed that she escaped successfully (295). As Adam Kelly points out, this example of irony is not “rhetorical, cynical, or postmodern”, but instead “structural, dramatic, and tragic” (20). The example of Mabel’s escape is dramatic since this information is only imparted to the reader, and only at the end of the novel, structural because it is the foundation for the novel’s plot, and tragic because of the complete coincidence of Mabel’s death. This example of dramatic irony does not contain irony’s “edge”, for unlike the white characters who are exposed to be

inconsistent or illogical in their white supremacist ideals, this example does not have what Hutcheon calls a “target”.

3.4 History and Time

In an *NPR* interview with Terry Gross, Whitehead has described the novel’s narrative structure as being inspired by *Gulliver’s Travels*, Jonathan Swift’s famous satirical narrative. In Swift’s picaresque narrative, the protagonist travels through several fictional exotic lands, each of which highlights and satirises a different topic. Like *Gulliver’s Travels*, Whitehead’s novel “is rebooting every time the person goes to a different state” (Gross). A “reboot” refers to the restarting of a computer, which can be deliberate or involuntary, and which often takes place after the system has crashed. The reboot then brings the system back to the initial settings. The word “reboot” therefore connotes a circular conception of time in the novel, which is shown through protagonist Cora’s trajectory: apart from the time that she is taken captive by slavecatcher Ridgeway, she always starts over in the same place: a (literal) underground railroad station, after which she has to start over in a new, unknown and unsafe state, without money, belongings or network of people she can rely on.

This narrative choice of Cora’s journey through multiple states in which she follows similar trajectories – arrival, sojourn, danger, flight – entails that each time Cora flees, she is not escaping racism, but merely encountering a different manifestation of it. As Adam Kelly has observed, *The Underground Railroad* is “a text whose temporal structure seems to refuse at every turn the notion of progress” (20). Since the states she passes through are representations of different events and eras in American history, it is important to note that these eras are not represented in chronological order. Thus, the novel frustrates attempts to compare its narrative trajectory with the course of history, and it becomes quite literally what Spaulding calls the postmodern slave narrative’s “re-formation of the past” (60). This non-

linear representation of history on the small scale of Cora's personal journey is therefore a metaphor for the large scale of American racial history. The circular representation of time implicitly criticises any notion of progress in American racial relations with the passing of time, for no matter which historical era is represented in this novel, each unfailingly exposes racial injustice in the form of the discrimination, exploitation, violence, and murder of Black people.

Spaulding theorises that postmodern slave narratives' "orientation toward time" has a dual structure of the "synchronic" and the "diachronic" (27). The synchronic aspect shows slavery as a distinct era which "reveals much about the values and morals of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America" (27). The diachronic aspect "emphasize[s] the ideological foundations of American slavery that persist through time and cannot be isolated in one moment" (27). This dual representation of time, Spaulding argues, are a distinct feature of the postmodern slave narrative, that is not present in "traditional historical fiction" (27).

The Underground Railroad uses this dual temporal structure as well. The synchronic is visible in the Georgia chapter, which describes Cora's life on the Randall cotton plantation in detail, but the chapter also includes, for example, thought fragments of the Randall slave masters. The synchronic exploration of nineteenth-century values is most clear in the three chapters with white focalisers, which show the motivations of these characters' adherence to the "values and morals" of white supremacy (Spaulding 27). These characters have their personal interpretations of white supremacist ideology, based on their varied backgrounds: slave catcher Ridgeway finds meaning in his work through the tenets of Manifest Destiny; the evangelical Ethel wishes to be a missionary to those she deems inferior; and Stevens represents the nineteenth century medical practitioners who felt no qualms about using stolen corpses of Black people to further their skills and careers. These variations of a white supremacist worldview highlight how ubiquitous it is in the nineteenth-century world that

Whitehead describes. This synchronic view provides a solid basis for the diachronic perspective to explore how the “ideological foundations of American slavery” have reverberated through history (Spaulding 27). In *The Underground Railroad*, the diachronic is of course visible in the anachronistic states after Cora flees the plantation, as discussed in chapter 2.

Since the novel mentions several times that the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 is in effect, the narrative present is set somewhere between 1850 and the start of the Civil War in 1861, as the war is not mentioned in the novel at all. Within the realm of this novel therefore, the Civil War with its outcome – the abolition of slavery – has never taken place. Thus, all the historical events in the novel which occurred after abolition are cast in a new, speculative light. Just like Whitehead’s circular representation of time during Cora’s flight through the United States, the absence of the Civil War and abolition invites the reader to ponder the continuity of racial injustice throughout American history, and reflect on the “arbitrary” nature of “sharp distinctions between past and present” (Spaulding 29). As Spaulding argues, “returning to history” is a “political project of liberation” for the authors of postmodern slave narratives (29). For Whitehead, the critical returning to and reforming of history involves a circular temporality, the removal of the Civil War, and the use of a consistent antebellum setting throughout the narrative, which ties each anachronistic event in Cora’s journey to her time as a slave. Mathias Thaler calls these devices “the novel’s defamiliarizing strategy” for representing history, and he argues that this strategy “upends a redemptive reading of emancipation that erases (and thereby perpetuates) the devastating legacy of slavery” (617).

The anachronistic states engage with events taken from different eras, none of which is later than the middle of the twentieth century in the South Carolina chapter. However, the novel does draw parallels with the present, and thus, Whitehead’s defamiliarising representation of history calls for contemporary racial issues to be reconsidered from a

historical perspective. For example, the Valentine Farm debates about the future of the slave refugees at the farm reflects the philosophies of W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, but Whitehead has pointed out in his *NPR* interview that “there are echoes in that argument, obviously, now” (Gross). According to Whitehead, public discussions of poverty and substance abuse in the Black population use “the same sort of rhetoric you hear now when people talk about ‘respectability politics’, as it’s called” (Whitehead). He also connects the system of slave patrollers as “just an early version of stop and frisk” (Whitehead). These examples with modern-day connotations are relatively minor – they are not explored over the space of a whole chapter, for example – but they do strengthen the ties between the synchronic view of slavery as a specific moment and the diachronic view of how it resonates throughout American history, up to the present.

Conclusion

In April 2013, Colson Whitehead reflected on the public conversation about race in the United States in an interview with British author Nikesh Shukla, in which he explained: “over here, once Obama was elected, there was a certain sense in which people said ‘Oh, so no one’s racist anymore.’ As if some magical spell had been cast and suddenly no one was racist here anymore. Obviously that isn’t true” (Shukla). This concept of “post-racism” that Whitehead refers to in this excerpt expresses a wish more than a definite conclusion that racism belongs in the past. In *The Underground Railroad*, published three years after this interview, Whitehead indirectly challenges the notion of post-racism, for the novel shows the legacy of slavery throughout American history, up to the present moment. As I have shown in this thesis, *The Underground Railroad* uses irony to critically engage in contemporary debates that were revitalised by the rise of Black Lives Matter in 2013/2014 and became central to US politics in the Trump era.

Like other works of historiographic metafiction, *The Underground Railroad* is “historical ... in an ironic and problematic way” (*Politics* 129). The novel’s central project of showing the continued legacy of slavery is achieved predominantly through this critical, problematising attitude towards history. This attitude is expressed most clearly in the novel’s circular, ‘rebooting’ structure of the anachronistic events. This structure thwarts attempts to equate the passing of time automatically with a decrease in racial injustice. The deliberate absence of the Civil War and abolition in the novel also implicitly emphasises the risk of seeing a specific emancipatory event as a “magical spell” that erases racial injustice (Shukla). Thus, the novel suggests that as long as continued racial inequality and the pervasiveness of white supremacy remain unaddressed, the United States is condemned to repeat its past mistakes.

The novel's engagement with contemporary debates on racial injustice paradoxically expresses itself through its critical and ironic position towards the origins of the United States. The novel shows the stark contrasts on which the nation was built: the Declaration of Independence was a demand for liberty and the pursuit of happiness, yet only for a select group of people; and the historical concept of Manifest Destiny was marked by an urge for expansion which came at a terrible cost for Native Americans. By showing the injustice that was done to Black people and Native Americans, and by showing how the Declaration of Independence was predicated on the exclusion of these groups, the novel suggests that the racial injustice that has marred the United States from its colonial beginnings is in fact inextricably interwoven with the origins of the nation.

The Underground Railroad is a novel which has a deep engagement with history, but simultaneously blurs the boundaries between the fictive and historical. In my analysis of the novel's focalisation, I have typified Whitehead's method as creating seamless transitions between different focalisers, which requires the reader to assume an active role in interpreting the text. I propose that this active interpretation is a requirement in other areas of the novel as well, for Whitehead anonymises the historical referents which appear as anachronisms. The anachronisms are recognisable nonetheless to the reader who knows what they refer to, but erasing details about the anachronistic events, eras, and places will mean that some readers, especially those without much knowledge of American history, will not know what the historical referents are. Thus, the cost of seamless representation of anachronisms is that they can be misunderstood, and that the reader may be uncertain which events are real after Cora leaves the historically realist setting of the plantation. In my view however, the reader's possible misunderstanding of historical events is a conscious choice Whitehead made in order to expose the systemic nature and effect of racism. Moreover, misunderstandings may also

challenge the reader to do research on the blurred historical referents, which could create a more active engagement, both with the novel and with history.

During Cora's last sojourn at Valentine Farm, Black farm owner John Valentine gives a speech about the farm's origins, saying he left the state in which he previously lived "to spare his children the ravages of prejudice and its bully partner, violence" (282-3). The notion expressed here is one that runs throughout the novel. It is reminiscent of North Carolina's "Friday Festival", which consisted first of a minstrel show which gave a false representation of slavery and of Black people, and then proceeded to a weekly scheduled hanging of a Black person. The former, it is implied, legitimises the latter. The novel shows a wide array of these expressions of racial prejudice and violence, so that the reader is invited to inspect the common root of white supremacy throughout history in the novel's many examples. *The Underground Railroad* has an intense engagement with history, which serves as both a mirror to how we collectively view history, and as a continuous warning for the present and future.

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