

and *The Mutual Housing Experiment* demonstrate the achievements and the problems associated with cooperative policies that tested the limits of the New Deal and which remain embedded in the landscape of Pennsylvania and surrounding states.

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Restricting Black Mobility as a Key Function of Racial Control in Post-Emancipation Societies

Lucy Maddox. *The Parker Sisters: A Border Kidnapping* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2016). Pp. 256. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$28.50.

Elizabeth Stordeur Pryor. *Colored Travelers: Mobility and the Fight for Citizenship before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016). Pp. 240. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. Cloth, \$34.95.

Colson Whitehead. *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016). Pp. 320. Cloth \$15.95; paper \$15.16.

Reconstruction is still with us. Recent events such as the NAACP’s travel advisory warning black Americans to be cautious in Missouri and the events that erupted in Charlottesville, Virginia, have clearly shown that the United States has yet to face reconstruction over 150 years after the Civil War outlawed race-based slavery.” For historians, “Reconstruction” refers to the United States in the years following the Civil War. What if, however, the term “reconstruction” were to be unhooked from that specific time period and instead used to describe a society in flux after the end of slavery? It could then mean something less temporally specific but more thematically unified—the period of confusion and chaos that followed in the wake of American emancipation. It would go from a capital *R* time period to a lower-case *r* descriptor of promises of freedom yet to be fulfilled throughout the United States. Instead of focusing on both regions from 1866 to 1877, then, studies of reconstruction would start in the northern states in the early to mid-1800s as gradual emancipation slowly took hold and in the southern states after slavery abruptly ended in the wake of the Civil War.

Northern reconstruction, from this angle, began before southern reconstruction and was complicated by the continued existence of slavery in half of the country. In this broad sense, reconstruction continues today. The racism that developed and grew alongside slavery has yet to die away.¹

Without necessarily using the term “reconstruction,” many important works on the antebellum North examine this phenomenon. The very efforts of former slaves to make their way after generations of bondage inspired the efforts of their white neighbors to control them. Works that fall into the category of “whiteness studies” have long done this from a theoretical perspective, and studies of such topics as Northern support for African colonization, the abolition and women’s movements, and social histories of the lives of free blacks have created, intentionally or not, the foundation for a better understanding of the reconstructing North.

Segregation and white vigilantism during reconstruction in North and South focused on restricting black mobility. Most recently, historians have begun to pay closer attention to the role of mobility during this period of northern reconstruction, a time of quasi-freedom that followed northern emancipation but overlapped southern slavery. These studies present a complex picture of a nation in which northern blacks were no longer constricted by legal bondage but faced the constant efforts of whites to curtail their newfound freedom as much as possible. At the same time southern blacks, some of whom were free but most of whom remained enslaved, longed for, and sometimes found, the right moment to head North and claim even the limited freedom available there. The picture that emerges reveals similarities between the post-emancipation societies of the North and the South in varying degrees of chaos, racism, and attempts at social control.

Three recent works that deal, directly or indirectly, with black mobility in the northern reconstruction of the early to mid-1800s collectively illustrate this process. Colson Whitehead’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad*, is about more than slavery and the clandestine movement involved in escaping bondage. It also encourages readers to blur temporal lines and consider the question asked by whites after emancipation: what to do with the freedpersons.² Though technically set in the South and Midwest before the Civil War, Whitehead includes scenes that clearly draw from a later period of US history by having his main character travel to Upper South states that have emancipated their slaves and are in the process of deciding what to do next. The chilling answer is one that exaggerates the realities of racial tension and intimidation in the post-emancipation

United States, though perhaps not as much as most readers might like to think.³ Elizabeth Pryor's *Colored Travelers* and Lucy Maddox's *The Parker Sisters* rely on reality rather than fiction to describe similar situations in which northern free blacks are excluded from true citizenship, denied travel rights, and even sold into southern slavery.

In the *Underground Railroad*, Whitehead offers many stark images, some historically accurate and others grounded in fact but skewed just enough to serve more as metaphor than reality. The main character is a young escaped slave named Cora who finds her way to freedom along a literal underground rail system. Her first stop is in a fictional South Carolina that Whitehead has ironically made a progressive post-emancipation state, at least on the surface. At first Cora feels safe and free there, until she uncovers a eugenicist plot to sterilize blacks and turn her and others into living displays that downplay the horrors of slavery. After that she finds herself in an even worse place, a fictional North Carolina that has freed its slaves and then managed to do what far too many antebellum white Americans fantasized about in the real world—remove the freed.

As they enter the state, the Underground Railroad conductor, who has hidden Cora in his wagon to protect her from vigilante whites, tries to impress upon her the danger she has brought upon herself by traveling into this society. He removes the tarp that has been covering her and tells her that they are on a path that has recently been named the "Freedom Trail" (153). As Cora gets out of the wagon to look around, it takes a moment for her to process that what she is seeing hanging from the trees are human bodies. Black bodies hang from the trees like "rotting ornaments" for miles, all of them guilty of being free in this fictional post-emancipation society (152). No longer enslaved, they found themselves dangerously unwelcome by whites who now saw them as nothing more than menaces to society—whites who had taken it upon themselves to rid the state of their presence through systematic genocide. Cora's clandestine mobility put her in danger of becoming the next human ornament.

As a novelist, Whitehead is free to modify time and space to bring eugenics and ethnic cleansing into stark relief through dramatic scenes. Even confined to historical fact, though, Maddox and Pryor also describe in disturbing detail a reality for freed blacks that was too often miserable. Pryor's examination of black mobility in the antebellum years reveals a very limited freedom policed by white vigilantes who took it upon themselves to deny black citizenship by curtailing black movement. Similarly, Maddox's recounting

of the kidnapping and selling into slavery of two free black children in Pennsylvania shows just how precarious freedom was even in the “free states.” These histories reinforce the feeling of dread in Whitehead’s novel and leave the reader with the disturbing realization that black Americans had nowhere to turn even after the end of slavery. Indeed, all three books describe post-emancipation societies in which the absence of slavery leads to heightened racial violence as whites seek to control blacks and confine them to spaces deemed appropriate by whites.

For Maddox, forced mobility illustrates the limited freedom vulnerable blacks faced in the border-North region of southern Pennsylvania. Her focus is the kidnapping of Elizabeth and Rachel Parker, two young girls who were snatched away from their families and sold into slavery in 1851. She explains that their kidnapping was made easier by the fact that the family’s lack of economic security and independence had led the parents to apprentice and hire out the children. Spread out this way, the parents were unable to keep a watchful eye on the girls so the kidnapper found it easy to abduct them and send them south under the guise that they were actually escaped slaves. The kidnapper, the notorious George Alberti, was able then to collect bounties for the girls’ “return,” selling these free children into slavery.

The kidnapper, known from the southern perspective as a slave catcher, also plays a prominent role in Whitehead’s novel. Through a character who is very obviously modeled after Alberti, Whitehead illustrates multiple angles of theft and trafficking in human bodies. Like Alberti, Whitehead’s character profited from dead bodies by robbing graves and selling the remains to medical schools and from live black bodies by selling people, some of whom had actually stolen themselves from masters through the illicit mobility of escape but others who were free to begin with, into slavery. Whether enslaved or free to begin with, victims of the kidnapper/slave catcher faced forced mobility that took away even the limited freedom they had managed to obtain.

While kidnapping was the ultimate denial of agency in terms of black mobility, it was not the only tactic used to dictate black movement. Pryor describes the many ways free blacks were denied rights of mobility enjoyed by white citizens. While Whitehead’s fictional railroad symbolized hope for freedom to the enslaved, the real railroad that was beginning to cross much of the nation soon came to symbolize repression to free blacks who were denied equal treatment with whites. Pryor uses the situation to show starkly just how limited freedom was for “free” blacks, even those who

technically owned themselves. As railroad transportation became more commonplace in the United States, whites and blacks with the means to travel sought to take advantage of this new and exciting advancement. Resentful white passengers began immediately to resist sharing the trains with black passengers, and northern railroad owners and operators responded by creating a de facto segregated system that predated southern Reconstruction Jim Crow laws, introducing one of the central aspects of a reconstruction society in the United States. As a result, black civil rights activists made freedom of mobility a “central tenet of U.S. citizenship” (Pryor, 102).

In addition to domestic efforts to curtail their mobility on the rails, black Americans faced further humiliation when the federal government refused to issue them passports to travel safely abroad. This insult was compounded by the fact that enslaved blacks traveled abroad with their owners under the full protection of the US government. According to Pryor, this created a situation in which “an enslaved or servile person was entitled to a greater breadth of mobility than a person of color who was free” (118). The message was clear: blacks who were in the service of whites were less threatening, more valuable, and more worth government protection than blacks who were free and representing only themselves.

Black mobility was not only curtailed in post emancipation society, it was often criminalized. While it did not lead to the widespread genocide depicted in Whitehead’s fictional North Carolina, black mobility did lead to confrontation with white authorities, many of whom were self-appointed. Alberti and his supporters rationalized the Parker sisters’ kidnapping on the notion that they were actually being apprehended as a result of criminal movement. The testimony of many Chester County residents proved that argument false and their freedom was eventually restored, but those who did not know the sisters personally presumed from the beginning that they and their family were guilty of illegal mobility.

Pryor describes how the “criminalization of black mobility” was applied to free blacks as well as the enslaved (6). Her account gives historical credence to Whitehead’s point that to whites the lack of slavery as a controlling force seemed to require more violence. She explains that in the post-emancipation North all whites were, in essence, “deputized . . . to surveil any black person in motion” (6). Though they did not commit genocide like the whites in Whitehead’s novel, these self-appointed deputies harassed blacks whom they perceived to be out of place and, as Maddox shows in her discussion

of Alberti, were not above capturing and selling their black neighbors to gain social control and monetary profit.

Perhaps the largest takeaway from these studies, and the many examinations of the antebellum North that have come before, is that nowhere in the United States was truly free for blacks, even the post-emancipation North or the newly settled and narrowly free Midwest. Again, Whitehead's novel draws this point in graphic detail. Near the end of the story, Cora finds herself in a more historically accurate Indiana that is in the process of trying to prevent free blacks from settling there. As Cora's hopes for asylum are once again dashed and she is chased out of yet another state, the reader feels her sense of hopelessness in ever finding an accepting home.

Cora is not the only one who can never seem to find a home. Maddox's story of two free black children who were kidnapped and sold into slavery along a path that ran opposite of Cora's railroad emphasizes the limits of northern freedom by ending with one of the children, Elizabeth Parker, preferring slavery in New Orleans to the limited freedom she returned to in Pennsylvania. In some sense the child saw her kidnapping as more an adventure than a terrifying experience because she was not truly free to begin with, even in Pennsylvania. Through Elizabeth, Maddox's reality is, in some ways, almost as terrifying as Whitehead's fiction, as it illustrates the lack of any type of control over one's destiny.

Pryor's account also reveals a disturbing lack of control over one's own fate. She discusses anti-immigration laws in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois that empowered whites to abuse black settlers and threaten them with enslavement. Though, as she points out, these laws "were not strictly enforced," they "sent the message that it was the duty of all U.S. whites to keep track of black people in motion" and they opened the door for the scene in Whitehead's novel—a scene that calls to mind the mobbings, massacres, and attempted genocidal actions of the post-emancipation South (Pryor, 49). Clearly, black freedom in both sections led to vigilantism and segregation.

While this collective assessment of reconstruction in the North is often disheartening, there are occasional glimpses of hope as seen through white decency and black agency in both the novel and the historical accounts. The novel concludes with a hint of optimism as the ending highlights the importance of both interracial cooperation and black agency in creating real freedom. Cora manages to kill the slave hunter who has been pursuing her and then uses the final stretch of the underground tunnel that had been constructed by whites to find her way to a fellow escaped slave who offers

her a ride on the last leg of her journey to California. Like the conductors along Whitehead's Underground Railroad some of the white residents of Chester County offered solidarity in fighting for justice for the Parker girls. As Maddox shows, many local whites traveled south to Maryland to testify that the sisters were not escaped slaves. Indeed, Joseph Miller, the white man who employed Rachel Parker, lost his life trying to secure her freedom.

Focusing more on black agency, Pryor shows how free blacks often used whatever resources they could to fight back. She features people like David Ruggles, who stood up in ways similar to Cora's defiance against her pursuer. Rather than taking a defensive stance, Ruggles took to an offensive strategy in many ways, most notably by hunting down a kidnapper (85). The real heroes in Pryor's account are civil rights activists who refused to be silenced, demanded their rights as US citizens, and fought back whenever they could in whatever ways they could. Of course, they were met with heightened defiance from the white grassroots and the federal government, which made the denial of black citizenship official with the Supreme Court's ruling in the Dred Scott case.

In the final analysis, these works and others that explore life after freedom in the United States—whether North or South—reveal a long, and tragically unfinished, story. In both regions, once black Americans were no longer the property of others, they were deemed dangerous, expendable outsiders. Far too many whites would have preferred to remove black Americans altogether, but colonization was expensive and genocide was, fortunately, a step further than most were willing to go. Instead, they worked to confine blacks to as limited a space as possible and deputized themselves to police black behavior and make sure that their freedom remained restricted. Whitehead's novel combines fantasy and reality in disturbing ways, but even his vivid imagination is no match for the horrors presented by Maddox and Pryor simply because their accounts are based on the nightmares that the majority of free blacks faced in a society that seemed beyond redemption most of the time. Their histories lacked any element of fiction but the reality was bad enough and, unfortunately, today's reality is still not good enough. The death of Trayvon Martin, Sandra Bland, and others who were moving outside their prescribed space illustrates in all too much detail the fact that reconstruction as described here has yet to end.

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BOOK REVIEWS

NOTES

1. For a discussion of the antebellum North as a society facing reconstruction, see my *Pennsylvania Hall: A "Legal Lynching" in the Shadow of the Liberty Bell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. For a good analysis of this dilemma after the Civil War, see Paul Escott, "*What Shall We Do with the Negro?*": *Lincoln, White Racism, and Civil War America* (Richmond: University Press of Virginia, 2009).
3. For accounts that make Whitehead's novel seem perhaps less far-fetched than we would like, see the plethora of works on Chicago and Red Summer; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction: The First Major Migration to the North of Ex-Slaves* (New York, W.W. Norton, 1976); E. R. Bills, *The 1910 Slocum Massacre: An Act of Genocide in East Texas* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2014); Scott Ellsworth and John Hope Franklin, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992); and H. Leone Prather, *We Have Taken A City: The Wilmington Racial Massacre and Cout of 1898* (Dram Tree Books, 2006) among many others. For cinematic treatment of the issue of race rioting and massacre of black citizens, see the 1997 film *Rosewood*.