

The Underground Railroad (2016) as Anti-White-Supremacist Fantasy

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Abstract: The possibilities the fantastical genre offers for commenting on the reverberations of the United States' colonial heritage have been exploited extensively in contemporary narrative works. One example is Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), in which he employs Toni Morrison's concept of the Africanist presence in the realm of the fantastic to show how the stereotypical image of a "Black other" still haunts the White American imagination. Situating Whitehead's bestseller within the field of Critical Whiteness Studies, this article examines how the fantastical encounter with the "Black other" comments on the image's persistence in American society and on its function to maintain White supremacy.

“ [T]he subject of the dream is the dreamer,” Toni Morrison once wrote (1992, 17). While Morrison was talking about the nature of fiction in general — and of nineteenth-century romance in particular — the metaphorical quality of the novel as dream, as a collection of figments of the mind, seems particularly apt for the genre of fantasy. In her introduction to fantasy literature, Rosemary Jackson specifies that the dream-like quality of fantasy is not the result of an escapist mode of writing, but of an assemblage of specific narrative techniques and structures expressing cultural and social concerns: “Like dreams, with which they have many similarities, literary fantasies are made up of many elements re-combined, and are inevitably determined by the range of those constitutive elements available to the author/dreamer” (Jackson 1981, 8). Fantasy is therefore not the invention of an alternate space separated from the empirical world but adapts and re-shapes its elements “to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different.” (Jackson 1981, 8). Fantasy therefore is a subversive literary mode, drawing on aspects of the real “in a parasitical or symbiotic relation” (Jackson 1981, 20) in order to undermine them.

With the “construction of the impossible” (James and Mendlesohn 2012, 1) at the center of its narrative techniques, fantasy highlights its difference from reality only to use the resulting liberated

critical view and the heightened creative license for insights into the same reality. This epistemic potential of fantasy can only be leveraged when the distance between the fictional world and reality finds its optimal balance in the “paraxial area [as] [...] the spectral region of the fantastic” between the real and the unreal (Jackson 1981, 19). The creation of this paraxial area is what makes fantasy both connected to and estranged from reality, “[I]ike the ghost which is neither dead or alive, [...] a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness. It [fantasy] takes the real and breaks it” (Jackson 1981, 20). The subgenre of historical fantasy also operates in this paraxial area, balancing the possible and the impossible by creating a fictive world that is sufficiently alienating for the reader to achieve a critical distance, like Brecht’s alienation-effect, while its historical references continually and explicitly establish a link back to the extratextual reality. Historical fantasy’s position in this transitional space between the familiar and the alien, between the possible and the impossible enables a closer look at the absurdities, absences, and “hidden truths” of our reality by means of distancing and estranging without ever entirely losing touch with the empirical world.

Following Bakhtin, Jackson infers that fantasy’s hybrid nature resists generic categorization: “Spatial, temporal, and philosophical ordering systems all dissolve” (1981, 15). Fantasy can bring together different temporal reference frames, as “the tools of the

fantastic offer a powerful way to address the contemporary world as well as the distant past” (Okoafor 185). Historical fantasy in particular represents “the ways of knowing and making sense of the world that are excluded by the dominant discourse of history” (Schanoes 237). Historical fantasy therefore not only emancipates its presented world from temporal constraints, but also from entrenched modes of knowledge production.

The Underground Railroad (2016) by Colson Whitehead exploits the possibilities of historical fantasy to address the “distant past” of slavery and its reverberations in the contemporary world, showing how close to the twenty-first-century reality this past really is (Dischinger 2017, 85-87; Li 2019, 2). With its fantastic anachronisms, the novel points out omissions in the dominant discourses of the United States as a way to link its past, present, and possible future (Li 2019, 2). One of those omissions is that Whiteness has been silently operating to structure American society in favor of White people to the disadvantage of Black people (Baldwin 1998, 178).¹ The novel estranges its readers from its anachronistic version of American history, only to use the resulting creative liberation to critically dissect the White supremacist system (Dischinger 2017, 87) that has been, and still is, a covert part of America’s dominant discourses. As Li states, *The Underground Railroad* “exposes the truths of history” and the present by performing its own alternate history in the fantastical

space (2019, 2-4). Maus identifies this aversion to convention in Whitehead's novels in general:

In his choice of forms Whitehead parodies and appropriates the conventions of literary genres as a means of subverting the formulaic conclusions to which they have been reduced. At the same time, Whitehead's choice of subjects parodically appropriates various forms of 'conventional wisdom' present in American culture as a means of subverting the unexamined, ignored, or malevolent aspects thereof (Maus 2021, 19).

One might speak of a subversion of convention on multiple levels, for which fantasy, as "the literature of subversion" (Jackson 1981) provides a suitable medium. Accordingly, Whitehead's fantastic collage of elements of African American history in *The Underground Railroad* serves to challenge established categories and conventions of Western knowledge to eventually "subvert the unexamined, ignored" role of Whiteness in the construction of this knowledge. This role is not easy to grasp, given that Whiteness is imaginary, but also extends its power into US-American reality, serving to justify discriminatory practices. Fantasy's often eccentric detachments from reality enable to capture both sides of this dynamic, to show just how far Whiteness and Blackness are from being representations of reality without diminishing the consequences people suffer because of those racial concepts. I argue that the novel uses its hybridity as a "spectral presence" between reality and imagination to reveal the belief in White

superiority and Black inferiority as “real-life fantasy,” to highlight the absurdity of the parasitical relation between Whiteness and Blackness, and to subvert the American White supremacist belief system.

***The Underground Railroad* and Whiteness’ Parasitical Relation to Blackness**

Like Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, *The Underground Railroad* offers a temporal, yet anachronic, outline of slavery in the United States and its ramifications in the present. The reader accompanies the protagonist Cora on her journey as a runaway slave through multiple states and stages of American (post-)slavery history. The novel zooms in on events that oftentimes have been omitted from dominant American history writings, such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, where Public Health Service secretly infected African Americans with syphilis for research purposes (Dischinger 2017, 90), and zooms out regularly to remind the reader of the overall picture of African American history. As Okorafor suggests for Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, “[t]he continuity of view intensifies the brutality and impact of slavery. Only through a fantasy novel can slavery be presented in such entirety” (2012, 183). Colson Whitehead’s fantastical reworking of this history however highlights not primarily the physical brutality of slavery. It rather focuses on an essential, yet no less violent, condition for slavery’s persistence, a condition that has been ignored by the American

public for a long time but still operates to uphold the racial hierarchy that became firmly established during slavery: Whiteness as a hidden but ever-present construct performing violence on African Americans.

In his essay “On Being ‘White’ ... and Other Lies,” Baldwin addresses Whiteness as an overarching racial imaginary that determines American reality: “America became white—the people who, as they claim, ‘settled’ the country became white — because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation.” (Baldwin 1998, 178). Whiteness, as well as Blackness, had to be invented because of the “necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history” (Baldwin 1998, 179). This relation between Whiteness and Blackness makes the latter a key for insights into the former, as “it is the Black condition, and only that, which informs us concerning white people. It is a terrible paradox, but those who believed that they could control and define Black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves” (Baldwin 1998, 180). What Lipsitz calls a “possessive investment in whiteness” (2018, 3) is thus, according to Baldwin, first and foremost a possessive investment in Blackness, in the “repudiation of the black Other” (Mills 1997, 58-59). In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison implicitly builds on Baldwin’s idea of, how she

calls it, the “parasitical nature of white freedom” (Morrison 1992, 57), a thought that appears also very prominently in Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* (2020, 16). According to Morrison and Wilderson, the function of African Americans in society has been reduced to that of a host for the White parasite, as “implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies” (Wilderson 2020, 15). Having been established during slavery, this exploitative relation continues into the present moment as “the afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2007, 6).

While Afropessimists like Wilderson claim that this unequal relation cannot be changed as it is too deeply anchored in Western society, Morrison sees a possibility to work toward a betterment of the American situation by raising awareness about Whiteness through literature. She develops a literary critique that enables readers to detect the discursive praxis of “American Africanism” (Morrison 1992, 6) in American literature that implicitly enables Whiteness’ exploitation of Blackness. At the center of this critique lies the so-called “Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992, 46), the name Morrison gives to the host of the White parasite, to the “Black other” that conditions Whiteness’ existence. She tries to grasp the complexity and the inherent absurdity in the construct of an othered Blackness by summarizing the “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American”

(Morrison 1992, 38). The Africanist presence is the image of a naturally enslaved, inferior, and powerless Black counterpart to a superior Whiteness, “both a visible and invisible mediating force” that is always present, even in its absence (Morrison 1992, 38-46). It is key to the definition of a White American identity, “[f]or in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (Morrison 1992, 38). The connection of this presence to the mode of fantasy becomes apparent when one considers that, like a ghost, the Africanist presence is “a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness” (Jackson 1981, 20). Whiteness is haunted by this ghostly shadow of the Africanist presence, which does not exist in empirical reality; it is a White fantasy, an imagined construct, even though it has very real consequences for African American reality in the United States. Paradoxically, Whiteness, too, is an invisible presence that has been hidden in public discourse and dominant writings of history but nevertheless haunts the United States since its beginnings, hindering it from realizing its vision of a functioning, multicultural society. Literary fantasy as equally “spectral presence”, characterized by its position in between categories, offers a mode for exploring such paradoxes in American race relations. The following close reading of *The Underground Railroad* will show that fantasy’s duality can provide a powerful vehicle for highlighting Blackness and Whiteness as parts of the American

imagination and negotiating their power in reality.

A Fantastical Train Crashes into the American Racial Hierarchy

Fantasy is a particularly apt mode to critically examine the parasitical relation of Whiteness to Blackness as it “exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real.” (Jackson 1981, 20). Whitehead’s novel draws on the historical Underground Railroad, a network of people that helped many African Americans escape from slavery, however imagining it as an actual train system transporting slaves underground from one station to the other. Cora rides this fantastic railroad from Georgia to “the North”, stopping in different states, where she witnesses and experiences various parts of American history like the Black Codes, lynchings, or eugenics programs in an anachronic fashion. The parasitical form of the fantastic railroad depends on its connection to the empirical world. The translation of the real Underground Railroad into a fantastical train system estranges the readers from this alternate history and puts them at a critical distance to make them aware of its critique of the American racial hierarchy. The railroad transports the readers into the space of the imaginary, where racial fantasies can be examined, always coming back to its connection with reality. In the novel, the underground railroad divides the setting into dark underground and light surface (Martín Salván 2020, 15), into beneath and above, which relates to the

division of American society into an allegedly superior Whiteness and inferior Blackness. The railroad thus functions as national allegory for the United States where Whiteness and Blackness are equally set in opposition to one another (Dischinger 2017, 89). The underground's darkness refers to the Blackness upon which White Americans base their identity. This becomes evident in Lumbly's final advice to Cora and Caesar before their first ride on the train: "Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (Whitehead 2016, 69). Cora follows this advice and sees "only darkness, miles and miles" (Whitehead 2016, 70). Despite America's White appearance on the surface, its identity is based on darkness, on its imagination of a "dark, abiding, singing Africanist presence" (Morrison 1992, 5) under the surface. The fantastical nature of the underground railroad, however, reveals the Blackness it represents as equally only imagined, as a fantasy that is impossible to exist in the empirical world. The railroad's existence as a mere fantasy also declares the existence of a White superiority and a Black inferiority in the extratextual world as impossible, without denying the real consequences this racial fantasy has for African Americans in the United States. The fantastic representation of America's Black-White dichotomy discloses both racial concepts as social constructs that do not describe a natural given but stem out of a White imagination. The contradictory meanings assigned to the underground railroad add to its fantastical, absurd impression. Dischinger points out that

the divergent semantics of the underground railroad represent both enslaved Blackness and African American freedom. He interprets this contradiction as mirroring the inconsistencies in American national mythology (Dischinger 2017, 89) – another re-enactment of elements of the real by the fantasy parasite:

The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern. [...] Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden cross-ties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus (Whitehead 2016, 67).

The alternation of “dark and light colored stones” represents the underground’s promise for a life where White and Black are recognized as equal – as well as America’s promise for a life in freedom. This freedom is described as a “miraculous terminus” to highlight the impossibility of its realization in a White supremacist environment. Like America, the underground railroad with its “black mouths” is a result of Black labor; thus subjugates African Americans while promising freedom at the same time. The paradoxical portrait of the enslaving train to freedom parallels America as enslaving “land of the free” (Dischinger 2017, 89). The fantastical re-combining of elements of the real sets the readers at a critical distance towards the absurd and contradictory alien world presented in order to make them shockingly aware of the

parallel to American reality.

The railroad entails even another contradiction, representing at once safety and danger for Cora and Caesar. As enthusiastic as Cora is in passing from the underground “into the daylight” (Whitehead 2016, 93) for the first time, as frightfully is she escaping “into the darkness” (Whitehead 2016, 130) again when she realizes that the Whiteness governing the American surface demands her life. Contrary to the association of darkness with evil and danger, the underground railroad is here connected to hope, safety, and freedom. Accordingly, the light surface is associated with fear, racism, and death instead of following the popular association of lightness with innocence (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 84-85). This reverses the binary opposition between Black and White, evil and good, through the semantic connotations of the narrated spaces. However, despite the underground railroad’s transportation of hope, its darkness scares Cora and Caesar: “The darkness of the tunnel quickly turned the boxcar into a grave” (Whitehead 2016, 90). This darkness represents the Africanist presence beneath the surface of White America. As this image projected onto African Americans has been used for the legitimization of slavery and the killings of Black people, it causes Cora and Caesar to be scared when confronted with the vehicle that is digging their own grave.

Bringing together contradictory concepts in the fantastical oxymoron of the underground railroad also formally subverts those concepts. The oxymoron as “the basic trope of fantasy [...] holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing toward synthesis” (Jackson 1981, 21). Black inferiority and African American freedom are held together and portrayed as a unity that is impossible to exist in the extratextual world. The binary opposition between darkness and light, between Blackness and Whiteness, however inversed their semantic connotations, is depicted as “impossible unity” as well, as an unnatural combination that does not describe empirical reality in the United States but a fantasy present in its national mythology.

The opposed meanings of the railroad-oxymoron are completed with a contradiction stemming from its form of the fantastical. As a fantasy, it is a parasite of reality; as representative of an allegedly inferior Blackness, it simultaneously works as a host for Whiteness. This clash of opposites in one form serves fantasy’s main purpose to resist “definite meanings” (Sartre in Jackson 1981, 18) and to exert “pressure against dominant hierarchical systems” (Jackson 1981, 17) by “shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinize[ing] the category of the ‘real’” (Jackson 1981, 21). Being the central fantastical element in the novel, Whitehead’s train network exerts pressure on the American hierarchy between Whiteness and Blackness and shows us that no definite meanings can be assigned

to the people grouped under those two concepts, as Whiteness and Blackness are inherently invented – unreal, like the fantastical railroad.

The Specter of the Africanist Presence as Absurd Fantasy

Through Mabel's character, Whitehead challenges the concept of the Africanist presence by highlighting it as an absurd fantasy. Her absence from the plantation torments the racist plantation owner Randall. Functioning as a symbol for escape and achieved freedom, Mabel breaks the image of the Africanist presence as passive, inferior, and enslaved and consequently represents a threat to the White plantation owner's identity. Later, Cora's refusal to fit into the concept of the Africanist presence represents another threat to his identity and finally the reason for his death. These two characters, destroying the construct of the Africanist presence in their owner's mind, simultaneously destroy his identity, which becomes clear through his psychological and physical deterioration and final death:

Terrance Randall was dead. From all accounts, the slave master's preoccupation with Cora and her escape only deepened over time. He neglected the plantation's affairs. His day to day on the estate consisted of conducting sordid parties in the big house and putting his slaves to bleak amusements, forcing them to serve as his victims in Cora's stead. [...] Terrance died in New Orleans, in a chamber of a Creole brothel. His heart relented, weakened by months of dissipation (Whitehead 2016, 269-70).

This description reveals Randall's strategies to cope with the destroyed core of his identity. His inability to move on after Cora's escape shows how fundamental this image is in his own life. With the neglect of "the plantation's affairs," his position as slave master starts to fade, which marks the beginning of his psychological deterioration. He attempts to reaffirm the Africanist presence in his mind through the subjugation of other Black people "in Cora's stead." For example, he visits a brothel where Black women are in inferior position to him by service contract. However, Randall's attempts to reestablish the firmness of the Africanist presence, and thus his own superiority, only seem bizarre and alienating. This effect is achieved through the repetitious idiom "day to day", marking the ordinariness of the routine of the everyday, and its opposition to exceptional events like the "sordid parties" and "bleak amusements." The bizarre impression is also implied in the tension between "sordid" and "bleak" as disreputable adjectives, as well as between "parties" and "amusements" as nouns associated with joy. Furthermore, Randall's physical deterioration mirrors his psychological downfall, as the reason for his death is said to be the relenting of his heart because of "months of dissipation." The indefinite temporal indication represents the seeming endlessness of his attempts to regain his superiority in opposition to an inferior and enslaved Africanist presence, the failure of which results in his death. He not only fails to restore his White identity

but also becomes himself enslaved to his obsession to restore his self-perception as White and in control over his inferior Black property. The Africanist presence turns into the reason for his devastation, which reveals the “terrible paradox” of the White American who thinks he can “control and define Black people” but loses control over himself (Baldwin 1998, 180). This paradox is even more drastic in Mabel’s than in Cora’s case. Mabel has the power to challenge her master’s White identity, even though she did not achieve freedom but in the master’s head. He thinks she succeeded in escaping from the Randall plantation, while she actually died on her way and disappeared into the swamp. Her master’s hurt pride accelerates his own death, which discloses the Africanist presence in the White imagination as an absurd and self-destructive fantasy.

The concept of the Africanist presence is further subverted by Mabel’s portrayal as a fantastic, ghost-like character. Nobody knows whether she actually escaped to freedom; her fate is wrapped in a veil of uncertainty. Until her actual death is revealed late in the novel, she is simultaneously dead and alive, present and absent, an enslaved Africanist and a free African American presence. As a fantastic oxymoron, a spectral presence with “ghostly counterpower” (Farooq 2019, 89), she brings together those oppositional categories in an “impossible unity,” resisting such enclosed entities and thereby subverting the

White supremacist belief in an Africanist presence that is clearly distinguishable from a superior Whiteness.

However, not just the enslaved Africanist part of Mabel is questioned through this fantastic hostility to categorization. She also embodies an empowered African American presence which is undermined by her spectral status. In contrast to Cora as African American presence, Mabel is not a realistic counter-image because of one feature that distinguishes both: freedom. Although Mabel never achieves freedom, she nevertheless works as a symbol for freedom to the characters; Cora is never entirely free. The novel therefore suggests – also in the open ending – that freedom for African Americans is as much a fantasy as the existence of a naturally inferior Blackness. While promoting the possibility of African American empowerment through Cora, the novel posits freedom for African Americans as impossible – at least within a White supremacist society (Dischinger 2017, 93-94; Matín Salván 2020, 29-30).

The Possibility of African American Empowerment

Just as the fantastical underground railroad needs its real counterpart to articulate the novel's criticism of American race relations, so does the Africanist presence need a realistic counterpart to underline the novel's criticism of the portrayal of African Americans. To destroy the image of the Africanist presence

on which the identities of the White characters rely, the novel constantly opposes an empowered African American presence to it, embodied in the character of Cora. The detailed and realistic depiction of her character opposes the fantasy of the Africanist persona. In contrast to Mabel, Cora is not reduced to an absent “spectral presence” that hovers in between opposite categories; she is portrayed as a realistic, visible, human individual with her own agency.

With Cora as protagonist, the novel moves a Black character to the center in order to make her undeniably present, visible, and realistic. Through insights into her thoughts and feelings, the reader is not alienated from Cora, but is invited to identify with her, which undermines her position as a Hob woman, as an othered outcast. Cora is not depicted as fragile and passive as some of the other Hob women, but as strong and independent. Throughout the novel, the readers can follow her personal development as a dynamic character whose independence steps more and more to the foreground along her way to the North. Her development from a powerless, raped slave girl to a self-reliant woman starts with her resistance to Blake in defending her inherited piece of acre on the plantation. The resistance to her Black oppressors evolves into resistance to her White oppressors as well with her decision to escape the plantation with Caesar:

It was her grandmother talking that Sunday evening when Caesar approached Cora about the underground railroad, and she said no. Three weeks later she said yes. This time, it was her mother talking (Whitehead 2016, 8).

Cora's grandmother as personification of hopelessness and eternal enslavement is opposed to that of her mother, who represents hope and freedom transported through the parallelism in the first and last line. This contrast represents the starting point of Cora's development from passive subjugation on the plantation in order to survive up to her actively influencing her own destiny. With the decision to escape, her development is just about to start, as she is not yet depicted as an independent individual with own will, but as a patchwork of her grandmother and mother. She is not taking the decision on her own, but the influence of her mother drives her to it. With every station to the North, this continues to change. In the Carolinas, she comes to understand the hypocrisy of White society more deeply. In Indiana, she outwits the slave catcher Ridgeway in order to make her way alone to freedom. Tracing Cora's history and her personal development counters the projection of a simplistic Africanist presence onto her. The differentiated and detailed portrait of the African American protagonist is thus used strategically to reveal the illusionary character the Africanist presence.

While Cora is continually forced by White society to match the

Africanist presence, she does not internalize that image. Instead, she resists these attempts to appropriate her identity. In South Carolina, she serves as a living prop in the exhibition of slavery: “Her recent installation in the exhibition returned her to the furrows of Georgia, the dumb, open-jawed stares of the patrons stealing her back to a state of display” (Whitehead 2016, 125). As on the plantation in Georgia, Cora is exposed to the gaze of White people. While she had been living a relatively free life in South Carolina, being exposed along with objects in the limited space of the museum window reminds her of her inferiority and objectification in a White supremacist society. Although she has more freedom than on the plantation, her status as Black and powerless in a society governed by Whiteness persists. The metaphoric description of the stares “stealing her back” shows Cora’s awareness of the moral illegitimacy of Black subjugation by White people. She realizes the power that the White visitants exercise by looking at her and opposes it by returning their gazes: “One day she decided to retaliate against a red-haired White woman who scowled at the sight of Cora’s duties ‘at sea.’ [...] Cora stared into her eyes, unwavering and fierce, until the woman broke” (Whitehead 2016, 125). The fearful reaction of the White woman shows that this unexpected reversal of power relations attacks her self-perception because it questions her right to exercise power over Cora. Cora performs her psychological revenge “until the woman broke,” meaning until the gaze

destroyed the Africanist presence and thus the core of the White woman's identity. She is forced to be seen by Cora, as well as to see Cora as human being capable of agency: "It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too" (Whitehead 2016, 126). As the White woman cannot restore her superiority in this situation, she flees from it. So does Masie, the little girl of the Anderson family where Cora used to work, when she becomes submitted to Cora's gaze in the museum:

Masie's face twitched in fear. From the outside, no one could tell what passed between them, just like when she and Blake faced each other the day of the doghouse. Cora thought, I'll break you, too, Masie, and she did (Whitehead 2016, 127).

The comparison of a White child with Blake, a rapist, underlines the violence performed on Black subjects by White Americans. As the rape did, the institution of White supremacy makes Cora a victim of unjust violence, psychologically as well as physically. Masie being a representative of the White community, Cora sees herself again subjected to an oppressor and again resists. After she succeeded to "break" Masie, she realizes that she made a child victim to her power, having focused on escaping her own subjugation and her plan of breaking White supremacy. As a child, Masie is insofar innocent in that she is unconscious of her promoting the racial divide between White and Black, infiltrated

into her mind by the White supremacist environment in which she was raised. Instead of most White Americans, Cora feels ashamed by her behavior of subjugating an innocent individual, proving not only her agency but also her humanity to the reader.

The Africanist presence is again confronted in the chapter on Cora's stay in North Carolina. As Black people are banned from the state, the station agent Martin Wells needs to hide Cora in the attic. This intertextual reference to Harriet Jacobs, who also had to live in an attic, aligns the novel with slave narratives and their spirit of resistance (Dischinger 2017, 88; Li 2019, 11; Mellis 2019, 3). By being hidden, Cora is assigned her role as powerless and invisible Africanist presence. Instead of silently complying to this image, Cora educates herself and thus "turns the tomb into a womb, a source of life and learning" (Groba 2019, 265), contradicting the Africanist presence as submissive and irrational by her representation as an intelligent and inquisitive African American persona. Furthermore, the African American presence is portrayed as powerful in that Cora uses her position in the attic to observe the visitants of the park unnoticed. The knowledge she thereby gains about the White inhabitants of the town is simultaneously her power over them: "Cora did not immediately notice an important feature of the park: Everyone was white. [...] In North Carolina the negro race did not exist except at the end of ropes" (Whitehead 2016, 156). Observing the customs of everyday life

in North Carolina, she attains knowledge over the state's harsh execution of its race politics as well as over "the politics of white identity construction" (Dubek 2018, 76). This knowledge is the major tool for her to survive, as she learns to whom she has to stay invisible. Following the Foucauldian link of knowledge and power (1980, 93), Cora's lead in knowledge, compared to the White people who are unsuspecting of being observed, puts her into the powerful position of the gazer:

Looking down over the universe of the park, she saw the town drift where it wanted, washed by sunlight on a stone bench, cooled in the shadows of the hanging tree. But they were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear. Martin and Ethel were terrified of the watchful eyes behind every darkened window. The town huddled together on Friday nights in the hope their numbers warded off the things in the dark: the rising black tribe [...]. Better to hide in attics than to confront what lurked behind the faces of neighbors, friends, and family (Whitehead 2016, 179).

She observes how the White inhabitants of the town are "cooled in the shadows of the hanging tree", a metaphorical description referring to the White people's reassurance of their superiority in face of dead African Americans, their tool to confirm their power. A reversion of that power distribution is questioning their identity, thus "shackles" them to their fear of the "things in the dark: the rising black tribe." This fear makes them "prisoners," encaged in their own imagination of an Africanist presence, referring to Baldwin's "terrible paradox," as they are dispossessed

from the control over their own identity (Baldwin 1998, 180). Cora's analysis of the observed situation as no merry gathering of the townspeople but of people imprisoned by their own fear of a "Black uprising" also highlights her competence in critical reflection, adding another element to her depiction as realistic, human African American presence in opposition to the debased Africanist presence.

The White supremacist conception of the Africanist presence is again challenged through Cora's final escape from Ridgeway's "American imperative" (Whitehead 2016, 303). While descending into the last station of the underground railroad, she takes the decision to actively fight Ridgeway a last time: "Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. [...] She spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron" (Whitehead 2016, 302). Her agency in this scene becomes apparent through her appropriation of the motifs of the dance and the chains. On the Randall plantation, dancing, a central part of the slaves' cultures, was used by the White plantation owner as means of control and power. These appropriations performed in the dance scene on the Randall plantation, as well as later in the play in North Carolina, refer to the equally appropriating minstrel shows as common form of entertainment during the nineteenth century. As Phiri suggests, "minstrelsy's chaotic dramatization of 'blackness' was symbolic [...], disguised white anxiety about black subjectivity [...] [and]

functioned as both a celebration and denigration of blackness” (2011, 91-92). Counteracting Randall’s cultural appropriation and “denigration” of Blackness, Cora re-appropriates the dance again as a tool to resist the power exercised on her by White Americans. The comparison of her arms with a “chain of iron” has the same function. The chains that were keeping her enslaved are now used metaphorically by herself to resist enslavement. Furthermore, as Groba argues, the underground railroad as her vehicle to freedom becomes replaced by herself moving a handcar through the tunnel: “Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?” (Whitehead 2016, 303). The agency of the African American presence is expressed through Cora becoming her own vehicle to freedom (Groba 2019, 267-268). African American agency is thus depicted on story level as well as through the novel’s symbolism.

The destruction of the Africanist presence through the embodiment of a realistic counter-image makes the artificiality of an inferior Blackness in opposition to a superior Whiteness visible and thus raises consciousness about the imaginative character of White superiority. That the submissive Africanist persona does not exist but in the White mind is proven by the novel’s continuous affirmation of an active and powerful African American presence; a presence that persistently estranges Whiteness by showing its reliance on a socially constructed racial fantasy.

Conclusion

A theoretically situated close reading of the contemporary novel has shown that it uses historical fantasy's hybrid nature between real and imaginary to resist the clear-cut opposition between Whiteness and Blackness inherent in the discourse of American Africanism. The novel's hostility toward generic categories raises awareness about the absurdity of America's racial dichotomy between Black and White as part of an accepted regime of truth governed by a White hegemony. The Africanist presence, as well as Whiteness and Blackness as the racial concepts it relies on, are disclosed as fantasies that have the power to structure US-American reality. Unlimited in its capacity to combine elements in an "impossible unity," like in the oxymora of the railroad and the character Mabel, the fantastic can highlight this absurd condition of "real-life-fantasies" in a way that historical novels cannot. As *The Underground Railroad* shows, fantasy can deliberately switch between image and object, between the impossible and the realistic end of the paraxial area (Jackson 1981, 19): The Africanist presence as alien other is revealed as an absurd and imagined construct of a White supremacist society through the opposition to a realistic African American presence as visible, empowered, and familiar counter-image.

The novel's antastical elements release its critique from any temporality, setting its depictions into an alternate, atemporal space to point towards the persistence of the parasitical relation of Whiteness to a Black Africanist presence across time. It presents this relation as part of the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007, 6) that continues into the contemporary US-American condition and possibly as well as into the future. While the novel does not fully subscribe to the Afropessimist claim of an eternal "social death" of African Americans without hope for betterment (Wilderson 2020, 16), it still portrays African American freedom as impossible to achieve in a White supremacist context.

The way how American narratives today deal with the constructs of Blackness and Whiteness is indicative of racial imaginations in twenty-first-century American society, as "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language" (Morrison 1992, 12-13). The public praise that Whitehead's novel has received shows that the reign of a hidden White hegemony is slowly being challenged by a growing critical awareness concerning Whiteness. In this respect, the historical fantasy of *The Underground Railroad* indeed "works [...] as a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today" (Saldívar 2011, 595). Those covert social dynamics are most crucial for an

understanding of society in all its complexity and literature is one way to make the invisible visible (Roche 2004, 20).

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Endnote

I In this article, I capitalize “White(ness)” and “Black(ness)” to highlight the social constructedness of both concepts. In contrast, “black” and “white” written in lower case refer to the actual colors. Further, “US-American” is shortened into “American” for purposes of readability.