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On Slavery Tracks: Medical Racism and the Neo-Slave Novel in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Nos Trilhos da Escravidão: Racismo Médico e o Romance Neo-Escravo em The Underground Railroad: Os Caminhos para a Liberdade *de Colson Whitehead*

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ABSTRACT: Colson Whitehead has been noted for writing books that migrate from one literary genre to another exhibiting then a penchant for genre eclecticism. In light of that, I propose that his most successful novel *The Underground Railroad* should be classified as a neo-slave novel due to its autonomy in recreating antebellum slavery. Besides, in so doing, Whitehead revisits specific forgotten historical events represented by his country's long use of racist medical procedures such as progressive eugenics. These events have been largely forgotten by most Americans and, thus, by recuperating such shameful past Whitehead indicates that progressive eugenics not only reproduced the same racist ideology under slavery but the writer also suggests the possibility that similar medical practices might still be in use today albeit with different names. In pursuing this analysis, I turn to authors such as Bernard Bell (1987), Toni Morrison (1995), Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), Valerie Smith (2007) as well as interviews with Whitehead.

KEYWORDS: Neo-slave Novel; Progressivism; Eugenics; Racism; Slavery.

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RESUMO: Colson Whitehead é reconhecido por escrever livros que migram de um gênero literário para outro exibindo assim uma inclinação para um ecletismo de gênero. Em vista disso, proponho que seu romance de maior sucesso *The Underground Railroad: Os Caminhos para a Liberdade* deveria ser classificado como um novo romance de escravos devido à sua autonomia em recriar a escravidão antes da guerra civil. Ao fazer isso, Whitehead revisita específicos eventos históricos esquecidos representados pelo longo uso do país de procedimentos médicos racistas tais como a eugenia progressista. Esses eventos foram amplamente esquecidos pela maior parte dos americanos e, portanto, ao recuperar tal passado vergonhoso Whitehead indica que a eugenia progressista não somente reproduzia a mesma ideologia racista sob a escravidão, mas também o escritor sugere a possibilidade que práticas médicas similares podem ainda estar em uso hoje, porém com nomes diferentes. Ao abraçar esta análise, o artigo apoia-se em autores tais como Bernard Bell (1987), Tony Morrison (1995), Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), Valerie Smith (2007) bem como entrevistas com Whitehead.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Novo Romance de Escravos; Progressismo; Eugenia; Racismo; Escravidão.

Colson Whitehead's sixth novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) falls in line with the author's penchant to write books that migrate from one literary genre to another as if literary conventions were clothes one wears each day. The writer began his literary career with a detective story entitled *The Intuitionist* (1999) and since then has explored other genres such as fictional memoir (*Sag Harbor*, 2009), science fiction (*Zone One*, 2011) and, more recently, historical realism (*The Nickel Boys*, 2019). Whitehead acknowledged this fondness for genre eclecticism in a 2013 interview to the online literary magazine *Guernica* as he refers to genre fiction as literary drag and admits that in *Sag Harbor* he "was wearing realist drag" in the same manner that he used "detective drag" or "horror drag" (SHUKLA, 2013) in his other books. Then he explains that the reason for being so eclectic was to avoid "certain expectations of plot and a certain kind of narrative satisfaction." According to Stephanie Li (2019, p. 1), "by presenting genre as a form of drag, Whitehead affirms the performative nature of the cultural codes that instantiate literary categories" and besides "[c]ritics most often describe his books as hybrid forms" as the novels tend not to keep to one specific "drag" but, instead, swing back and forth on different genres.

Indeed, the hybrid narrative of *The Underground Railroad* has episodes of historical realism, historical fantasy, speculative realism, magical realism and even dystopian science fiction. This analysis shows however that this time Whitehead decided to wear the neo-slave narrative drag particularly due to the novel's genre hybridism and historical setting as the plot revisits antebellum slavery with substantial poetic license. The depiction of nineteenth-century South Carolina, for instance, differs significantly from history as it is portrayed as a dystopian progressive free state when in reality it was the very first Southern slave state to secede from the federal government during the civil war. In the novel the state is reimagined as a well-organized place and booming in a modern capitalist economy that conspicuously showed itself in the many stores, skyscrapers, fast elevators, machine factories and impressive hospital buildings. Moreover, its white population are quite proud to look progressive as they engage into social actions intended to provide full citizenship to fugitive slaves by offering them housing, jobs, education and free medical care.

More significantly, the recreation of South Carolina revisits forgotten historical events in American history which probably many readers are either not familiar with or would rather not remember them. These events refer to the direct allusions to the country's long history of eugenics which resulted in mandatory sterilizations of women across the country and the infamous *Syphilis Experiment* of Macon County, AL, which, in turn, fooled four hundred African-American men into believing they were receiving free medical care as doctors secretively pursued experiments with syphilis. In the novel, the newly arrived runaways in South Carolina were submitted to mandatory sterilizations for colored women and fake syphilis treatments for colored men as part of government health campaigns. These racist medical requirements were disguised as progressive actions intended to help the fugitive slaves. The sad irony here is that such alliance between eugenics and progressivism actually occurred in early twentieth-century U.S. and, besides, Whitehead adds

another level of complication to this historical recuperation by placing progressive eugenics strategically within antebellum slavery. In so doing, the novel indicates two possibilities: first, the racist ideology which sustained eugenics is analogous to the principles that sustained antebellum slavery and second, this same ideology could be masqueraded as progressive actions. I want to explore this alternate history and suggest that Whitehead's reasons for doing so are based on the writer's attempt to create a cautionary narrative on the possibilities that progressive eugenics could still be present in contemporary U.S. albeit with different names.

Thus, I will proceed in the following manner: first, I will situate the novel within the neo-slave narrative tradition by providing a brief genealogy of the genre; next, I will focus mainly on the South Carolina chapter as it alludes to the controversial association between progressivism and eugenics. Finally, I expect that this investigation will contribute not only on the interpretation of *The Underground Railroad* but also on the significance of Whitehead's cautionary neo-slave novel.

The Underground Railroad as the latest example of Neo-Slave Novel

One regular feature of neo-slave narratives is to cross genre boundaries while providing a historical revisionism on nineteenth-century slavery from a contemporary perspective. This is the case of novels such as Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* ([1976] 2013), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* ([1979] 2019) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ([1987] 2018). All of these previous books have hybrid narratives which blend realistic descriptions of slavery with idiosyncratic elements which might pertain to the realm of magical realism or fantastic fiction. Neo-slave novels first appeared in the U.S. in the sixties and seventies later attracting the attention of scholars such as Bernard W. Bell (1987) and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999), who debated over the use of the term

neoslave/neo-slave narrative to denominate what appeared to them as a new literary genre. Bell was the first scholar to study these texts and responsible for coining the term which for him would not have the hyphen. The scholar characterized neo-slave narratives as postmodern (re)readings of former slave narratives that dialogued with and against Western literary tradition as a large number of African-American writers embraced postmodernism but due to the legacy left by institutional racism, sexism, and lack of social justice, which fostered ambivalence towards their own society, "most modern and postmodern Afro-American novelists, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, [were] not inclined to neglect moral and social issues in their narratives (BELL, 1987, p. 284)."

Bell (1987, p. 282) envisioned neo-slave novels as going against the grain of the "self-sufficient world" of postmodernism because fiction could not be disassociated "from the external world" otherwise it would lack meaning or would suggest that meaning could only exist "in the indeterminacy of its language." As a consequence, African-American writers created narratives that rediscovered and reaffirmed "the power and wisdom of their own folk tradition: African-American ways of seeing, knowing and expressing reality, especially black speech, music and religion (BELL, 1987, p. 284)." In other words, African-American writers were rediscovering their "distinctive voices" despite a high level of suspicion towards such notions as true voice, essence or meaning as formulated by postmodernism. Finally, Bell affirmed that Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* ([1966] 2016) and Ernest J. Gaines's *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* ([1971] 2017) were respectively the first and second major neo-slave novels published in the U.S. His arguments are that by presenting a narrative which was "residually oral" (BELL, 1987, p. 289) and that used elements of African folklore to describe African-Americans' plight during their escape from bondage to freedom, these two books launched a new literary genre.

Rushdy published what has been so far the major work on neo-slave novels and recognized the importance of Bell's definition, from whom he borrowed the term but added a hyphen to it. Accordingly, neo-slave novels should be understood not solely within a postmodern context but also within a specific sociopolitical milieu of the sixties of which issues about race, identity, representation, and so forth, were central in the political debate of the country hence providing a venue for a revisionism on the history of slavery by African-American writers. Thus, neo-slave novelists adopted what the scholar identified as "political intertextuality" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 4), that is, an ideological text grounded in the political debate of the sixties which used the traditional format of nineteenth-century slave narratives to address contemporary issues. For Rushdy the sixties represented "the social logic" (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3) of the genre because the decade represented its birth and evolvement in the public sphere. Finally, neo-slave novels were contemporary texts "that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative (RUSHDY, 1999, p. 3)."

On the other hand, more recently, Valerie Smith has expanded the understanding on the genre by including all sorts of novels written in the present that re-asses the institution of slavery. These novels are free to "embrace a variety of styles of writing: from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire, and works that combine these diverse modes" (SMITH, 2007, p. 168) and despite their idiosyncrasies these texts provide a perspective to the memory of slavery that resonates in the politico-cultural present. Smith has also underlined the degree of autonomy that contemporary writers have to create absolutely the kind of neo-slave narrative they desire; a freedom their predecessors, mostly runaway slaves, did not have in writing the first slave narratives. Finally, contemporary novelists write from a more informed standpoint as they are:

> enriched by the study of slave narratives, the changing historiography of slavery, the complicated history of race and power relations in America and throughout the world during the twentieth century, and the rise of psychoanalysis and other theoretical frameworks. (SMITH, 2007, p. 169).

Therefore, *The Underground Railroad* represents the latest example of neo-slave novel as Whitehead revisits antebellum slavery modeling the novel on nineteenth-century slave narratives as the plot describes the journey towards freedom of its main characters but this journey is narrated through a combination of diverse literary genres evidencing a high level of autonomy by the author in approaching history and in reconstructing antebellum slavery.

Progressive Eugenics in South Carolina

The Underground Railroad begins with Cora's genealogy and in stark realism the novel depicts how her grandmother, Ajarry, had been captured in Africa and brought to U.S. soil through the cruel journey on a slave ship. After being the property of several different owners, Ajarry was finally brought to James Randall's plantation in Georgia, thus completing the notorious infamous episodes of the slave trade. There Ajarry gives birth to Mabel; the only slave who was known to have accomplished two unimaginable successes: escape the plantation and the slavecatcher, Ridgeway. Cora is Mabel's daughter and is repeatedly besieged by a young man named Caesar who gradually convinces her to escape together via the Underground Railroad. Caesar chooses Cora because he believes she could bring them good luck especially because her own mother was able to flee the plantation; although much later in the narrative it is revealed that Mabel actually died during her escape but nobody had found her body. Initially, Cora does not pay much attention to Caesar's pledges but after being raped by four other slaves, flogged by the farm foreman, forced to live in a captivity room called "Hob" and, finally, losing

her piece of land, she convinces herself that she should risk the impossible escape via the Underground Railroad to the free states.

At this point the historical realism which characterized most of this chapter is interrupted by the appearance of a literal underground train which reached the state and could remove them from bondage. As Cora wonders if "they really operate this deep in Georgia?" and "how would they alert the railroad in time?" (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 26) the novel switches genres and moves from realism to historical fantasy as the presence of the train is just one of a series of anachronisms which will appear in the narrative. The idea of running away raises another concern for Cora: Caesar had told her that the escape plan included the help of a white man, Mr. Fletcher, who would take them to the embarkation point in case they managed to cover the 48 km distance between the plantation and Mr. Fletcher's home. This concern was actually mutual as Mr. Fletcher was risking his own life in helping them and in fact, by the end of the novel, almost everyone who in some way helped Cora pays a heavy price. As Caesar warns: "[the] southern man was spat from the loins of the devil and there was no way to forecast his next evil act" and furthermore "abolitionists and sympathizers who came down to Georgia and Florida were run off, flogged and abused by mobs, tarred and feathered ...The planters did not abide contagion (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 27)." Eventually the runaway couple manages to get to Mr. Fletcher's home and there he takes them hidden in his cart to a barn that contains the railroad entrance. Cora and Caesar meet a second white man, Lumbly, who introduces himself as a station agent. Lumbly quickly opens a trapdoor and the trio descends a ladder. As they were cautiously stepping down:

> Cora appreciated the labor that had gone into its construction…Then they reached the tunnel, and appreciation became too mealy a word to contain what lay before her…The stairs led onto a small platform. The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and lightcolored stones in an alternating pattern. The sheer industry that made such a project possible. Cora and Caesar noticed the rails. Two

> steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden crossties. The steel probably ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting towards a miraculous terminus. Someone had been thoughtful enough to arrange a small bench on the platform. Cora felt dizzy and sat down. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33)

The appreciation of the magnificent industry that resulted in the underground station strikes also Caesar who asks Lumbly who created such a marvel of engineering. Lumbly replies ironically: "[w]ho builds anything in this country? (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33)." His ironic response reveals that despite the anachronism and the impossibility of the railroad, African-American labor has been the hidden driving force behind the creation of industrial advancements such as the train station. In fact, Cora and Caesar could hardly comprehend that black bodies were able to produce such a "project" with its "sheer industry". Matthew Dischinger points out that the railway is described as a kind of "national allegory" because "much like the promise of the US, it is inconceivable in its ambition, design and construction" (DISCHINGER, 2017, p. 89) and yet, the "black mouths" that opened the station on each side were, of course, constructed by black bodies.

Despite boasting with industry, the underground station has its caveats as Lumbly describes to the fugitive couple: due to its secrecy, the number of lines is reduced and stations could be dismantled without previous warnings. Because of that, Lumbly could not tell the runaways where they would be heading to or, more interestingly, what both of them could expect once leaving the train as "[e]very state is different…[e]ach one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33)." Lumbly as well as other underground agents possess an optimistic mindset towards the various possibilities of freedom which the Underground Railroad could provide. On the other hand, Whitehead purposely deconstructs this optimism as the train eventually demonstrates that no matter where the protagonists travel to, they will have to confront different forms of racism. Ultimately, the Underground Railroad itself fails to provide freedom to Cora

who remains on a journey for a better life throughout the novel. Finally, Lumbly ingeniously remarks using a sentence which could very well represent the purpose of the railway: “[i]f you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 34).”

Upon arriving in South Carolina, Cora and Caesar are introduced to the second station's agent, Sam, a 25-year-old white man. Soon Sam informs them that their original identities will be erased during their stay because they "were runaways” and thus “they need to commit the names and the stories to the memory (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 44).” Their names will now be Bessie Carpenter and Christian Markson, former slaves who had been bought by the government and were now free. Thus, the railroad has not only taken the couple out of Georgia but also out of their former identities which from now on should be a representation or, in other words, both characters will have to use drag; especially Cora who, ironically, will find employment at a museum as a living character of sanitized scenes from American history.

A peculiar difference between Georgia’s and South Carolina’s chapters is that whereas the former is depicted in stark realism the latter is portrayed in stark historical fantasy. All new arrivals go through a government program of resocialization which even includes education. The state wishes to be progressive as the new mayor tells his voters that he will continue with “the progress ticket” resembling then “his predecessor’s forward-looking initiatives (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 51).” In addition, Cora “had savored this fact in a multitude of ways over the months, but the provision for colored education was among the most nourishing” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 46) so much so that Miss Handler, Cora’s schoolteacher, warns her black students that were they instead in North Carolina, what they were doing was considered a crime and she would probably have to pay a fine whereas the students would get thirty-nine lashes; “[t]hat’s from the law. Your master would likely have a more

severe punishment (WHITHEAD, 2016, p. 46).” Thus, Sam believes earnestly that he had left the couple at a state that “has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancement than the rest of the south” and that “South Carolina is like nothing you’ve ever seen” as there “they get food, jobs, and housing. Come and go as they please, marry who they wish, raise children who will never be taken away. Good jobs, too, not slave work (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 44).” As in dystopian novels, the state looks too good to be true and there is probably danger lurking behind the supposedly progressive benefits.

One requirement for all new runaways were mandatory check-ups in the hospital in order to prevent diseases and maintain good health. Cora goes to Dr. Stevens, her second doctor, and after a long examination, she is asked if she would consider having a surgery to stop bearing children. The doctor calmly talks about birth control, its positive effects and informs Cora that:

> South Carolina was in the midst of a large public health program…to educate folks about a new surgical technique wherein the tubes inside a woman were severed to prevent the growth of a baby. The procedure was simple, permanent, and without risk. The new hospital was specially equipped, and [he] had studied under the man who pioneered the technique, which had been perfected on the colored inmates of a Boston asylum. Teaching the surgery to local doctors and offering its gift to the colored population was part of the reason he was hired. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52)

Cora replies that she is not interested in the doctor’s “gift”, however, in “his warm demeanor” the doctor adds that unfortunately “[a]s of this week, it is mandatory for some in the state. Colored women who have already birthed more than two children, in the name of population control (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52).” Cora leaves the hospital briskly and gasping. She could not fathom the pressure and directness of the questions and the doctor’s scientific and calm explanations. Moreover, there was the question of mandatory “which sounded as if the women…with different faces, had no say. Like they were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased

(WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52).” She wonders if the doctor was offering the same surgery for her employers, the Andersons, after all Mrs. Anderson “suffered black moods. Did that make her unfit? No (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 52).” In reality, Dr. Stevens was part of a government racist health program that required compulsory sterilization of African-American women as a means to secretively decrease the number of individuals of African descent.

Furthermore, through Sam, the couple is informed of another perverse plan from the government: whereas African-American women were openly forced to halt child birth, black men were fooled into believing they were receiving free medical care when instead they were guinea pigs for doctors conducting researches on the advancement of syphilis. It was called the syphilis program and details of it were given to Sam by a recent hospital hire, Dr. Bertram, who tells Sam that:

> “It’s important research,” Bertram informed him. “Discover how a disease spreads, the trajectory of infection, and we approach a cure.” […] The syphilis program was one of many studies and experiments under way at the colored wing of the hospital. Did Sam know that the Igbo tribe of the African continent is predisposed to nervous disorders? Suicide and black moods? The doctor recounted the story of forty slaves, shackled together on a ship, who jumped overboard en masse rather than live in bondage. The kind of mind that could conceive of and execute such a fantastic course! What if we performed adjustments to the niggers’ breeding patterns and removed those of melancholic tendency? Managed other attitudes, such as sexual aggression and violent natures? We could protect our women and daughters from their jungle urges, which Dr. Bertram understood to be a particular fear of southern white men. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55)

Dr. Bertram asks Sam if he had read the editorials of the newspapers over the years as they were proofs of his anxieties concerning the topic. The doctor adds that:

> America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization— first the women but both sexes in time—we could free them from bondage without fear that they’d butcher us in our sleep… Controlled sterilization, research

> into communicable diseases, the perfection of new surgical techniques on the socially unfit—was it any wonder the best medical talents in the country were flocking to South Carolina? (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55)

The most shocking revelation of these passages is not only their racist content but more significantly their specific historical allusions to twentieth-century progressive eugenics and to a real syphilis program called the *Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment of Macon County*. According to Walter Nugent (2010, p. 1), progressivism was "a many-sided reform movement that emerged in the final years of the nineteenth century, flourished from about 1900 to 1920, and faded away by the early 1920s" which attempted to resolve "problems that had festered and spread from the unregulated capitalist economy that developed after the Civil War ended in 1865" (NUGENT, 2010, p. 2) and, in this manner, "constituted one of the longest periods in American history when reform was generally welcome (NUGENT, 2010, p. 2)."

However, the appearance of progressivism coincides with the popularity of eugenics in early twentieth-century U.S. even though many Americans would hardly remember today that by 1920's and 30's there were several competitions for better babies or better families as well as books and films all of which addressing the positive features of eugenics. This popularity resulted in mandatory sterilizations supported by the Supreme Court and carried out by 29 states around the country reaching by 1931 a number of over 64,000 individuals who had to undergo this procedure. In addition, Terry Bouche explains that the basic distinction between English and American eugenicists was that whereas English scientist Francis Galton's ideas advocated for a more positive selection of human traits prearranged by "judicious marriages during several consecutive generations" (BOUCHE, 2014), American eugenicists such as Charles Davenport, who was the founding director of the *Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory* in 1904 and its *Eugenics Record Office* in 1910, focused on eliminating via sterilization undesirable traits found mostly "in poor, uneducated, and minority populations" as a means to curb their proliferation.

The movement lost its popularity in the 1940's due to its association with Nazi-Germany specially after Hitler "proudly admitted to following the laws of several American states that allowed for the prevention of reproduction of the 'unfit' (BOUCHE, 2014)."

One of the most shameful racist medical procedures in American history was carried out in Macon county, AL, where four hundred black men, who had contracted syphilis, participated unbeknownst to them on medical researches to investigate the evolvement of the disease in its various stages. These individuals were poor sharecroppers who actually believed they were getting free medical care. According to Susan Reverby (2009, p. 2) "[t]he study went on not for one year but for forty through the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, into the civil rights era as administrators, doctors, and nurses made it possible." Although there is a vast body of academic articles about the experiment, the event is hardly portrayed on the media and has been forgotten by most Americans. By bringing back these shameful episodes and placing them within a context of slavery, Whitehead shows that a long history of oppression and racism cannot be disassociated from the country's shameful compliance with eugenics. In other words, the ideological principles that justified antebellum slavery were reproduced years after with pseudo-sciences such as eugenics. More importantly, the syphilis experiment represents a blatant proof on how these racist principles are again used to justify the exploitation of the black body this time via racist medical experiments rather than racist capitalist colonial practices.

The historical twist here is the way progressive eugenics is represented in the novel as if it were a government conspiracy against the black community that could not fathom that lurking behind all the social benefits recently acquired there existed a racist plan to wipe out the births of more African-Americans. As Sam reports to Cora what Dr. Bertram had revealed to him Cora realizes that a racist plan was in place which intended to secretively eliminate the

black race; a plan which involved "not only the doctors but everyone who ministered to the colored population [...] All those white hands working in concert, committing their facts and figures down on blue paper (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55)." That is the reason why she remembers "the screaming woman" (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 50) who was taken to the dormitories and disappeared from view after screaming on the streets: "[m]y babies, they're taking away my babies! (WHITHEAD, 2016, p. 49)." She also recollects a strange encounter with Miss Lucy, a local proctor, right after meeting Dr. Stevens because the lady was too interested to know if Cora had thought about "the hospital's birth control program" and that "[p]erhaps Cora could talk to some of the other girls about it, in words they could understand (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55)." After all, Miss Lucy underscores she would be very pleased if Cora could help her on this cause and, moreover, "for people who had proven their worth", such as Cora, "all sorts of new positions" and "opportunities" are regularly "opening up in town (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55)." Caesar remembers the doctors asking him from what part of Africa his parents were because he "had the nose of a Beninese." Sam's sarcastic response sums it all: "[n]othing like flattery before they geld a fellow (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 55)."

Many scholars have discussed the degree of compliance between twentieth-century progressivism and eugenics as well as its likely reappearance in the US. According to Linda L. Mccabe and Edward R. B. Mccabe (2011, p. 193):

> The early decades of the twentieth century, during which eugenics prospered in the United States, were turbulent socially, economically and politically. One response to this turbulence was Progressivism, which utilized a scientific approach to planning and management, engaging experts and managers to address rapid change and improve efficiency, initially in the industrial sector and eventually in government. These features had strong appeal to proponents of eugenics, who argued that science could be harnessed to improve genetic outcomes, and careful management of human breeding would be more efficient for society economically.

In addition, Herbert J. Hovenkamp (2017, p. 950) affirms that the possibility that many Progressives were racists is probably true as some of them "held strongly exclusionary views about immigration and supported the sterilization of perceived mental defectives." All in all, Hovenkamp (2017, p. 950) adds that:

> Progressives themselves were highly diverse on the question of race, ranging from the explicit racism of people like John R. Commons or Edward A. Ross, to the more egalitarian views held by the mainly white founders of the NAACP in 1909, including Jane Addams, John Dewey, Oswald Garrison Villard, and also Afro-Americans W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Ida B. Wells.

One question that hovers over this particular chapter of the novel is the possibility that progressive eugenics could resurface today albeit with different names. In this regard, Garland Allen finds various similarities between the early twenty-first and early twentieth centuries and raises serious concerns on the actual presence of eugenicist mindsets in contemporary U.S. particularly as some individuals are regarded too expensive to maintain as health costs are taken into consideration:

> As health care costs skyrocket, we are coming to accept a bottom-line, cost-benefit analysis of human life. This mindset has serious implications for reproductive decisions. If a health maintenance organization (HMO) requires in utero screening, and refuses to cover the birth or care of a purportedly "defective" child, how close is this to eugenics?... If eugenics means making reproductive decisions primarily on the basis of social cost, then we are well on the road. (ALLEN, 2001, p. 61)

Thus, the dystopian representation of South Carolina not only readdresses progressive eugenics but also engages readers to ponder if such racist past could be re-enacted today as genetic arguments are used to justify cut-backs in health costs, employment, insurance or all other sorts of benefits. Moreover, one should be constantly aware that specific groups might be targeted for genetic alterations particularly minorities. In other words, racism runs deeply within eugenicist practices. Recently, accusations of forced

sterilizations in a detention center for illegal immigrants in Georgia rekindled the country’s long history of eugenics. According to Maya Finoh (2020):

> Within the context of the criminal legal system, coerced sterilization in exchange for a sentence reduction remains rampant. In November 2017, an Oklahoma woman named Summer Thyme Creel was encouraged by a judge to get herself sterilized. Summer was charged with using a counterfeit check and had the procedure at the suggestion of U.S. district judge Stephen Friot, who said he would consider it as a factor during her sentencing. Also, in 2017, a Tennessee judge attempted a coercive sterilization policy for incarcerated people that offered a 30-day sentence reduction if they got the birth control implant Nexplanon or a vasectomy. Moreover, there is substantial evidence of incarcerated people receiving illegal sterilization procedures in prison within the last two decades: a *Center for Investigative Reporting* revealed in 2013 that nearly 150 incarcerated women in California state prisons were sterilized without the required state approvals and/or consent between 2006 and 2010.

The issue of forced sterilizations in detention centers requires serious investigations. Moreover, Steven Moore (2020) highlights the level of bias on such decisions usually made by judges, that target mostly Black Americans rather than whites. Moore’s analysis reveals that “[t]hose who support such sterilizations do not necessarily see the procedures as cruel or violent; nor do they necessarily feel animus toward the group they target (MOORE, 2020).” It is this very thin line between good intentions and pure racism that *The Underground Railroad* addresses and places under public scrutiny.

Fake Historic Encounter

Part of South Carolina’s progressive agenda consists in the placement of fugitive slaves at jobs so that they could pay for their expenses such as housing, education and food. In this manner, the runaways would have the opportunity of living under the benefits of full citizenship and have a free life. Cora is still coming to grips with her new social status and managing to understand how it differs from her previous condition as slave. For example,

money is a new element in her life and "[s]he had been careful about her spending for the most part. Money was new and unpredictable and liked to go where it pleased" that is why the new dress "was a one-time affair (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 48)." She notices that one should not rely too much on scrip because "some of the girls owed months of wages and resorted to scrip for everything now (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 48)." After working as a maid for the Andersons, Cora is placed at the "Museum of Natural Wonders" due mostly to Miss Lucy who tells her she should take this new opportunity as a compliment for having adapted herself much more easily than the other girls. She is then introduced to Mr. Fields, the curator of a new exhibit called "Living History", who explains "the business of museums" to her:

> In this one, the focus was on American history—for a young nation, there was so much to educate the public about. The untamed flora and fauna of the North American continent, the minerals and other splendors of the world beneath their feet. Some people never left the counties where they were born, he said. Like a railroad, the museum permitted them to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience, from Florida to Maine to the western frontier. And to see its people. "People like you". (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 50)

As Li (2019, p. 11) observed "Mr. Field's evocation of the railroad makes it, like the museum, a tool of education" which underlines its pedagogical possibilities. In other words, to visit the museum is to be educated about North America just like to ride the underground train is to experience the diversity of the country. For Mr. Fields the museum was doing a remarkable service by allowing its visitors to see "the truth of the historic encounter" (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 53); a truth that everyone knew from books but that now was before them. The problem was that Mr. Fields's vision of history is a blatant lie as it presents an idealized version of America without the brutalities of slavery and colonization. His vision is similar to Dr. Stevens's lies which hid forced racist sterilizations for women and men.

Cora alongside two other African-American women, Isis and Betty, are the only living objects in the exhibits or in Mr. Fields' terms: they were his types.

Their job consisted in acting out brief roles in three displays: “Scenes from Darkest Africa”, “Life on the Slave Ship” and “Typical Day on the Plantation”. Cora had “numerous suspicions” and felt displaced in each room as they were inauthentic in representing the slave trade and its brutality. Answering her questions Mr. Fields replies “that while authenticity was their watchword, the dimensions of the room forced certain concessions” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p.51).” Cora asks Skipper John, a dummy, if those scenes really represented “the truth of our historic encounter” and thinks that:

> the white exhibits contained as many inaccuracies and contradictions as the other three habitats. There had been no kidnapped boys swabbing the decks and earning pats on the head from white kidnappers. The enterprising African boy whose fine leather boots she wore would have been chained belowdecks, swabbing his body in his own filth. Slave work was sometimes spinning thread, yes; most times it was not. No slave had ever keeled over dead at a spinning wheel or been butchered for a tangle. But nobody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it. Certainly not the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit at that very moment, pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting. Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 53)

Cora’s insights reveal that the problem was not solely on questions of authenticity but, most importantly, on the indisposition of the world to hear the truth, especially those “white monsters” that paid tickets to see the lie of the historic encounter. More significantly, the very idea that truth could be manipulated and ever changing, depending on the hands that control it, demonstrates a tragic resemblance to progressive eugenics as history, or the historic truth, becomes similar to the human body and thus prone to genetic alterations.

Moreover, associating all the white individuals who had helped her, Cora thinks about the Declaration of Independence and the lie it promotes because “[t]he whites came to this land for a fresh start and to escape the tyranny of their masters […] but the ideals they held up for themselves, they denied

others (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 53).” For Cora, the whites are thieves who “snatched away what belonged to other people, whether it was something you could hold in your hand, like dirt, or something you could not, like freedom (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 53).” Unfortunately, South Carolina’s progressive politics were an unstoppable racist engine that along with Dr. Stevens’s surgeries were stealing the futures of African Americans by killing their babies. As Cora concludes:

> Because that’s what you do when you take away someone’s babies—steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better. (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 53)

Thus, the promises of a new and better life under the auspices of progressive South Carolina become a nightmare from which she will have to escape again. Eventually, she manages to embark on the Underground Railroad and after stationing in three more states the novel ends with her still escaping in the railway tunnel “towards a miraculous terminus” (WHITEHEAD, 2016, p. 33) going North in another attempt to find freedom.

How Racist Can Progressive Politics Be?

By choosing to represent slavery through the neo-slave narrative genre, Whitehead creates an alternative historical account which ultimately offers a fictional panorama of the various forms in which racism could be enacted in the country ranging from the subtlest to the most graphic descriptions of violence and abuse. The latter can be seen not only in the first chapter but also on the section about North Carolina; a state that forces Cora to go into hiding at a white family’s basement from where she watches through a small window public lynching every Friday evenings. According to Whitehead, “North Carolina doesn't put up a false front of its true intent” as did South Carolina, therefore “to solve the problem of slavery they've outlawed all

black people (GILL, 2019).” My focus however was not on the many in-your-face examples of white racist brutality but on more subtle forms of racism which present themselves as progressive. In this regard, *The Underground Railroad*’s alternate history surprises readers on two levels: it makes them come to terms with a forgotten racist past as the narrative readdresses progressive eugenics at the same time that it warns them on the likely forms in which this same racist past could still be re-enacted today. This is the “kind of truth” that Whitehead’s neo-slave novel is searching for: the issue is not about what would happen if twentieth-century progressive eugenics was ever used in antebellum South Carolina but the fact that it was already used and very popular in the country. Eventually, through direct references the novel highlights the intrinsic relationship between eugenics and slavery. As a consequence, the reader is forced to come to grips with the fact that racist medical procedures were not only put in practice but also quite popular in American history years after slavery was abolished, cutting across the progressive era until the civil rights years and beyond. Ultimately, the novel does not change the facts but rearrange them creating first shock and, second, shame as the narrative resurfaces indigestible historical events that many Americans would rather not be asked to see.

Besides, although Cora believes that all white people were part of a conspiracy against the black race, the novel does not demonstrate to what extent this is true. In other words, there might be a chance that the white reformers in South Carolina did believe they were not racist but, instead, were actually dismantling racism through the creation of social policies of racial uplift. Therefore, if one assumes that Dr. Stevens, Miss Lucy and Mr. Fields did not realize they were active agents in perpetuating racism, *The Underground Railroad* then touches on a more complex problem related to the individual level of racism and the assumptions one makes for not being racist at the same time one is reproducing racist practices. In this regard, Whitehead warns us that the notion of racial progress could include more

sophisticated and subtle forms of racism that are difficult to perceive on both the collective and individual levels. More importantly, the overarching question that remains is exactly how racist can progressive policies be. As well observed by Dana Brownlee (2020):

> One of the challenges of this 2020 racial justice struggle is that racism today looks so different. The truth is that the hood wearing, n-world hurling brand of racism of decades past is no longer front and center. Instead, it's been replaced with a much more nuanced and less conscious brand of racism that is more pervasive and malignant, albeit subtle.

Although Brownlee's assertion might sound controversial in light of many episodes of police brutality against African-Americans denounced by the appearance of large protests all around the country being the *Black Lives Matter* their most successful example, her concerns rest on how racism is present within workplaces and reproduced by people that see themselves as progressive good citizens and consequently not racist or violent. Similarly, Whitehead's alternate history is aimed at those who might be surprised not only to realize that Nazi-like eugenics was highly popular in their country but also surprised to see themselves as either active or passive in the reproduction of such racist ideas. Ultimately, the novel asks us to dismantle all types of racist attitudes even if we will have to look at ourselves to come to grips with ingrained racism.

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