Rewriting the Female Self through Backstage Discourse in Contemporary Neo-slave Narrative: An Analysis of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

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Abstract

Whereas the tradition to subvert white representations of black femininity dates back to Harriet Jacob's historic narrative, black women have either been absent or mentioned *en passant* in the slave narratives written by African American male writers. In the same vein, while the contemporary African American men's neo-slave narratives portray black men as protagonists, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) accords central position to black women. This article critically analyzes Whitehead's narrative through the lens of James C. Scott's notion of Infrapolitics (2008) and bell Hooks's theorization of self-recovery (2015) to argue that black women counter white racist structures of domination and reclaim their selves through deploying oppositional discourse as strategy for resistance. This paper significantly departs from the existing scholarship on neo-slave narratives that has focused on the oppressed and subjugated position of black women under slavery and critically analyzes the oppositional and liberatory struggle of black women to attain self-recovery. The paper argues that black women use infrapolitical strategies and backstage discourse as acts of resistance to challenge their subordinated representation and find a voice to heal their oppressed selves. The protagonist's struggle in the novel to attain freedom from racist and patriarchal structures and create a space for herself defines her role as a dissenting subject.

Keywords: black female self, infrapolitics, self-recovery, neo-slave narrative, liberatory voice, Colson Whitehead

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The emergence of neo-slave narratives in the 1970s and 80s "as an important form of black-authored writing offering new perspectives on and knowledge about antebellum slavery" has received considerable critical attention (Lewis 2014, p. 447). Often invoking eighteenth-century slave narratives, these neo-slave narratives "sought to redeem African Americans of the past" and to "interrogate the terms under which one becomes recognizably human in U.S. culture" (Lewis 2014, p. 447). In this regard, the critical works on the contemporary neo-slave narratives written by African American writers "call for the rethinking and re-evaluation of slavery and its legacy" (Patton 2008, p. 878). Analyzing the works of Saidiya Hartman, Toni Morrison, and Marlon James, Markus Nehl notes that "rather than constructing their texts as narratives of reconciliation and healing, these authors focus on the enduring impact of slavery, examining the ways in which this past still haunts the present" (2016, p. 192). The neo-slave narratives of Colson Whitehead enjoy a pivotal position among the contemporary works in the genre. These narratives "pose open and multiple—rather than singular—challenges to dominant historical narratives" while simultaneously questioning "received notions of multiple periods in U. S. history" (Leise 2014, p. 289). In this regard, Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016) moves beyond slavery to debate challenges associated with freedom.

Though set in the pre-Civil War South and the Midwest, the novel sketches scenes from later periods of American history, too. The narrative traces the journey of its protagonist, Cora from the life of slavery in the South to the Upper South states via a literal underground railroad system. Cora's journey to the North reveals the terrifying truths about the fate of escaped slaves subjected to eugenicist scheme of sterilization to turn them into living displays depicting the horrors of slavery. In an effort to escape the ethnic cleansing of black population, Cora continues her journey to find

her freedom. However, every destination has its own set of horrors and predicaments to offer; thus, she can "never seem to find a home" (Tomek 2017, p. 553). Hence, engaging with James C. Scott's concept of infrapolitics and Bell Hooks's theorization of self-recovery via oppositional discourse and liberatory voice to challenge white-supremacist patriarchal hegemony, this paper argues that Cora refuses to accept the oppressed and subjugated position accorded to black women under slavery and rewrites her self through rediscovering her voice via backstage discourse.

Scholarship on *The Underground Railroad*

The Underground Railroad has received substantial attention as a work of revisionist history where Whitehead uses "speculative literary strategies in order to enact political satire of real histories" that "stretch into the present" (Dischinger 2017, p. 84). Matthew Dischinger investigates the way "the novel's speculative premise works in conjunction with satire to create a narrative space in which fantasy can work in the service of understanding, rather than obscuring, peripheralized histories" (2017, p. 83). Dischinger believes that the novel creates "a new political destiny" through its "imagined landscapes" and, in so doing, "refamiliarizes us with the histories of the present while simultaneously gesturing toward an alternative possibility" (2017, p. 96). With regard to the uniqueness of form, Stephanie Li (2019) calls the novel "a genre troublemaker" (p. 4). However, Li believes that Whitehead resolves this trouble "by offering a dangerously performative conception of history, an inexplicably moral protagonist, and a happy ending that panders to audience appetites involving tales of black suffering" (2019, p. 4). However, Li compares the novel with Toni Morrison's *Beloved* drawing on the similarity between the works which sketch truth "unencumbered by the details of actual events" (2019, p. 9). Hence, Li concludes that Whitehead combines history with imagination and

past with future resulting in a novel that "offers both an escape from misery and an escape from history" (2019, p. 20).

However, Nihad M. Farooq (2019) believes that the novel chooses "movement" as the "fundamental element for slave survival" since the fugitives move "constantly to evade capture" and "to be *free* to choose their own fates" (p. 89). In this way, the novel prioritizes "movement over stasis" and "migration over settlement" through the "scenes of pursuit, collaboration, and evasion" (Farooq 2019, p. 90). Farooq maintains that Whitehead attempts to conceive utopia through constant movement of the slave in general, and of fugitives in particular. At the same time, through movement of blacks, the novel exposes American myth of freedom: "If freedom is routed through flight, through rhizomatic relations," then "it remains, like utopia, inherently fugitive" (Farooq 2019, p. 105). Beverly C. Tomek (2017) highlights the motif of movement and mobility of black slaves in the narrative adding that while the novel's fictional railroad symbolizes "hope for freedom to the enslaved," the real railroad was associated with "repression" for "free blacks who were denied equal treatment with whites" (p. 551). Tomek maintains that "black mobility was not only curtailed in post emancipation society; it was often criminalized" (2017, p. 552). Thus, while survival of blacks depended on continuous movement, whites 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" (Tomek, 2017 p. 554).

Stacy Parker Le Melle (2016) takes this point further maintaining that Whitehead's American states are "both magical and real as he reconfigures American race history into new tableaus for his characters" (p. 937). However, the continuous journey of black characters to find their freedom proves to be a façade alone. Sooner or later, they learn that "no matter where they run, America is one big breathing funnyhouse for all Negroes" (Le Melle 2016, p. 937).

Hence, the novel depicts the tactics through which American power maintains its control over blacks, using “satire to subvert this white gaze of history” (Heneks 2020, p. 135). In this way, the novel “exposes how an underlying (white) fear of black liberty and power contributes to the violence committed against black people throughout history” (Heneks 2020, p. 135). Hence, the novel challenges established historical truths. Commenting on the technique of the novel that maintains the omnipresence of white power and control, Grace Heneks states that the novel “places skyscrapers and subways alongside antebellum slave markets and cotton gins to remark on how white supremacy exists in all times at once and is always highly ridiculous and extremely dangerous” (2020, p. 138-139). In portraying the living history museum for blacks where Cora works, the novel “uncovers the violence wrought on the history of black people in the United States, a history that is so often covered up or invalidated” (Heneks 2020, p. 140). Heneks believes that this “pessimistic but honest novel” (p. 151) is not just about the railroad; rather, it “depicts, through speculation and fantasy, the lingering systemic injustice embedded in this nation’s very founding” (2020, p. 150).

Thus, the novel demands its readers to “confront the unfinished work of emancipation and makes a compelling case for imagining other, perhaps more tangible, forms or means of recuperation and redemption” (Winters 2018, p. 343). Comparing the novel with Yaa Gyasi’s *Homegoing* (2016), Lisa Ze Winters maintains that both the novels suggest “conflicting understandings of the work of memory and the possibilities for Black agency” as well as “the centrality of sexual violence against girls and women to the histories of the slave trade, slavery, and colonialism” (2018, p. 343-344). Winters believes that the novels pay special attention to “the violence African and enslaved women suffered at the hands of men from within their communities” (2018, p. 344). Thus, the novels challenge “romanticized notions of home, family, and community as

inherently safe spaces for African diasporic subjects" (2018, p. 344). Hence, while the existing scholarship on *The Underground Railroad* has focused on its genre and technique along with its take on American history, the current research analyzes how black women in the novel challenge their subordinated representation and find a voice to heal their oppressed selves.

It is interesting to note that the contemporary neo-slave narratives, written by African American men, portray black men as protagonists and sketch black women as weak and timid. In this context, Edward P. Jones's *The Known World* (2003) is "centered on the complex character of Henry Townsend," the novel's protagonist, "who in freedom chooses to go the way of his former slave master" (Bassard 2008, p. 407). Leonard Pitts's *Freeman* (2012) depicts the struggle of its protagonist Sam Freeman and other black male characters who challenge "the stereotypical representation of black men as dangerous criminals, sexual deviants, irresponsible partners, absent fathers, and careless lovers" in order to "claim their manhood" in the aftermath of the Civil War (Siddiqa & Sohail 2023, p. 15). This central position accorded to black men in the novel is juxtaposed to the figure of Tilda, Sam's still enslaved wife, who is unmoved by the idea of freedom, and finds it hard to escape. In the same vein, Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer* (2019) "re-visits the past to lay bare the close interaction of hegemonic structures of power and black manhood in order to challenge the dominant discourses on black masculinity" through the figure of its protagonist, Hiram Walker (Sohail & Siddiqa 2023, p. 6). *The Prophets* (2021) written by Robert Jones foregrounds the lives of two black men, Isaiah and Samuel, whose love "brings peace to the hearts of the many enslaved people on the plantation" along with the maneuverings of other black male characters in the novel (Smith 2021). Hence, while the contemporary neo-slave narratives highlight the lives and struggles of black men, mentioning black women *en passant* or according secondary status to them, this paper argues that Whitehead's novel

portrays a strong black woman who rewrites her female self and finds liberation. Drawing on the theoretical ideas of James C. Scott and Bell Hooks, this paper explores how these women rewrite their female selves through backstage discourse as a strategy for resistance.

Infrapolitics, Hidden Transcripts, and Self-Recovery via Oppositional Discourse and Liberatory Voice

In his book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (1990), James C. Scott analyzes the relations of power between the powerful and the powerless. Having observed that power in these relationships "uncovers contradictions, tensions, and immanent possibilities," Scott maintains:

> Every subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a "hidden script" that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden script representing the practices and claims of their rule that cannot be openly avowed. (1990, p. xii)

Scott contends that a close analysis of these two transcripts and the way these compare with the "public transcript of power relations" offers fresh possibilities for analysis of resistance against domination (1990, p. xii). Hidden transcript thus serves as "the safe expression of aggression against a dominant figure" hence substituting direct aggression (Scott 1990, p. 184). The realization that the subordinated are unable to strike back against the dominant openly is to be challenged "whether in backstage talk, in supervised rituals of reversal, or in festivities that occasionally cool the fires of resentment" (Scott 1990, p. 186).

In this regard, Scott defines backstage discourse as "consisting of what cannot be spoken in the face of power" (1990, p. xii). This discourse works as an act of covert resistance to power. The capacity of the subordinated groups to resist power has been termed as

'Infrapolitics'. Scott designates the term to "a wide variety of low-profile forms of resistance that dare not speak in their own name" (1990, p. 19). The term refers to "political acts that are disguised or offstage" which constitute "possible dissent" (Scott 1990, p. 20). Scott believes that "virtually every instance of personal domination is intimately connected with a process of appropriation" (1990, p. 188). The domain of infrapolitics is constituted of "the disguised, low-profile, undeclared resistance" (Scott 1990, p. 198) which is "always pressing, testing, probing the boundaries of the permissible" (Scott 1990, p. 200). It is the elemental and foundational form of political resistance that is "the building block for the more elaborate institutionalized political action that could not exist without it" (Scott 1990, p. 201). Scott maintains that while the oppressor oppresses through surveillance and punishment, infrapolitical resistance works as "the counterforce of surveillance and punishment brought to bear by the authorities" (1990, p. 194). The same is linked with the need and desire of the subordinated group which may result in exploitation of any weakness in the surveillance and control system.

Scott further contends that the "veiled symbolic resistance" to various forms of domination is inseparable from "the practical struggle to thwart or mitigate exploitation" (1990, p.188). In this way, hidden transcript is not just "behind-the -scenes griping and grumbling;" rather, it is enacted through "a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation" (Scott 1990, p. 188). Taking slavery into account, Scott maintains that the slaves' stratagems included theft, feigning ignorance, damaging crops and livestock, and running away. These offstage practices have the power of sustaining resistance. This helps Scott conclude that hidden transcript is not only "*a condition of practical resistance rather than a substitute for it*" (1990, p. 191 original emphasis).

While studying historical resistance among peasants, Scott reaches the conclusion that though resistance appears in open forms of protests and revolts, but mostly resistance manifests itself "in quiet but massive patterns of evasion" (1990, p. 195). The subordinated will take "quick advantage of the opportunity" (Scott 1990, p. 195). In this way, hidden transcript continually presses against "the limit of what is permitted on stage," hence manifesting the desire of the subordinated to "give unbridled expression to the sentiments voiced in hidden transcript directly to the dominant" (Scott 1990, p. 196). The subordinated in their own specific way test the limits of authority to widen the space for resistance: "A small success is likely to encourage others to venture further, and the process can escalate rapidly" (Scott 1990, p. 196). However, Scott believes that if these offstage resistance strategies of the oppressed go unnoticed or unpunished by the powerful, these "*everyday forms of resistance give way to overt, collective defiance*" (1990, p. 197 original emphasis). In this regard, the oppressor makes an example of a dissenting individual which is intended "as a kind of preemptive strike to nip in the bud any further challenges of the existing or perhaps to take new territory" (Scott 1990, p. 197). Analyzing the power relations where permanent subordination is the target, like slavery and serfdom, Scott maintains that while the dominant group is "ceaselessly working to maintain and extend its material control and symbolic reach," the subordinated group is "correspondingly devising strategies to thwart and reverse that appropriation and to take more symbolic liberties" as well (1990, p. 197).

In addition to the concept of Infrapolitics, this research uses Bell Hooks's theorization of self-recovery via oppositional discourse and liberatory voice to challenge white-supremacist patriarchal hegemony, as given in her book *Talking Back: Talking Feminist, Talking Black* (2015). Being the first book where Hooks realizes the necessity to speak with a feminist voice, the work insists: "Finding our voice and using it, especially in acts of critical rebellion and

resistance, pushing past fear, continues to be one of the most powerful ways feminist thinking and practice changes life" (2015, p. 15). For Hooks, "coming to voice" is the "necessary aspect of feminist self-actualization" (2015, p. 15). Believing that "language is also a place of struggle," Hooks maintains that "the oppressed struggle in language to recover ourselves—to rewrite, to reconcile, to renew" (2015, p. 58). Hence, the words of the oppressed are replete with meaning and become "an action – a resistance" (Hooks 2015, p. 59). However, Hooks realizes that the oppressor's language cannot do justice to the experience of the oppressed. Hence, in order to start and carry out the process of self-recovery, the oppressed need to "make a new language," "create the oppositional discourse," and invent "the liberatory voice" (Hooks 2015, p. 59).

Hooks believes that "recovery of oneself, of one's integrity" is the form of enlightenment that is needed by the oppressed (2015, p. 60). Hooks has a strong faith in the power of self-recovery for the subordinated and the exploited. For her, self-recovery is linked:

> [w]ith the overall effort of the oppressed, the dominated, to develop awareness of those forces which exploit and oppress; wit efforts to educate for critical consciousness, to create effective and meaningful resistance, to make revolutionary transformation. (2015, pp. 60-61)

For Hooks, writing books on feminism was an "act of reclamation, enabling me to recover myself, to be whole" (2015, p. 61). Rejecting the oppressor's idea of the self "in opposition to an other that must be destroyed, annihilated," Hooks maintains that the oppressed and the dominated must believe that "the whole self existed prior to exploitation and oppression, a self that could indeed be restored, recovered," hence making the process of self-recovery inevitable (2015, p. 62). Interestingly, self-recovery is dependent on the voices "that speak in and to us from the past" and that have been "silenced, suppressed, when we are dominated," and these are the voices that

"we struggle to recover" (Hooks 2015, p. 62). For Hooks, self-recovery involves "personal transformation" of both the oppressed and the oppressor, "for the making and reconstituting of ourselves" so that radical changes may take place in "social and political reality" (2015, p. 64). Linking self-recovery with feminist movement, Hooks notes that there is a dearth of "adequate models for radical change" (2015, p. 68) provided by the writers that could add meaning to the lives and existence of women, hence leaving women with "unfulfilled longing for transformation" (2015, p. 66). Hooks rejects the idea of linking women's self-recovery with a mere "description of one's woundedness, one's victimization, or repeated discussion of the problems" (2015, p. 66). Rather, Hooks stresses that, for women, naming their pain must be linked with "strategies for resistance and transformation" so that it aids the process of self-recovery (2015, p. 66).

Hence, drawing on the concept of Infrapolitics in combination with Hooks's theorization of self-recovery via oppositional discourse and liberatory voice to challenge white-supremacist patriarchal hegemony, this research analyzes the process of rewriting of the self by African American women in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Deploying textual analysis of the narrative, the paper argues that unlike contemporary neo-slave narratives written by African American men, Whitehead's novel challenges the subordinated position accorded to black women. Hence, these women subvert the oppressive power structures and rewrite their female self through backstage discourse. While Scott's theory provides the lens to analyze the power interactions between the oppressor and the oppressed, Hooks's theorization aids in understanding the process of these women's self-recovery and reclamation of voice.

Female Self-Recovery through Backstage Discourse in *The Underground Railroad*

Set in the American South, *The Underground Railroad* traces the journey of its female protagonist, Cora, from enslavement to freedom through the underground railroad. In doing so, Cora replicates her mother, Mabel's footsteps. Though twice hunted down by Ridgway, the slave catcher, Cora finally manages to attain freedom. Divided into twelve parts that are titled after the names of people and places alternately, the narrative introduces slaves and their conditions. However, while the atrocious treatment of the slaves kindles the desire to find freedom, the spectacles of severe punishments administered to those who dare to flee the plantations dampen the spirits and desire of slaves. Whereas the female slaves are sketched as more vulnerable to violence and torture, Cora asserts her femininity through her words and actions. The opening of the novel centers on Cora as a woman who is opinionated and has the ability and courage to decide her own fate and design her own life: "The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no" (p. 3).

In order to trace the reason behind Cora's refusal to run away, the narrative shifts to the account of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry's transatlantic journey and subsequent enslavement whose "burdens were such to splinter her into a thousand pieces" (p. 4). Ajarry's thought process, her power of observation and evaluation of her surroundings, her condition, and the nature of her masters and mistresses, and the way she "made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations" demonstrate the intelligence Cora has inherited from women in her ancestry. However, beset with the struggles of atrocious slavery, Ajarry loses all hope of a free existence. While her voice resonates in Cora's heart, it discourages her to find her freedom and she refuses to join Caesar in his plan to run away. Cora remembers her grandmother's words: "Know your

value and you know your place in the order. To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence" (p. 8). Whereas, Cora's refusal to run away was a temporary influence of her grandmother's memory, she shakes that influence off and rather chooses to be impacted by the legacy of her escaped mother. As a result, "three weeks later she said yes" because "[t]his time it was her mother talking" inside her (p. 8). Thus, Cora defines her female self by choosing to associate with her free and bold ancestors as an assertion of her liberatory voice.

The bond with her female ancestors is Cora's strength and identity under slavery which establishes itself through breaking the families and severing the ties. While everyone wants to acquire the three-yard space between the cabins, Cora is highly possessive of the square patch of land owned first by her grandmother and later by her mother: "She fought for the dirt. There were the small pests, the ones too young for real work. Cora shooed off those children trampling her sprouts and yelled at them for digging up her yam slips" (p. 14). In this way, Cora's insistence to undo the damage of slavery by keeping in touch with her maternal line is an assertion of "it was her inheritance" as well as a pronouncement of her right to ownership of property (p. 42). In his regard, Cora's unmatched courage to pull down the doghouse with a hatchet that was built by Blake, their master's favorite slave, on her patch of land has been a spectacle for the rest of the slaves: "Her grandmother had warned that she would knock open the head of anyone who messed with her land" (p. 19). Later, when Blake arrives to witness the disaster and confronts Cora, she bravely faces him, hatchet in her hand, with a message being delivered through her "posture and expression" that says: "You may get better of me, but it will cost you" (p. 20). Since Cora remains undeterred in her resolve to defend her patch of land, the act serves to keep Blake and his gang away from her.

The patch of land, her only connection with her lost maternal ancestry, solaces her whenever she is hurt or feels lonely. It provides her the strength to move forward and to brave the excruciating pain of enslavement. She retreats to her plot often “to ease her restlessness” and sits on her maple to smell the air and listen to the sound of silence (p. 39). While badly hurt from the ruthless canning, the only comfort is to sneak out to her plot at night and take in the stillness of the night, at the same time envisioning the prospect of “heading north to the Free states” (p. 40). While the very thought of freedom is prohibited and is sinful for the slave, Cora’s resolve to reconnect with the spirit of her escaped mother is strengthened through her connection with the patch of land once owned and tended by her mother. It is for this reason that on her last night in the hut before running away, Cora roots out all the yams and cabbages she had grown there hence declaring her disconnect with the patch and her disowning of the soil. In a way, the act is a pronouncement of her relinquishment of her status as a slave and an assertion of right to choose freedom over slavery.

Similarly, though sent to Hob, the area specified for the ones discarded and isolated by society, labeled insane, and considered lunatic, Cora remains true to her nature. Though secluded and humiliated for having aggressively defended her right to her piece of land, Cora is proud of her decision and this idea is liberating for her just as her announcement of her birth date which is not characteristic of other slaves. She tells her fellow slave Lovey, “Told you when I was born” (p. 12). On the eve of her fellow slave, Jockey’s birthday, the festive event for the slaves, Cora demonstrates courage by trying to protect the orphan boy, Chester, whom Cora had taken care of after his parents were sold, and protected him from his master, Terrence’s cane. Cora prefers to get the beating instead as she ventures to shield the boy as “the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her” (p. 34). Though event concludes in Cora getting the severe thrashing and originating

of lifelong scars, she always realized the "urgency of that moment" and "knew why she had rushed to protect Chester" (p. 39). Hence, the act is Cora's way of denouncing and resisting the slavery's scheme of severing the ties and breaking the bonds.

Cora's dissent is closely tied to her gift of imagination, intelligence, and common sense all at once. While her physical circumstances do not allow her freedom, she has the dare to break away from her surroundings and take an imaginative flight away from her immediate surroundings, as a liberating infrapolitical strategy. During her master Terrance's visit to the plantation in order to witness the burning of a slave as punishment, Cora detaches herself from the scene and her attention floats "someplace past the burning slave and the great house and the lines that defined the Randall domain" (p. 48). The detachment saves Cora the pain of witnessing one of her acquaintances succumbing to death through roasting and later she would try to "fill in its details from the stories, sifting through the accounts of slaves who had seen it" (p. 48). Her imaginative faculty rescues her from the clutches of slavery to the "freedom's bounty" (p. 98):

> Each time she caught hold of something—buildings of polished white stone, an ocean so vast there wasn't a tree in sight, the shop of a colored blacksmith who served no master but himself—it wriggled free like a free fish and raced away. (p. 48)

In this way, her imagination not only keeps her connected with her past through the omnipresent whisper of the voices of her grandmother and mother but also serves to disconnect her with the agonizing present that surrounds her assisting her in the process of recovering her female self.

With this free will and boundless imagination, it is no wonder that "the idea of escape overwhelmed her" (p. 51). The moment she

decides to run away with Caesar, "she bristle[s] with ideas" and suggests that they must wait for the full moon (p. 50). Instead of blindly trusting Caesar's plan of running away, Cora constantly questions his scheme as well as the intentions of the Underground agent, Mr. Fletcher, thus voicing her thoughts about any possible breaches: "How we know he ain't tricking us?" (p. 53). Hence, Cora's ability to hold and voice ideas and think beyond the boundaries her circumstances allow her, become the source of strength and courage which are needed to resist the white-supremacist patriarchal hegemony.

It is her courage and an inspiration from her escaped mother that influence Cora's decision to run away. Unlike other Hob women who have never thought of escaping, "the idea of escape overwhelmed her" (p. 51). Despite being badly hurt from severe thrashing, Cora agrees to Caesar's idea and "the enormity of their plan" stirs her imagination about freedom and all the good things that might accompany it (p. 53). However, aware of her oppressed condition, Cora does not divulge her plan to any of her fellow Hob women. She instead uses backstage acts and says "goodbye without saying goodbye" (p. 54). On her last night with them, she sits longer than usual with her friends after supper and tries to "slide in gentle words" about her companions (p. 54). Similarly, saving her last meal for her friends, Cora breaks the customary silence as "it was rare for them to spend their free hours together" but Cora manages to "round them up from their preoccupations" (p. 54). Cora's decision to leave few of her belongings by her door, like her comb, her collection of blue rocks, and a square of polished silver, is symbolic of an unspoken farewell to her friends and companions at Hob. Hence, while the fear of white power and that of being caught keeps Cora from openly bidding her friends adieu, her infrapolitical tactics defy the supremacy of white influence on the lives of slaves, particularly black women, at the same time establishing the hidden strength and prowess of slaves.

Owing to her strength, unlike many run-away slaves, Cora, when caught on the night of her escape with Caesar, fights her white slave catcher valiantly. Upon being caught, the memory of her earlier thrashing by Blake's gang members, Edward and Pot rushes back and "strength poured into her limbs, she bit and slapped and bashed, fighting now as she had not been able to then" (p. 59). The fight that results in the death of her assailant is reminiscent of Frederick Douglass's fight with Covey—fueled by brutalizing memory of her inhuman beating at the plantation, Cora defines her female self through the physical act of fatally fighting a white man to find her freedom. In doing so, Cora challenges the notions of servility and subservience attached with her slave identity as well as her female self and feels proud of her dissent: "Every mile between her and the plantation was a victory" which "she would add to her collection" and the bunch of successes she was proud of (p. 63). At the same time, Cora's courage is reflected in her desire to evaluate her circumstances, her ability to gauge the consequences of her actions, and to rethink her plans.

Cora's faculties are at her best during her journey through the underground railroad. While fear of being caught and branded as a murderer of the slave catcher, who succumbs to the injuries she has inflicted upon him, haunt her, she is undeterred in her resolve to find her freedom. Upon being told by Lumbly, the underground railroad agent, to look outside the train window to witness "the true face of America", Cora's inquisitive eye meets "only darkness, mile after mile" (p. 70). Similarly, upon reaching South Carolina, where she helps the Anderson household and stays at a dormitory alongside other escaped slaves, Cora is alive to all the details of the surrounding city. Witnessing machines around her, Cora, now named Bessie Carpenter for paperwork, is "both delighted and frightened by [their] magic" (p. 86). Her newfound status "as a free woman" thrills her as "no one chased her or abused her' there (p.

87). However, her freedom and the respectability it brings alongside, do not distract her from refining the woman inside her:

> Cora mastered posture. Her letters and speech required attention. After her talk with Miss Lucy, she removed her primer from her trunk. While the other girls gossiped and said goodbye one by one, Cora practiced her letters. The next time she signed for Anderson's groceries, she would write Bessie in careful print. (p. 94)

Hence, every task she takes up is focused on rewriting her self in contradiction to the subordinated and ignoble slave self that is accorded to her by white supremacist hegemonic society.

Cora's ability to challenge white hegemony is nowhere more apparent than during her work at the Museum of Natural Wonders in South Carolina. While performing for African living exhibits, Cora notices that the white exhibits contain "as many inaccuracies and contradictions as Cora's three habitats" (p. 116). Cora strongly disapproves of the way "white monsters" fiddle with truth about American history to justify their plunder of black identity and heritage. Her analysis of the way the museum depicts history frames her realization that "Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach" (p. 116). Unlike her fellow slaves, Cora's is able to criticize the very phrasing of the declaration of Independence, whenever it is recited in front of her. Despite the fact that the document does not make much sense to her, "*created equal* was not lost on her" (p. 117). Cora wonders:

> The white men who wrote it didn't understand it either, if *all men* didn't truly mean all men. Not if they 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. (p. 117)

Hence, Cora's intelligence surpasses those of other black women around her in challenging the American ideals of ownership, belonging, and possession.

Similarly, upon being told to visit the doctor and get physically examined during her stay at South Carolina, Cora realizes that the doctors have been assigned the task to sterilize the escaped slaves so that black population can be kept under check. Cora recognizes the similarity of pattern between the large-scale massacre of Indians at the time of America's establishment and the sterilization of freed black population. Cora concludes that in both the cases, white men "killed women and babies and strangled their futures in the crib" (p. 117). Through her refusal to opt for the surgeries hospital for blacks has been offering, Cora subverts the hegemonic white design of "stealing futures in earnest" while arguing against the practice in her mind as backstage discourse involving resistance (p. 117). She scrutinizes the medical practice for what it is:

> Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. 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. (p. 117)

In this way, through her courage to challenge established norms and practices, Cora stands apart from the rest of other black women and men who succumb to the hegemonic grip of white power.

Cora's infrapolitical acts are in fact her way of asserting herself. Upon receiving the news of Randall's hounds looking for her and Sam in South Carolina, she immediately decides to leave the place by underground railroad. Having encountered a mishap in North Carolina, Martin, the former station operator, rescues her, taking her to his home. Living under the threat of being caught and killed in the case of a raid, Cora is made to stay in the attic of Martin's house.

Facing the oppressive conditions in the suffocating attic, Cora realizes "whether in the fields or underground or in an attic room, America remained her warden" (p. 172). Cora's unique ability to recognize and judge her situation, reject the hegemony of white supremacy, and imagine improvement in her existing predicament are infrapolitical acts of resistance. While staying in the attic, Cora thinks:

> What a world it is . . . that makes a living prison into your only haven. Was she out of bondage or in its web: how to describe the status of a runaway? Freedom was a thing that shifted as you looked at it, . . . Being free had nothing to do with the chains or how much space you had. On the plantation, she was not free, but she moved unrestricted on its acres, tasting air and tracing the summer stars. . . Here, she was free of her master but slunk around a warren so tiny she couldn't stand. (p. 179)

Interestingly, whenever Ethel, Martin's wife, attempts to read Bible to Cora, "the contradictions vexed her" (p. 182). While Ethel is upset with the way Cora questions Biblical statements, the latter is busy wondering that "a slaver must have snuck into the printing press" and put the sentences about a slave's submission to his master into the Bible (p. 182). Hence, analyzing the way white power works, Cora produces oppositional discourse as a way to her self-recovery.

Cora's discernment in evaluating her circumstances and surroundings throws the white idea of slaves' idiocy into sharp relief. While traveling west with Ridgeway and his party, Cora attributes the devastated state of Tennessee to nature's justice: "The whites got what they deserved. For enslaving her people, for massacring another race, for stealing the very land itself" (p. 215). However, her own unfortunate situation makes her question: "[W]hat had she done to bring her troubles on herself?" (p. 215). Working towards resolving the conflict, she concludes that "[H]er

skin was black and this was how the world treated black people. No more, no less" (p. 216). After having been rescued by Royal, a free black man, who takes her to a farm in Indiana, owned by a free black man, Cora is astonished to witness the spectacle of black freedom: "Freedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare" (p. 272). At the farm, sense of her own liberation combined with free-spirited souls around her makes her reimagine her past as an attempt at self-recovery. At such a farm, "A bright child like Chester might thrive and prosper" and a boy like Caesar could "own a spread, be a schoolteacher, fight for colored rights" or "even be a poet" (p. 272). The idea of black freedom along with Cora's liberty to read and explore "oversized volumes" that contain "maps of lands Cora had never heard of" and "the outlines of the unconquered world" reshape her female identity (p. 273).

However, at the end, once again caught by Ridgeway, after the farm is burnt down and Royal is killed by a white gang, Cora's female identity is asserted through re-establishing her connection with her escaped mother, Mabel whose escape has been responsible for Ridgeway's "mania over their family" (p. 301). Cora chooses to stop listening to Ridgeway who declares: "You're your mother's daughter through and through" (p. 301). While Ridgeway insists that Cora lead her to the underground railroad, "the secret beneath us, the entire time" (p. 301), Cora is burnt by the "shame of betraying those who made possible her escape" (p. 302). Interestingly, the novel ends with Cora's arms wrapped around Ridgeway's neck "like a chain of iron" in a successful attempt to push him down a flight of stairs (p. 302). The move is followed by her pushing the lever of the locomotive engine in the darkness of the tunnel wondering how miraculous underground railroad has been with its tremendous capacity to reconstruct one's identity: "On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light" (p. 304). Hence, apart from her backstage discourse and infrapolitical performances, Cora is seen to

rewrite her 'self' through the use of physical strength, extraordinary courage, and power of analytical reasoning. Outside the tunnel, joined with a caravan traveling to the west, Cora, unafraid of revealing her identity, informs the group that "her name was Cora" (p. 306). Her refusal to hide her individuality or take on a fabricated identity is not only an act of resistance but also an assertion of her 'self' as an African American woman.

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