

These Abject Creatures: Motherhood and Utopian Desires in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

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Abstract

Neo-slave narratives depict realities that generally resist the idea of entertaining utopia. As Zamalin puts it, “black American life has been nothing short of dystopian” (6). Lack of rights and even the ability to have one’s family protected feed into this “dystopian” sense of existence in the Antebellum South. However, newer scholarship on Black literature and utopia asserts that utopian desires are actually strongly embedded in black history, as evidenced by abolitionism, and the Civil Rights Movement. As Mark Tabone argues, “Utopia is indeed everywhere in black literature, which teems with writing that ‘resolutely refuses to accept the world that we have and cries out for a better one.’” (12)

This paper investigates utopian desires in *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead, exploring how searching for mothers catalyzes utopian dreaming.

Motherhood is not just an act or a state, but a site of hope: characters anchor their sense of a better future and become capable of dreaming. The capacity to dream of a utopian state becomes the strongest point of resistance for these texts: characters refuse to give in to the “dystopian” state of slavery, fight forgetting and fear, and ultimately validate the hope coming from what Lyman Tower Sargent calls the “few who hope for more” (63) that burgeons from these texts.

Keywords

Black literary utopia, neo-slave narratives, motherhood

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These Abject Creatures: Motherhood and Utopian Desires in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

In this essay, I analyze *The Underground Railroad* as a novel that depicts utopian desires, particularly in the aspects of motherhood, mothering, and maternal connections. I draw from Mark Tabone's study of Black literary utopia, with utopia as generally defined as being the desire for a better life and better conditions compared to what is currently being experienced. In particular, I read *The Underground Railroad* as what Tabone calls a utopian healing narrative, in which the wounded storyteller – in this case, its main character, a 15-year-old girl named Cora – seeks to address ills caused both by her environment and by the absence of her mother Mabel, to spur a forward movement to the future.

Cora's journey starts at the Randall plantation, where she is a slave and where Mabel left her behind. From there, she envisions a better life by escaping the plantation through the Underground Railroad, which, in the text, is an actual subterranean railroad that ferries slaves from one state to the next, until it reaches the American North. Each state has a specific way of treating colored folk, with some states, such as South Carolina, being significantly better than others in terms of reinforcing a form of equality between colored folk and white people. Nevertheless, Cora moves forward and through the states – the “good” ones and the “bad” – in pursuit of a place where she can finally be at peace and achieve freedom. Part of what holds her back, however, is Mabel's absence. Cora wrestles with anger against her mother and with fragmented memories of her. These prevent her from fully being at peace with where she is and affect what aspect of a better life she achieves.

The novel shows how a maternal connection becomes the lynchpin of the fulfillment of utopian desires, and how Cora must resolve problems surrounding it in order to achieve freedom in the course of the narrative. As a prime example of a neo-slave narrative – novels that follow the trajectory and form of the slave narrative – Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, charts the fulfillment of the desire to be free from plantations, from enslavement, and from institutionalized racism. Beyond that, however, the novel prominently centers motherhood as something that is critical to the resolution of

Cora's personal arc. Resolving the questions Cora has surrounding motherhood speaks to its importance in her picture of a better life and better conditions for the enslaved.

Crying out for a better world: conceptualizing utopia in Black literature

To understand how utopian desires can be mapped in *The Underground Railroad*, it is important to explain the development of the concept of utopia, often understood as a perfect or ideal place. A general understanding of what utopia is that it is a perfect or ideal place. Darko Suvin argues that utopia has an "impossibly ideal scheme" (20) and that it is removed from the "author's and reader's immediate 'empirical environment'" (21). Inasmuch as it is a place, it is also largely imagined and thus not real, in part because of the notion of perfection that informs it, and in part because it does not necessarily belong in the writer's or reader's surroundings. Suvin also cites Hertzner's definition: the utopia is unrealizable, does not have a specific location, and is in all ways tuned towards the happiness of its inhabitants (21). Suvin further points out that definitions of utopia are vague, and that this vagueness highlights the "uselessness to our endeavors of most surveys of 'Utopian Thought' as being idealistic and ideological" (22).

Beyond the understanding of utopia as a space, scholarship on utopia looks at it as a fictional state where philosophical or theoretical ideas on social structures have been implemented in a speculative environment (27). Vieira notes that writers of utopia present "plausible alternatives, basing them on meticulous analysis and evaluation of different cultures" (8). Vieira's dissection of utopia is particularly important: she focuses on how the core of utopia is the "desire for a better life" (6). She acknowledges that utopia is founded on a "paradox that does not really require to be solved," informed as it is by the "tension between the affirmation of a possibility and the negation of its fulfillment" (6). Vieira outlines the general characteristics that make up a utopia:

Historically, the concept of utopia has been defined with regard to one of four characteristics: (1) the content of the imagined society (i.e., the identification of that society with the idea of 'good place')...; (2) the literary form into which the utopian imagination has been crystallized...; (3) the function of utopia (i.e., the impact that it causes on its reader, urging him to take action)...; (4) the desire for a

better life, caused by a feeling of discontentment towards the society one lives in (utopia is then seen as a matter of attitude) (6).

Each of these characteristics have their merits and their demerits, and emphasize the tension that Vieira outlines between the fulfillment and negation of utopia. Regardless, what is consistent in utopian imaginings is its connection with reality:

Utopists depart from the observation of the society they live in, note down the aspects that need to be changed and imagine a place where those problems have been solved. Quite often, the imagined society is the opposite of the real one... It should not be taken, though, as a feeble echo of the real world; utopias are by essence dynamic... their scope of action is not limited to a criticism of the present;... utopias put forward projective ideas that are to be adopted by future audiences, which may cause real changes. (8)

Vieira's emphasis on utopia's *dynamism* opens pathways to think of utopia not as a completely perfect place that is impossible to achieve, but as a better place that could be realized. In the twenty-first century, this means utopia can be "reshaped" to "emphasize its pragmatic features," to highlight its "focus on a slower but effective change of the present," and to reinforce the "idea of social betterment" (22). Corollary to the idea of utopia is the notion of utopian *desire*, which is the capacity to want for a better environment, to achieve social betterment, and to eventually be able to bring this to fruition. The working definition of utopia for the purposes of this essay, then, is simple but powerful, and is informed by Vieira's arguments: that utopia is a state of social betterment, and that it is realizable at some point in the future.

The concept of utopia as a state of social betterment is instrumental to charting it in neo-slave narratives like *The Underground Railroad*. As the novel covers a time period that exemplifies how "[B]lack American life has been nothing short of dystopian" (Zamalin 6), it may first appear unsuitable to map utopian spaces and specifically utopian desires in the text. The discordance between utopia and slavery is evident: extensive documentation on enslavement shows its brutality, with slave narratives showing slavery as "a condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotion, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth" (Andrews). Accounts from slave narrative writers like Harriet Jacobs bring details to the

fore. As Jacobs herself writes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861):

Pity me, and pardon me, O virtuous reader! You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce to you the condition of a chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant; you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice.

Though the slave narratives from which neo-slave texts draw inspiration also chart the eventual successful escapes of slaves and their involvement with the abolitionist movement, the accounts themselves highlight sordid and difficult realities. This could signal a turn away from utopian thinking. Despite that, there have been in-depth studies on Black literature and utopia. Mark Tabone's dissertation, "The Politics of Utopia and Dystopia in Late Twentieth-Century Black Literature," traces utopian desires in Black American novels from the 1960s to the 1990s. Tabone argues that utopian desires could be traced in movements that call for the empowerment and freedom of Black individuals. He writes: "[u]topia is indeed everywhere in black literature, which teems with writing that 'resolutely refuses to accept the world that we have and cries out for a better one'" (12). To Tabone, Black utopian literature is charged with the capacity to change how society thinks and treats race, and this change should ultimately be for the better. Tabone's own work looks toward utopian studies because this approach "promises to be especially valuable for reading politically charged texts in the black literary tradition because it provides a means *to read past the negative moment of critique* in order to discern the positive, utopian figurations that take shape on their textual horizons" (27). Tabone develops a *theory* of Black utopian literature to fill a perceived gap in literature: "there exists no comprehensive theoretical framework for conceptualizing the politics and aesthetics of the black literary utopia" (24). While Tabone does not give a concrete, fully formed definition of Black Utopian Literature, he discusses how Black texts "utilize, appropriate, manipulate, combine, or subvert generic conventions they have every reason to assume are familiar" (36). The concept of utopia in Black literature, in particular, is something he calls a "thorny issue," citing Ahmad who argued that utopias have traditionally and classically been associated with imperialism" (36). Yet Tabone's project of tracing utopian forms and sub-forms in African American texts is crucial in both reshaping the notion of utopia and, more importantly, in underscoring the presence of hope in the texts themselves.

One particularly compelling aspect of Tabone's dissertation is the discussion of the healing narrative in Black American texts as examples of utopian texts. Healing narratives, like Morrison's *Paradise* and Walker's *Meridian*, tell narratives of "dis-ease, recovery, transformation, and renewed commitment to a better future" (299). Tabone writes:

The novels discussed here couple the healing of their respective protagonists with an impetus to heal sociopolitical maladies, and to instill a desire for such ameliorative change... what distinguishes these texts from mere representations of convalescence is that they do not simply 'restore' intact their subjects or the political of spirit of the 1960s these subjects often allegorize; rather, these novels reconfigure the past to open toward a fundamentally transformed, 'healthy' future world. (299)

Tabone's arguments on Black American healing narratives are founded on Arthur Frank's conceptualization of the task of "illness narratives," in which the individual who undergoes healing finds "new futures, new identities, new worldviews... new 'worlds'" through the "narrative wreckage" of "prior life-histories" (300). These "wreckages" involve fragmentations of memories of the past, lingering in and "haunting" the present, and through healing, these fragments become a "healed" memory structure (300). Here, Tabone highlights Frank's argument that, in the process of healing the fragmentation of the past, a future is also being formed (300). In narratives like this, the "wounded storyteller" is central. According to Tabone, Frank's work on utopian healing narratives frames the sick as "wounded storytellers":

I hope to shift the dominant cultural conception of illness away from passivity – the ill person as 'victim of' disease and then recipient of care – toward activity. The ill person who turns illness into story transforms fate into experience; the disease that sets the body apart from others becomes, in the story, the common bond of suffering that joins bodies in their shared vulnerability. (xi)

Frank notes that the "ill body" is a site of story, but it is "inarticulate" and that efforts to speak for it are "quickly frustrated" as, in speaking about the body, it is "often alienated"

(2). The alternative, Frank writes, is “to reduce the body to being the mere topic of the story and thus to deny the story’s primary condition: the teller has or has had a disease” (2). Such stories end up focusing only on the body, but Frank’s project is to focus on the ill body as a site of the evidence of social ills as well. Recognizing the “ill body” not just as a body but a storyteller – the *wounded* storyteller – enables the opening of conversation to what wounds society inflicts. As Tabone puts it, the wounded storyteller transforms “from a passive, medicalized, isolated, ‘sick’ individual to an integral, active – even activist – member of a community,” and that this healed narrative trajectory is “a utopian one” (302). The wounded storyteller, having experienced the wounds society inflicted on them, gains insight on what ills plague society itself, and then in healing and being enabled, they themselves become, or are hinted to become, instrumental in the process of helping heal the same wounds in others.

Viewed as utopian narratives, then, healing narratives “create new ‘remade’ futures as they use the illnesses of the present to work through the narrative wreckage of the past” (308). Tabone cites Tom Moylan’s assertion that utopia focuses on “emancipating possibilities of the dream” (308). With renewal, healing, and dreaming – and with narratives that themselves “renew [the concept of] utopia” – one can thus find a sense of hope.

Tabone’s dissertation covers a variety of 20th and even 21st century Black American texts, but does not focus much on the neo-slave narrative. Nevertheless, texts like *The Underground Railroad* can be rich sites of tracing sites of hope and utopia. Neo-slave narratives follow the social logic of the slave narrative, which came from stories of slaves who had escaped from their plantations during the Antebellum South. Ashraf Rushdy writes that the “form evolved from a change in social and cultural conditions in the late sixties,” and that it “engaged in dialogue with the social issues of its moment of origin,” creating a link between the circumstances of their forebears and the writers’ current time (5). In other words, Black authors adopted the slave narrative as a form because it calls back to Black ancestry and history, giving birth to the *neo-slave* narrative. Rushdy calls this adoption of the form an “act of recuperation” for the neo-slave narratives’ authors themselves, as they were “replicating the acts of the fugitive slaves who had originally written slave narratives in order to assert the authority of their experience” (6). In this form, authors of neo-slave narratives could call back to their forebears, and acknowledge the power of writing as a form of Black resistance.

With the aspect of the authoritative voice, as well, writers of neo-slave narratives could think about their contemporary circumstances and how these could call back to, relate to, or even echo what their ancestors would have experienced, linking thoughts of race between the current time and the past. Kennon points out that neo-slave narratives are “marked by a fully developed black subjectivity that complicates, or directly calls into question, traditional historiography of ‘master’ narratives.”

This challenging of traditional historiography is a core feature of neo-slave narratives, emphasized in part by many neo-slave writers’ use of speculative elements in their novels. Whitehead’s novel, *The Underground Railroad*, which won which won the Arthur C. Clarke Award for best novel despite not having been published under what were considered traditional science fiction and fantasy presses, makes generous use of the speculative, as Whitehead envisions an alternate history version of the Antebellum South. He reimagines the historical Underground Railroad not as an abolitionist network that had members who helped smuggle slaves out of plantations and into the North, but as an actual network of railways running underground. To Whitehead, imagining the Railroad as a real place was necessary for the writing of his novel. He explains, in an interview with *The Fader*, the he “didn’t see any particular value in doing a straight historical novel”:

The use of certain fantastical elements was just a different way to tell a story. If I stuck to the facts then I couldn’t bring in the Holocaust, and the KKK, and the eugenic experiments. I was able to achieve a different effect by altering history. Instead of sticking to what happened, it was being more concerned with what might have happened. (Parham).

Matthew Dischinger agrees that the use of speculative elements better serve Whitehead’s novel, in which the fantastic “clarifies, rather than obscures, the ways in which violent colonial histories are overlooked” (82). To Dischinger, Whitehead’s narrative method is “speculative satire,” which uses “speculative premises” in satire to mine the understanding of history, both national and regional. In this way, the novel shows the reader “how the poetics of fantasy point toward the possibility of justice without knowing whether justice is possible” (84). It is through this method of speculation, Dischinger argues, that *The Underground Railroad* achieves its goal of looking for a “symbolic” form of justice while examining history. As Dischinger puts it:

“Whitehead’s novel levies a critique against not just the past but a present in which police brutality and anti-black violence are seen as immutable parts of the capitalist system. In this way, the novel is particularly suspicious of a philosophy of ‘foundational idealism’ that ‘[does] not enjoin action in the world against such structures of oppression.’” (87)

Dischinger’s analysis connects the narrative past of Whitehead’s novel to the reader’s present, looking at it as a way of responding to and critiquing the persistence of racism. This places Whitehead’s novel in consonance with the general goals of the neo-slave novel, to connect the reader’s present day to the historical past in which the novels are set. Dischinger’s enumeration of anachronistic and historical elements in *The Underground Railroad* serve as a critique against ways in which the question of race has been dealt with. The novel juxtaposes historical enslavement in the United States with anachronistic and spectacular elements, including eugenics, KKK-style white supremacy, and presenting Blackness as part of museum exhibits. Dischinger, however, argues that the use of the speculative, while working in the novel’s favor, can also be seen as a double-edged sword. In showing “contemporary acts of violence” through “the legacies it remixes,” *The Underground Railroad* can be seen as a “literary achievement,” a showcase of its form rather than its message (93). Instead of reading it as a “polemic tale that positions slavery as a symptom, rather than a cause, of a racism that is foundational to the nation’s ongoing colonial economy” (93), there is a danger of having it simply be confined to best-of lists and nothing more, reducing the potency of a novel like it to effect or inspire particular social changes.

Nevertheless, *The Underground Railroad* serves as an excellent example of a neo-slave narrative that makes full use of its speculative capabilities. It is also, of course, not the only text to follow that tradition. Madhu Dubey points out that speculative elements open up “a unique set of imaginative possibilities for a literary tradition that has long been burdened by the demands of realist social protest” (779). Of speculative fiction in neo-slave narratives, Dubey points to a contrast from the “[d]ocumentary realism” that was an “essential component of antebellum fugitive slave narratives”:

... relaying the unvarnished truth about slavery was crucial to the political goal of pressing the case for abolition. As Mosley suggests,

this realist imperative continued to constrain African American writers through much of the twentieth century, as literature remained a vehicle of social protest. Notwithstanding certain errant flashes of fantasy and fabulism, the burden of realist representation began to ease off only by the 1970s, or the beginning of what is commonly termed the post-Civil Rights period, which, as Mosley observes, witnessed an outpouring of fiction that flouts the dictates of realism.” (780)

As a way of differentiating itself from slave narratives, neo-slave writing welcomed elements of speculative fiction. Dubey cites Morrison’s *Beloved* as an example, as well as Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1976) and *Parable of the Sower* (1992). Dubey cites Morrison’s argument that “contemporary writers revisiting slavery are engaged in a ‘very different’ enterprise than were the authors of antebellum slave narratives, and their turn to speculative fiction conspicuously marks this difference” (780). Slave narratives generally told of individuals’ escapes and triumphs, and of finding freedom by going to the Northern states and “renaming oneself and dedicating one’s future to antislavery activism” (Andrews), but their realist scope still introduced certain limitations. Sherley Anne Williams, the author of *Dessa Rose*, for instance, felt “alienation from official traditions of U.S. history” through slave narratives, that “there was no place in the American past [she] could go and be free” (782). In writing *Dessa Rose*, Williams was able to introduce an alternative historical narrative to the life of the woman on whom the titular Dessa Rose was based. In presenting alternatives or “revised histories, Dubey argues that neo-slave narratives can give a “more accurate representation” of the picture of slavery (782). The speculative elements found in later neo-slave texts like Butler’s novels further those aims. Dubey argues:

... speculative fictions overtly situate themselves against history, suggesting that we can best comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing. This aversion is not only directly related to the choice of antirealist genres as the best modes of access to the past, but it is also symptomatic of a wider assault on history that began to gain momentum in the 1970s. (784)

The use of speculative elements in neo-slave narratives supplement, and at times even override “objective” truth found in factual slave materials, to show that there are aspects

to the lives of slaves that go beyond historical veracity. Neo-slave narratives, then, respect, acknowledge, and explore the appeal of the form, but speculative elements introduce a new and different dimension of the “authoritative” voice that slave narratives have.

“Your mother’s daughter”: Motherhood and utopian healing in *The Underground Railroad*

Of particular interest is how early examples of neo-slave novels highlight the struggle that women, particularly mothers, face as slaves. Anne E. Goldman writes of *Beloved* and *Dessa Rose*:

very act of reproductive labor... dramatizes the tenuousness of both mothers’ self-possession. Occurring in flight, midway between the South and the North, such maternal work is performed in a kind of geographical and metaphysical borderland, an undefined space that makes the defining of one’s self in relation to one’s child almost an impossibility. (315)

Goldman’s statement highlights the fact that slave mothers had an impossible time maintaining their motherhood. Their children could be taken away or sold elsewhere. There is also the reality that slaves would be functionally treated as livestock. Goldman cites Barbara Christian, who notes that female slaves were considered valuable because they could breed and raise more workers (315). Because of this specifically female experience, slave women experienced “doubled oppression” (315) – in one part because of their race, and in another part because of their being women. Goldman also explains that the slave mother’s “moral capacity” to raise children is “more likely disabling than enabling,” as her own children are understood to be commodities (316). The slave mother has to suffer through psychological trauma knowing that she will likely lose her children.

Underscoring the difficulties of the slave woman, particularly the slave mother, reinforces Alex Zamalin’s sentiment that there is much that could be considered dystopian in Black American life. In his own book, *Black Utopia: The History of An Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism*, Zamalin argues that the “dystopian” aspect of Black life was more prominent in the imagination during the time, simply because slaves were not given rights, and their bodies were treated as commodities (6). In this system that “doubly oppresses” the enslaved Black woman, whose rights as a mother, especially by virtue of race, are non-

existent, the question of where and how one locates utopian desires comes up.

The convergence between speculative fiction, utopian desires, and the examination of motherhood can be charted in *The Underground Railroad*. The novel's 15-year-old protagonist, a young girl named Cora, is spurred by two opposing forces in her life as she decides whether or not to escape the Randall plantation in which she is a slave. The first is her grandmother, Ajarry, who made the most of her stay in the plantation and cultivated a respectable reputation among her fellow slaves. The second is her mother, Mabel, who kept to herself, was the only successful slave to run away from Randall. Cora, who is stuck between her grandmother's sterling reputation and her mother's less respected one, has to deal with the aftermath of her mother's escape. Others expect Cora to escape as well. She feels pain, fury, and resentment towards Mabel while also trying to understand why her mother did not bring her along. All of these hound Cora as she manages to successfully escape and travel across the Antebellum South, trying to find a place for herself and find out her mother's ultimate fate. This desire fuels Cora to the end, where she manages to find her way to the North – to relative safety and freedom.

The Underground Railroad centers Cora's struggles with her mother. Throughout the novel, Cora seeks to find answers to her questions, face her resentment and anger towards Mabel, and repair her notion of what mothering is, as she finds other examples of nurturing in different communities. Alongside this, Cora tends to her own ills – primarily emotional and mental, but also physical.

The Underground Railroad does not shy away from showing the complexity of this act of restoration. The novel is clear in its statement: slave motherhood can be traumatic both on the body and on the mind, and not just on the mother, but on the child as well. Motherhood can inflict deep wounds or illnesses, which reinforces Goldman's argument that motherhood is disabling rather than enabling.

The Underground Railroad clearly establishes that many of the ills and traumas that characters experience are inflicted by social institutions. This is not a novel claim, but Whitehead's use of the speculative effectively highlights the extreme control that is inflicted on Black individuals. In the text, for instance, Cora finds herself living in South Carolina after her initial escape from the Randall plantation. With her friend Caesar, she finds gainful employment, first as house help, then as a museum hand. She finds South Carolina

a significantly better place than the Randall plantation, in large part because she is treated as an individual with her own capabilities, her own earnings, and her own choices to be made, living for all intents and purposes as a free person. Compared to Randall, it is a “utopian” space, in that it fulfills the minimum requirement of giving a state of betterment to Black individuals. As the South Carolina Underground Railroad stationmaster Sam puts it, the state “has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancement than the rest of the south” (Whitehead 91), and that “[colored folk] 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” (93). Cora sees this for herself, as she is treated well by her employers, has free time to mingle with Caesar and other colored folk, and is even given the opportunity to study – the “most nourishing” of all the good things afforded to her and a crime in other states (96). Cora becomes enamored with South Carolina, so much so that when opportunities to leave it come through the passing of the Underground Railroad’s trains, she and Caesar let them pass:

Three trains had passed through since the pair arrived. The first time they talked for hours over whether it was wiser to depart the dark south immediately or see what else South Carolina had to offer. By then they had gained a few pounds, earned wages, and begun to forget the daily sting of the plantation... there had been a real debate, with Cora agitating for the train and Caesar arguing for the local potential... They stayed. Maybe the next one. (104)

Underneath pleasantness, however, South Carolina exercises a form of repression and control on certain individuals – including Black women – through public health programs. At one point, Cora witnesses a scene on her way home from a social gathering:

The woman ran through the green near the schoolhouse. She was in her twenties, of slender build, and her hair struck up wildly... Two men grabbed the woman and, as gently as they could, stopped her flailing. A crowd gathered... Cora shouldered her way on. The woman blubbered incoherently and then said suddenly, ‘My babies, they’re taking away my babies!’” (105)

The scene begins to reveal an aspect of reproductive control in South Carolina,

compounded by the crowd's familiarity with such a sordid moment: "The onlookers sighed at the familiar refrain. They had heard so many times in plantation life, the lament of the mother over her tormented offspring" (105). This haunts Cora, who eventually comes into close contact with reproductive control when she is asked to meet a doctor for a routine medical exam. In the text, Cora is asked to meet a doctor for a routine medical exam. She meets Dr. Stevens, who administers a physical examination, and discovers that she has had "intimate relations" before (113). Dr. Stevens tells her about birth control, explaining to her that she could avail of a new medical procedure – tubal ligation – and it was a process that was largely safe, having been "perfected on colored inmates of a Boston asylum" (113). Dr. Stevens explains that while the choice is Cora's, it has been made mandatory for some individuals: "Colored women who have already birthed more than two children, in the name of population control. Imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit, for obvious reasons. Habitual criminals" (113). While Dr. Stevens emphasizes that Cora does not belong to those categories, and that this is an opportunity for Cora to "take control over [her] own destiny" (113), the lumping together of colored women with the mentally unfit and the criminal population is telling, suggesting that Black motherhood is, to an extent, pathological, a wrongness, and that the increase of a colored population is in itself an illness and therefore must be limited. By default, individuals like Cora are already considered "disordered" or ill. This apparent diagnosis is couched within language that purports to heal, and is already at an institutional level with the mandatory treatments.

Beyond reproductive control, South Carolina's medical system works to alienate Cora from her own body. Prior to Dr. Stevens, she meets Dr. Campbell, who gives her a general physical exam:

Dr. Campbell looked at her hands. They had softened but were still those of one who had worked the fields. His fingers traced the scars from her whippings. Hazarding a guess as to the number of lashes, he was off by two. He examined her privates with his tools. The exam was painful and made her ashamed, the doctor's cold attitude doing nothing to ease her discomfort. Cora answered his questions about the assault [done on her by her fellow slaves] (100).

The clinical approach to Cora's body – her experiences as a slave, the wounds and whippings she had "collected" over the years, getting sexually assaulted by male slaves

at the Randall plantation – reduces her story. This approach turns the story of a person into, as Arthur Frank puts it, a story of a body. The doctor neglects the depth of Cora’s experience and is thus unable to help her heal from it.

South Carolina’s medical system is a prominent example of the convergence between utopian desires and motherhood. It is also a good example of how those who are “wounded” in society can also show what wounds are festering in society. Returning then to the idea of utopia as a better place, it becomes clear that while South Carolina is better than the Randall plantation, there is still a sinister side that exercises racist ideals, even if it is dressed in rhetoric that indicates care for colored folks’ well-being.

Beyond South Carolina’s medical control over certain demographics, a more visceral example of pathologizing happens to Cora in the Randall plantation itself. Where South Carolina’s mandatory medical processes and ligations are very clearly institutional in their control, in the Randall plantation, control is internal and based on what Randall’s slaves consider acceptable. In Randall, the reputation among slaves determines what “privileges” are afforded a slave within the community – whether or not slaves recognize that one owns property, a plot of land, or pets, among other things. Cora’s tale starts by placing her in a clear space within the social configuration of the Randall Plantation, where she is a slave. Carrying the reputation of her mother, Mabel, whom the Randall slaves dislike or even outright loathe because she had empowered herself by escaping, she is immediately relegated to Hob, the cabin where the mentally and physically unfit slaves were made to stay. Hob was originally occupied by men, and later, the cabin’s female population rose:

White men and brown men had used the women’s bodies violently, their babies came out stunted and shrunken, beatings had knocked the sense out of their heads, and they repeated the names of their dead children in the darkness: Eve, Elizabeth, N’thaniel, Tom. Cora curled on the floor of the main room, too afraid to sleep up there with them, those abject creatures. (16).

The “abjection” of Hob’s female population is largely grounded on the loss and trauma they had experienced because of motherhood, having been violated, then beaten, their children being lost. The dis/ease surrounding them can be read as a twofold thing: first, because they were unable to “produce” able-bodied children that would one day pick up the

work, and second, because they themselves have become unfit to contribute to plantation work because of their conditions, either or both physical and mental. Cora's reason for taking her place with them is the reverse: while the women of Hob are childless, Cora is a stray and is motherless, and this, to Randall plantation's slaves, makes her "fit" to be one with the "abject creatures" of the cabin. She becomes Hob's most well-known, "most infamous occupant, and the most long-term" (20). The other slaves treat her with disgust and disdain, spreading rumors about Cora's "fornicat[ing] with donkeys and goats," firmly keeping her "outside the circle of respectability" (21).

The "ill" reputation heaved upon Cora is in many ways inherited, as her mother Mabel is remembered not as an exemplary member of Randall's slave community, but as a damaged woman herself: "What [Cora] remembered most was [Mabel's] sadness. Her mother was a Hob woman before there was a Hob. With the same reluctance to mix, the burden that bent her at all times and set her apart" (54). This "damaged" reputation is furthered by Mabel's apparent fate: that she had escaped Randall plantation, something only the others could dream of. This escape is also the cause of Cora's main conflict with the memory of her mother. As she was too young to remember Mabel in full, she could only remember her in snatches: "Cora's image of her was remote... Cora couldn't put her together in her mind. Who was she? Where was she now? Why had she left her? Without a special kiss to say, When you remember this moment later you will understand that I was saying goodbye even if you did not know it" (54). Cora's fragmented memory of Mabel fuels her confusion and her resentment throughout the text, even after she escapes from Randall and finds herself elsewhere:

Once Mabel ran, Cora thought of her as little as possible. After landing in South Carolina, she realized that she had banished her mother not from sadness but from rage. She hated her. Having tasted freedom's bounty, it was incomprehensible to Cora that Mabel had abandoned her to that hell... Her company would have made the escape more difficult, but Cora hadn't been a baby. If she could pick cotton, she could run. (98)

Angry, alone, and isolated, Cora embodies Arthur Frank's "wounded storyteller," not just in body but also in mind. Her condition, and those who are also in Hob with her, speaks much of the female slave's condition: motherhood wounds. Cora's anger solidifies

the marring of the bond between mother and daughter. This echoes Terry Paul Caesar's argument, that motherhood and enslavement "so profoundly contaminate" each other that "they become virtually inseparable" (113), and that "neither mother nor daughter is free to define the terms of their mutual possession of each other because each has been formed by the outer violence that disrupts their relation" (114-5). Cora's understanding of motherhood is deeply fractured by Mabel's leaving that she cannot think of herself, in comfortable terms, as a daughter to her mother. The pain is further underscored when, in the state of Indiana, Cora meets Sybil and Molly, a woman and a child unrelated by blood but bound by a created bond of motherhood that the two of them define.

The factors of social othering, personal anger towards her mother, and the failure of states and institutions to bring up genuine positive changes for colored folk all contribute to Cora's personal wounding, manifesting most prominently in her inability to remember Mabel. Her healing is certainly not easy. Examples of motherhood pain her, as is evidenced by her time in South Carolina, and as she travels through different states – through North Carolina, where colored folk are lynched, through Tennessee where the dead line the roads – she finds neither trace of her mother nor any positive example of nurturing motherhood. It is only until she comes to the Valentine Farm in Indiana that she starts recuperating her notion of motherhood.

In Valentine Farm, a commune where colored and white people live more or less equally, sharing the same privileges and the same amount of work, Cora meets and befriends Sybil and Molly, a mother-and-daughter pair. Sybil and Molly give Cora a real, tangible example of positive motherhood: "The silent theater of Sybil and Molly's love moved [Cora] always. The way the child asked for assistance without speaking and the mother pointed, nodded, and pantomimed her child out of a fix. Cora wasn't... accustomed to this type of maternal performance. (244)

Sybil and Molly's relationship does a lot to heal Cora's notion of motherhood, in part because it speaks to Cora's desire for escape with Mabel:

Sybil had absconded with Molly when her daughter was only two, toting her child all the way. Rumors from the big house held that their

master meant to dispose of some property to cover debts from the disappointing crop... [Sybil] left that night... 'Molly didn't make no sound,' Sybil said. 'She knew what we were up to.' Three miles from the Pennsylvania border they risked a visit to the cottage of a colored farmer. The man fed them... and, through a line of intermediaries, contacted the railroad. (244)

Sybil and Molly represent a fantasy realized for Cora – that a mother could take her daughter along, and escape successfully. This affirms the “realizability” of such an act, which further complicates Cora’s thoughts of Mabel, and even as she asks around Valentine Farm, she gets no definitive word on whether or not Mabel went through there. This is where the recuperation – the *healing* – of Cora’s understanding of motherhood happens. She does not actually find out what happens to Mabel, and in fact Whitehead endeavors to show that Mabel had not gotten far when she escaped, having died from a snake bite on her way out of the swamp surrounding Randall. Cora is compelled instead to map her understanding of motherhood on other figures, on other “utopian” alternatives that exist, are realizable, and are healthy. She is able to do this in the “safest” state among all of the states the Railroad had taken her: Indiana, specifically at the Valentine Farm. Because she is now able to accept and enjoy the safety provided by her community, she is also able to safely confront her anger towards Mabel. Herein lies the convergence of utopian dreaming and healing: after accepting the presence of a healthy mother-daughter relationship, Cora is able to move forward and actually escape into the north.

Cora faces a final confrontation with her plantation owner’s hired slavecatcher Ridgeway, who had tried to capture Mabel long before but had failed. As Ridgeway tells Cora, “I don’t know if the current master of Randall will pay your reward. I don’t rightly care... It wasn’t going to be easy, I should have seen that. You’re your mother’s daughter through and through” (301). Through Ridgeway’s words, Cora begins to “heal” her connection with her mother. She and Mabel are tied by their willingness to escape, their willingness to resist:

Cora has stopped listening to him, to Homer’s unwholesome snickering. She and Royal and Red may have diminished the slave catcher when they last met, but it was Mabel who first laid him low. It flowed from her mother, his mania over their family. If not for her, the slave catcher wouldn’t have obsessed so over Cora’s capture... After

all it cost her, Cora didn't know if it made her proud or more spiteful toward the woman. (301)

Cora escapes to the north and leaves behind the wholeness of her past, along with her anger towards her mother. It is instead replaced by a form of respect and acknowledgment that her mother's blood flowed in her and that this was Mabel's legacy. Despite the "failed" act of mothering - in terms of nurturing, in terms of raising - Mabel and Cora are still connected by a strong maternal bond that takes shape in the desire to find a better life for themselves. This is where the utopian desire in *The Underground Railroad* is fulfilled: by acknowledging resistance as the mother's gift and legacy, the daughter fulfills what the mother had wanted for herself and for her.

The Underground Railroad contends with dystopian circumstances of enslavement and its effects. Yet there is a persistence of utopian desires - of continuing on, of surviving, then of living - that influences the current of the novel. In both texts, utopia is framed as a constantly-pursued desire on a personal level, usually presented as the longing for a better life, but more powerfully, posited as a desire to connect to aspects of personhood that enslavement aspects of personhood that enslavement has stripped: knowing family stories, knowing legacies, knowing oneself. While the desires that Cora has are very much couched in the personal, they are always informed by the political: what she is allowed to have, how she is permitted to nurture, how she views her families, their relationships, and their children, are controlled by the system that fragments them, and through the cracks in these the characters find a way to flourish and to survive.

The utopian desire that powers *The Underground Railroad* is located precisely within its healing of Cora's relationship with her mother and, more broadly, with its recuperation of the condition of slave motherhood. It rethinks motherhood not as a burden or a source of fear, but instead reestablishes that it is a valuable, nurtured connection that provides a pathway to a better life and, more importantly, to hope.

Lyman Tower Sargent says it is "possible to so oppress people that the most they can imagine is improvement within the bounds of their oppression, but there are always a few who hope for more" (63). This hope for "something better" is potently manifested in *The Underground Railroad*. The text's presentation of slave motherhood is reinscribed as something not enveloped in despair but instead embraced in belonging, and this in turn

presents a pathway out of reading it negatively. In the novel, motherhood is itself a form of resistance, no matter what it looks like – whether it be Mabel’s, or Sybil’s, or even Cora’s refusal to be operated on, and this resistance spurs positive utopian change. In the case of *The Underground Railroad*, motherhood represents the persistence of living and life, and signals the possibility of a future. Utopian futures - better futures - are possible, and to give birth to these, we need only look to and understand our mothers.

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