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Trabajo Fin de Grado

Abuse, Sexuality and Trauma in the Antebellum South: An Intersectional Approach to Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

This paper, supported by works mainly about intersectional feminism, race studies, and sexuality, examines Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* and the many abuses that Cora, the main character, and other female slaves suffer. It also analyses some of the narrative techniques and literary devices used by the author in order to better illustrate all these abuses and bring the reader closer to Cora's experience. Lastly, it aims to explore the consequences of this violence on Cora's perception of her sexuality as a possible sexual trauma. In this way, it brings an intersectional approach to the situation of black women in the Antebellum South, represented by Cora in Whitehead's novel.

Resumen

Este ensayo, apoyado en varias obras sobre feminismo interseccional, estudios raciales y estudios sobre sexualidad, analiza la novela de Colson Whitehead *The Underground Railroad*, y los abusos que sufren Cora, la protagonista, y otras esclavas. Además, analiza algunos de los recursos literarios y técnicas narrativas usados por el autor para ilustrar estos abusos y acercar al lector a la experiencia de Cora. Por último, examina las consecuencias que esta violencia tiene en la percepción de Cora sobre su sexualidad como un posible trauma sexual. De esta manera, este ensayo trae un enfoque interseccional a la situación de las mujeres negras en el sur de la América prebélica, a las cuales Cora representa en la novela.

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Introduction: Intersectional Violence and its Roots in the Antebellum South

The Underground Railroad is the sixth novel by American writer Colson Whitehead. As soon as it was published in 2016, it became a best-seller and a critical success. It won several important prizes, such as the 2016 National Book Award or the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. It is also part of the Oprah's Book Club Selection and other influential literary lists. This novel, set in the early 19th century in the Antebellum South, tells the story of Cora, an enslaved woman born in a plantation in Georgia, and her experiences escaping from it. It belongs to the literary genre of the neo-slave narratives, which are contemporary novels inspired by the slave narratives' autobiographical accounts, such as the ones written by Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs (Audra).

The most often highlighted characteristic of this novel is the literalization of the Underground Railroad, which was "a network of routes, places, and people that helped enslaved people in the American South escape to the North" (National Geographic Society). This network, however, was originally not an actual subway or literal "underground railroad," but it was only called like that in a metaphorical way, in order to keep it secretly. The houses where the fugitives took shelter were called "stations" and the people that helped them were known as "conductors." The most famous conductor of the Underground Railroad was the former-slave and abolitionist Harriet Tubman. Rewriting this history, Whitehead takes this metaphorical concept and makes it a literal underground railroad, with its real stations and conductors; and it is through it that Cora tries to escape from the plantation where she was born.

The novel starts telling the story of Ajarry, Cora's grandmother, and how she was captured in Africa in order to be sold as a slave in the New World. After being sold several

times, she ended up in a plantation in Georgia, where she gave birth five children, but only one of them survived: Mabel, Cora's mother. Mabel is presented as a brave and defiant woman, since she was the only slave who managed to escape from the plantation. Therefore, Cora represents the third generation in a family of enslaved women living on the same plantation.

Even though the main point of *The Underground Railroad* is not showing Cora's reality as an enslaved woman, Whitehead constantly exemplifies the double oppression that she suffers because of her gender and race in the Antebellum South. During this period, enslaved women not only suffered the oppressive conditions of slavery, but also some added abuses because of their gender. Since they were kids, they were victims of all kinds of sexual violence by their masters and overseers; and were forced to have sexual relations with other slaves in order to "produce" more slaves for their owners, among other things.

This double oppression did not stay in the Antebellum South but was only the beginning of a reality that black women have continued experiencing to this day. In the words of the Combahee River Collective, it is difficult "to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual" (213). In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in order "to deal with the fact that many of our social justice problems like racism and sexism are often overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice" (Crenshaw 4:45-5:16). In her view,

> If we think about this intersection, the roads to the intersection would be the way that the workforce was structured by race and by gender. And then the traffic in those roads would be the hiring policies and the other practices that ran through those roads. (Crenshaw 9:44-10:05)

Through the story of Cora, mainly, *The Underground Railroad* proves the need for an intersectional approach to the experiences of women of color. For one thing, it is impossible to talk about the terrible situation of enslaved women during this period without talking about their sexuality, since most of the abuses that they suffered were related to their sexuality and their capacity to bear children. As Jim Downs points out, even though "decades ago, racism, sexism, and other prejudices caused scholars to neglect exploring enslaved women's sexuality," it is necessary to "consider sexuality as a fundamental component in the history of slavery" (201).

As a neo-slave narrative, *The Underground Railroad* tells the fictional story of Cora, bringing back, at the same time, many historical facts. From the very beginning of the novel, Whitehead shows how enslaved women were economically valued on the slave markets depending on their reproductive capacities and forced to marry in order to have children. He also illustrates how these women were sexually abused by both white and black men, among other things. In the novel, it is possible to see how this situation affects the way Cora perceives her sexuality, as it could happen to many enslaved women during this period.

This novel, however, consciously manipulates many of these historical facts, and provides alternative versions of some historical events. It not only literalizes the metaphorical Underground Railroad, but also moves other events in place and time in order to include them in the narrative. In this way, it combines some elements of historical fiction, most notably, a realistic plot or well-defined characters with some metafictional elements that make the reader consciously aware of the fictional nature of the novel. By doing this, it sometimes blurs the line that separates fiction and reality. This feature of the novel places it in the genre of historiographic metafiction, a term coined by Canadian

literary theorist Linda Hutcheon in 1988 to refer to fictional works that combine elements of metafiction and historical fiction ("Historiographical Metafiction").

The author uses some other narrative techniques and literary devices in order to better illustrate all the abuses that these women suffer, as well as to bring the reader closer to Cora's experience. For instance, the novel starts with a backstory about Cora's grandmother's life, and alternates chapters about Cora's and other characters' stories, so that the reader can haves access to a bigger variety of experiences. Whitehead also uses an omniscient third-person narrator that tells the story from Cora's perspective, allowing the reader to know what she feels and thinks. Apart from this, some elements can be interpreted as very powerful symbols for the novel and Cora's experience, such as Hob, the cabin she belongs to, or the act of dancing.

This paper, supported by works mainly about intersectional feminism, race studies, and sexuality, brings an intersectional approach in order to explore some of the abuses illustrated in Whitehead's novel. It also analyses some of the narrative techniques and literary devices used by the author in order to illustrate this reality. The first chapter examines the perception of female slaves as nothing more than "child-bearing women"; the second analyses another way of controlling these women's reproduction by means of a sterilization program; the third chapter explores the situation of the most oppressed women in the novel, and Cora's experience as one of them; the fourth chapter is focused on sexual abuse by male slaves; the fifth one on how these women sometimes had to "consent" sexual relations with white men; the penultimate chapter explores the ambivalence of dancing both in the slavery system and for Cora; and finally, the last chapter, unlike the others, does not provide any historical facts, but is entirely focused on

analysing the consequences of all these previously-mentioned abuses on Cora's possible sexual trauma.

1. Arranged Marriages, Forced Pregnancies and your Value as a Woman

When asked what was more compelling to him about having a woman as protagonist, since "the intersectionality between gender and race during slavery was incredibly complex." ("Colson Whitehead" 30:50-31:05), Whitehead answered:

> When you're a woman, when you hit puberty, you're expected to produce, and that means producing babies because more babies means more hands to pick cotton. More cotton means more money and more babies to sell and your body is not your own. You're prey to the desires of your master, other slaves. There's no law on the plantation, except what exists according to the whims of your owner. (31:49-32:20)

One of the first ways of intersectional violence that appears in the novel is "white men's commodification of enslaved female's capacity to reproduce" (Jones-Rogers 109). As bell hooks argues in *Ain't I a Woman?*, "breeding was another socially legitimized method of sexually exploiting black women," since "white men in colonial America defined the primary function of all women to be that of breeding workers" (39). These women's childbearing potential was one of the main characteristics that differentiated them from male slaves. As Jones-Rogers points out, "enslaved females and males possessed different monetary values that were contingent on their biologically distinct bodies" (120).

According to hooks, "advertisements announcing the sale of black female slaves used the terms 'breeding slaves,' 'child-bearing woman,' 'breeding period,' 'too old to breed,' to describe individual women" (39). Such was the case that even the economic value of female slaves depended on their reproductive capacity. Young and healthy women were perceived as a very worthy investment. Barren women, by contrast, were seen as "worse than a misfortune," what made them the ones that "suffered most under the breeding system" (hooks 40).

The Underground Railroad starts with a backstory about Ajarry's experience, which illustrates how enslaved women were treated on the slave markets. In this chapter, the narrator tells how traders looked for "slaves of breeding age" (Whitehead, *UR* 5), or how the agent that bought Ajarry "pinched her breasts to see if she was in flower" (4). In the case of Cora, although she is never sold as it happened to her grandmother, she is also "checked" by Terrance Randall, one of the owners of the plantation, in order to see the development of her breasts, cupping and squeezing them (47).

A very common way of increasing reproduction among slaves was forcing them to have sexual relations. As Jones-Rogers explains, both female and male masters forced enslaved women to "have sex with men who were not of their choosing" (110). In her words, scholars "classify instances of forced breeding as acts of sexual violence too" (111). hooks also explores this phenomenon in *Ain't I a Woman*:

> Slave women who refused to choose a man and mate with him had men forced upon them by their overseer or master. Some slaveholders preferred to breed black women with white men, as mulattoes frequently brought a higher price on the market or were easier to sell. (40)

Arranged marriages between slaves were also a very typical way of encouraging reproduction. As David Doddington points out, slaves' "sexual lives were rarely free from

white interference and marriage was frequently predicated on fecundity" (149). "Owners encouraged female slaves to form conjugal relationships with male slaves –sometimes by promises of clothing, food or other incentives, and other times by ordering them to marry" (Amott 148). In the novel, Whitehead also illustrates this reality by mentioning how Terrance Randall "arrange[s] and approve[s] all marriages personally to ensure the appropriateness of the match and the promise of the offspring" (47). In fact, Cora herself was ordered to take a husband when she was fifteen or sixteen (24).

All these events exemplify how enslaved women's bodies were perceived in the Antebellum South, and how their sexuality was reduced to a mere reproductive issue. By starting the novel with Ajarry's backstory, the author includes the oppressive situations lived by Cora and those that precede her, such as her grandmother's experience on a slave market. In this way, the narration allows the reader to have a broader knowledge not only about Cora's background but also about the reality of these women before being sold. Although this is not the most traumatic type of abuse in Cora's life, since she is neither sold or economically valued, nor forced to have sex in order to get pregnant, it is undeniable that this conception of the female slaves' bodies can have an impact on the way the protagonist starts perceiving her body and sexuality from a very young age, as it probably happened to millions of enslaved women during that period.

2. Sterilization Programmes and Fertility Control: When your Body is not Yours

When Whitehead wrote *The Underground Railroad*, he intended to represent a "different alternative America, slightly tweaked, but different sort of state of possibility" with each

of the states that Cora visits ("Where Colson Whitehead" 0:35-1:02). In South Carolina, just after escaping from Georgia, Cora lives a totally different reality, since she is not an enslaved woman living in a plantation anymore. Here the narration starts by telling the reader that she works as a maid for a white family and sleeps in a dormitory with more black women. However, little by little, Cora starts discovering several things that make her realize that this new state is, at the end, not so different from Georgia. Although the novel is told by a third-person narrator, Cora is the focalizer in all the chapters about her story, since everything is described from her point of view. Because of this, the reader discovers South Carolina's reality at the same time as Cora does.

The way the author presents South Carolina and some events that take place in this chapter are one of the clearest examples of the metafictional nature of this novel, since he manipulates several events in place and time, such as The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the forced sterilization programmes of African American women. Both clinical programmes were carried out in the 20th century, and not in the 19th, as it happens in the novel. As Whitehead explains, the literal underground railroad "freed him up to play with time a bit more" and "allowed him to bring in things that didn't happen in 1850" and present them "sort of matter-of-factly" ("A Literal Train" 6:04-6:38). According to Samantha Richmond, by placing these events "alongside Cora's journey," "the reader can view the traumas that occurred to African Americans during and beyond slavery" (30).

With regard to the forced sterilization program in South Carolina, in the novel, the narrator foreshadows what is about to happen in the chapter by telling how a black woman screams "my babies, they're taking away my babies" (Whitehead, *UR* 27). The narration, from Cora's perspective, makes the reader think the same as Cora at that moment: that this woman is screaming because she has a trauma about her life on a plantation.

However, as the novel continues, she realizes that that woman was referring to the things that are happening in the, at first idyllic, South Carolina:

> Cora thought back to the night she and Caesar decided to stay, the screaming woman who wandered into the green when the social came to an end. "They're taking away my babies". The woman wasn't lamenting an old plantation injustice but a crime perpetrated here in South Carolina. The doctors were stealing her babies from her, not her former master. (123)

Although their purposes are totally opposed, this forced sterilization programme and the forced pregnancies previously explored are not so different in terms of the perception on enslaved women's bodies and sexuality, since in both cases their bodies are perceived as something that did not even belong to them. In the novel, Cora herself is examined by one of the doctors and asked "about the assault" in which she was sexually abused in Georgia (Whitehead, *UR* 100). Here, the nurse writes down the doctor's speculations "over [Cora's] ability to mother a child" (100). This can be compared to Terrance Randall checking Cora's breasts, as it happens in Georgia, since both he and the doctor want to know about her reproductive capacities. Later in the novel, she is proposed to "consider birth control" by another doctor, as she has "had intimate relations" (112).

Later on, Cora is explained by Miss Lucy, a proctor in South Carolina, that those sterilization programmes were "mandatory for some in the state," such as "colored women who have already birthed more than two children," "imbeciles and the otherwise mentally unfit," "habitual criminals," or "women who already have enough burdens" (113). Thanks to the omniscient third-person narrator, which allows the reader to have access to Cora's thoughts, it is possible to see how Cora compares the situation of mentally unfit white and black women, and how the former ones were not offered "the same proposal," whereas the latter "had no say" and "were property that the doctors could do with as they pleased" (113).

This chapter, by manipulating some events and blurring the line between fiction and reality, becomes one of the clearest examples of this novel as an historiographical metafiction. South Carolina can be interpreted as a representation of the reality that many black women continued living even decades after the abolition of slavery, as some kind of "future" compared to Georgia, which represents life on plantations. With this, the author illustrates another way of "possessing" black women's bodies. Although Cora is not forced to undergo that sterilization treatment, she learns that many other women are forced to do it, even in a state where they are not slaves anymore. Here, it is possible to see one of the first Cora's reflections on the oppressive situation of black women, especially compared to that of white women.

3. Hob Women: Oppression at its Highest Level

In South Carolina, when Miss Lucy mentions all those "women with enough burdens," Cora instantly thinks about Hob women. Hob is the cabin where the outcast women on the plantation live: all those mentally ill, disabled, or considered "strange" in some way. In the novel, these women are victims of violence not only because of their race and gender, but also because of their social status on the plantation. The author, who was asked during one of his interviews about Hob and the notion of "undesirable" and "unfixable women" in the novel, explained that he wanted to create a "community of the damaged" or "outcast" in order to represent the trauma and mental imbalance caused by their master's abuses (Jones).

Cora, who became a stray when her mother "vanished" (Whitehead, *UR* 13), started belonging in Hob when she was only a child. As the narrator points out, focalizing on Cora, she went to Hob with "those who had been crippled by the overseers'

punishments," those "broken by the labor in ways you could see and in ways you could not see," and "those who had lost their wits" (15). Even though she belongs in Hob since she was a child, Cora's reputation worsens because of her confrontation with Blake, another slave, in order to protect her plot, which is her mother and grandmother's only legacy. This small piece of land, which "remained in the middle of it all, immovable" while everything changed on the plantation (35), symbolizes not only what Cora has inherited in a tangible way, but also the strength and determination of these three generations of enslaved women.

As just said, after showing a defiant attitude in order to protect her parcel, Cora becomes Hob's "most infamous occupant" (Whitehead, *UR* 19), which means that she starts belonging to the lowest class of people in the plantation community, the most oppressed ones. She starts to be seen as a lunatic woman, whom "no worthy man" pays notice of (24). Soon some slaves start spreading rumours about her. Edward, for instance, "the most wicked of Blake's gang," as soon as "her chest started to sprout," "bragged of how [she] flapped her dress at him while she made lascivious suggestions and threatened to scalp him when he refused her" (20). However, not only the male slaves start talking about Cora as if she was sexually depraved, but also some other women:

> Young women whispered how they watched her slink away from the cabins on the full moon, to the woods, where she fornicated with donkeys and goats. Those who found this last story less than credible nonetheless recognized the usefulness of keeping the strange girl outside the circle of respectability. (20)

Cora's reputation as a Hob woman can be interpreted as a representation of the negative stereotype of black women as unworthy and sexually depraved. According to hooks, the image of black women as "sexually immoral, licentious, and wanton" (165) has its roots

in the slavery system, and it was spread by both men and women, as the rumours about Cora in the novel. As she states:

> White men and women justified the sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by arguing that they were the initiators of sexual relationships with men. From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages. (hooks 52)

Hob, then, represents all those "damaged" and traumatized women not only inside Randall's plantation but also throughout history. Cora's reputation as a Hob woman, which worsens because of the defiance and strength, represents the stereotype of black women as "sexually savages" and "immoral," widespread by both men and women. Because of all these rumours, Cora is labelled as an unworthy woman and no man wants to have any kind of romantic relation with her. Although this disrepute and rejection is not a way of violence as obvious as the ones previously seen, the novel clearly illustrates the traumatic impact that it had for black women, as it has for Cora.

4. Sexual Abuses by Male Slaves: An Eclipsed Way of Violence

Throughout the novel, Cora is the victim of many types of abuse; however, one of the most traumatic events in her life is the moment when she is gang-raped by some male slaves. Although this incident is highlighted in the narrative; as Doddington explores, sexual abuse towards enslaved women by their male fellows has been eclipsed by abuse by white men. In fact, this type of violence, much more typical than many people think, is one of the clearest examples to see how "gender and race intersected and influenced relationships in slavery," making enslaved women "felt victimized by gender as well as by race" (Doddington 152).

In *Ain't I a Woman*, hooks explores how some "sexist" scholars have continually talked about how black men were "stripped of their masculinity" by white men during the slave system (20) by not allowing them to assume their traditional patriarchal status and "reducing them to an effeminate state" (21). According to her, these scholars "minimize the impact of sexual exploitation of black women on the black psyche and argue that white men used the rape of black women to further emasculate black men" (34). Darlene Clark Hine also explores this fact:

> Until quite recently . . . when historians talked of rape in the slavery experience they often bemoaned the damage this act did to the Black male's sense of esteem and respect. He was powerless to protect his woman from white rapists. Few scholars probed the effect that rape, the threat of rape, and domestic violence had on the psychic development of the female victims. (437)

However, as hooks argues, black men not only did not feel emasculated, since "there was no reason for enslaved African men to feel responsible for all enslaved African women" (35); but also imitated white men's abusive conduct towards black women. As she states, "the rape of black women by black slaves is further indication that, rather than assuming the role of protector, black men imitated the white male's behavior" (35).

Doddington also explores "how some enslaved men exerted or expected dominance over enslaved women in sexual encounters" (145). He even discusses how some masters "rewarded" male slaves with intimacy with women, even if women did not want to, which could make these women feel that "there was cooperation between enslaved men and owners in establishing intimate relationships" (152). In his words,

> Coerced sexual activity could be articulated as an expression of masculinity by some enslaved men. This fact should not demonize all enslaved men, but it does highlight the complex and multiple understandings of manhood among the enslaved . . . While undeniably victimized and constrained in their actions by slavery, some enslaved men felt that manhood meant they could be,

> and even should be, dominant in sex, even if this came at the expense of others in their community. (Doddington 154)

Of course, Whitehead has also included several examples of abuse by white men in the novel, such as the case of Ethel's father and his black maid Jasmine, who he constantly raped; or that of Terrance Randall, one of the owners of the plantation in Georgia:

> When Terrance appeared on his brother plantation, he usually appraised each slave and made a note of which men were the most able and which women the most appealing. Content to leer at his brother's women, he grazed heartily upon the women of his own half. "I like to taste my plums", Terrance said, prowling the rows of cabins to see what struck his fancy. He violated the bonds of affection, sometimes visiting slaves on their wedding night to show the husband the proper way to discharge his material duty. He tasted his plums, and broke the skin, and left his mark. (Whitehead, *UR* 29)

However, contrary to what happens in real life, in the novel, sexual abuse by black men is perceived as one of the most remarkable events. In fact, by using Cora as focalizer, the author constantly reminds the reader how traumatic this event was for her, since it is possible to see how she continuously remembers it throughout the novel, being "over and over . . . transported to the night of the smokehouse" (143).

This type of abuse is even more highlighted in the novel because it constitutes a parallelism between Cora's and her mother's life, since the latter was also raped by a male slave, Moses. In fact, Mabel decided not to show any resistance in order to protect Cora from being raped, since Moses implied that if she were "not game," he would rape Cora, who was just eight at that moment (Whitehead, *UR* 291). Cora, however, probably does not know about this incident, since here, as in all the chapters that are not about her story, she stops being the focalizer, in order for the narrative to give voice to other characters.

As can be seen, this type of abuse, that has been eclipsed by sexual violence by white men and given less importance than it deserves, is presented as one of the most significant incidents in the protagonist's life. The author, by alternating chapters about Cora's and other character's stories, lets the reader know about Mabel's experience, giving this reality even more visibility. The narration also highlights this episode by constantly reminding the reader how much Cora thinks about it, making it the most traumatic incident in her life. This event clearly represents one of the main differences between the position of men and women in the slavery system.

5. Consensual Sex: Agency and Structure

In the novel, there are also many situations in which black women seem to freely choose to have sex with white men; that is to say, they apparently have some kind of agency over these sexual relations. However, as the author clearly illustrates, this agency is highly influenced by a racist and sexist structure, being this structure "all those factors . . . that determine or limit an agent and their decisions" ("Agency"). This kind of sexual relations were quite common in the slavery system, since some slaved women used to have sex with white men in order to obtain some "benefits" in their position of subservience, or simply in order to survive. Because of this apparent consensuality, black women were seen as some kind of "prostitutes" that sexually tempted white men.

According to hooks, in the 19th century, "with the shift away from fundamentalist Christian doctrine came a change in male perceptions of women," who were desexualised and "worthy of love, consideration, and respect." In this way, they stopped being "portrayed as sexual temptresses" (31). Of course, here hooks is referring to white women exclusively, since this change occurred at the same time as an extreme sexualisation of

enslaved women, who were treated as sexually depraved and wanton by both white men and women. This image of black women as "sexual savage" was used by white men in order to relieve their urges and justify their sexual abuses (hooks 32-33). As Angela Davis states,

> [t]he purity of white womanhood could not be violated by the aggressive sexual activity desired by the white male. His instinctual urges would find expression in his relationships with his property—the black slave woman, who would have to become his unwilling concubine. (95)

This image of black woman as an "unwilling concubine" is also illustrated in *The Underground Railroad*. The author uses the word "concubinage" (31) to refer to sexual relations between Connelly, the overseer, and some female slaves. The role and position of concubines can significantly vary depending on the place and period of time. In the case of Antebellum America, it is known that many of these "concubines" used to have some privileges over other slaves. According to many scholars, some slave owners even "freed their concubines and children" (Hazard-Gordon 49), and "left substantial property to them or their wills" (Amott 147, 148).

Whitehead illustrates this "privileged" position with Nag, who was "Connelly's preferred, spending most nights in his bed" (Whitehead, *UR* 37). As mentioned in the novel, she was "tutored" in those "licentious practices" by her mother, who had "consorted frequently with white men" (37). Nag stayed in this privileged position till the day that Connelly "made it clear that he no longer required [her] in his bed." That day, she had to move to Hob, where the most unprivileged women lived, which meant "her loss in status to the village" (37).

In the novel, this practice of "concubinage" between masters or overseers and enslaved women is not the only form of "consensual" sex between black women and

white men. In Ridgeway's chapter, which tells the story of the slave catcher, Betsy, a female fugitive he captured, makes "a lewd proposition in exchange for freedom, pulling up her dress with slender fingers" (77). Also, at the end of the narrative, Cora herself does not show any resistance when Boseman, Ridgeway's accomplice, is about to rape her, since she thinks it can be a good opportunity to escape:

> She had been asleep for a short time when Boseman crept in and put his hand over her mouth. She was ready. Boseman put his fingers to his lips. Cora nodded as much as his grip permitted: She would not cry out. She could make a fuss now and wake Ridgeway; Boseman would give him some excuse and that would be the end of it. But she had thought about this moment for days, of when Boseman let his carnal desires get the best of him. (224)

As can be seen, Whitehead also exemplifies some ways of "consensual" sex between white men and black women, as means of "concubinage" or punctual relations. However, as the author skilfully illustrates, these women's apparent agency was highly influenced by a racist and sexist structure and their oppressive situation as black women. Far from being "sexual temptress," they had to "consent" these relations because of their position of subservience, in order to obtain certain "privileges"; as in the case of Nag, tutored as a concubine by her mother; or simply in order to survive, as is the case with Cora. These "consensual" relations, at first sight not as abusive as outright rape, are then just another way of violence that these women had to deal with.

6. Victimry and Agency: The Ambivalence of Dancing

Contrary to what many people think, dancing was not always a party-like activity that slaves practiced on plantations whenever they wanted. Of course, in many occasions slaves freely decided to dance for pure enjoyment, but they were also usually forced to

dance by their masters or overseers. In this way, dancing represents an ambivalence between slaves' agency and victimry. Although forced dancing was not a way of oppression that only affected female slaves, in his novel, Whitehead not only expresses this ambivalence for all slaves, but also constructs another ambivalence in the perception that Cora, as a sexually-abused woman, has on the act of dancing.

As Katrina Hazzard-Gordon explores in her book *Jookin'*, the relation between slavery and dancing is very complex. As is widely known, slaves used to dance in order to express their African roots, as a link to their cultural origins. Slave masters, however, who wanted to destroy every kind of relation between them and their past, soon attempted to appropriate dance and reshape it into an instrument of domination," since they "recognized that controlling the slaves culture helped endure their subordination" (4-6). Although slaves sometimes danced "for themselves as celebration, recreation and mourning," they were frequently forced to do it "for their master's entertainment" (22), as well as "to maintain a healthy appearance" ("Dance among Slaves"). This practice was known as "dancing the slaves" (Hazzard-Gordon 11).

In the beginning of *The Underground Railroad*, there is a moment when the slaves on the plantation are dancing as part of a birthday celebration. This moment is described in a very poetic way, as a "brief eddy of liberation," comparing it to a "sway of a sudden reverie among the furrows," or a "song on a warm Sunday night" (28). However, this idyllical moment is broken by the arrival of the Randall brothers, the owners of the plantation, who, instead of ordering them to stop, force them to continue for their own entertainment, thereby appropriating the act of dancing. This situation is described by the narrator as if they had freely decided to dance: "Oh, how they capered and hollered,

shouted and hopped! Certainly this was the most lively song they had ever heard, the musicians the most accomplished players the colored race had to offer" (32).

Whitehead clearly illustrates "the way slave owners made negative a practice that, for many African slaves, had been culturally redeeming" ("Dance among Slaves"). The ambivalence of dancing is then skilfully presented in the novel: it represents both the slaves' agency or "freedom" and their oppression or victimry. For Cora, however, at first it seems that dancing means only the latter, as she cannot help comparing it to some kind of sexual abuse, since being close to male bodies reminds her of the time when she was gang-raped:

> Cora did not move. She was wary of how sometimes when the music tugged, you might suddenly be next to a man and you didn't know what he might do. To pull on you, take both of your hands, even if they were doing it with a nice thought. One time on Jockey's birthday . . . Cora had dared to step out among the dancers and close her eyes and twirl and when she opened them Edward was there, his eyes alight. Even with Edward and Pot dead . . . she shrank from the idea of loosening her leash on herself. . . . No one approached to pull her into the lively madness. (Whitehead, *UR* 28)

Later on, however, when Cora is caught by Ridgeway, the slave catcher, and they are having supper in a saloon in Tennessee, she can hear the music from the saloon next door. Here, the narrator, focalized on Cora, compares partner dance to a "real conversation":

> The music from next door was slow now. Couples coming together to hold each other to sway and twist. That was real conversation, dancing slow with another person, not all these words. She knew that, even though she had never danced like that with another person and had refused Caesar when he asked. The only person to ever extend a hand to her and say, Come closer. (Whitehead, *UR* 223)

This situation is presented as a complete contrast to the moment when Cora compares dancing to a rape. Here she thinks about Caesar, the only man who had ever got closer to her. The narrator, here again showing Cora's reflections, even tells this as if Caesar, already dead, was actually speaking inside Cora's thoughts, getting closer to her once more.

At the end of the novel, when Cora and Ridgeway enter a cellar that leads to the underground railroad, just right after entering the tunnels, Cora decides to confront him. This confrontation is compared to a slow dance, a dance in which she regains her agency and has some control over the man's body. Here, Cora's arms around him are compared to a chain of iron, as if she was chaining the slave catcher like a slave. Finally, just right before injuring him, she sees him as lover in a slow dance:

> On Randall, on Valentine, Cora never joined the dancing circles. She shrank from the spinning bodies, afraid of another person so close, so uncontrolled. Men had put a fear in her, those years ago. Tonight, she told herself. Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. As if it were just the two of them in the lonesome world, bound to each other until the end of the song. She waited until the slave catcher was on the third step. She spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron. . . . She held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness. (Whitehead, *UR* 301-302)

As can be seen, the ambivalence of dancing during slavery is also illustrated in the novel. The author both exemplifies the agency of slaves over this practice during some celebrations, and their victimry and oppression when whites forced them to dance, appropriating this activity. Although this was not a kind of oppression towards female slaves exclusively; for Cora, dancing represents another ambivalence: on the one hand, it reminds her of her trauma because of the physical proximity with male's bodies that dancing requires; on the other hand, she compares it to a proximity that she never had, to

a “real conversation.” The final confrontation with Ridgeway at the end of the novel, which she compares to a slow dance, can be interpreted as a kind of partial release or liberation, in which she regains some agency and control over physical closeness and dancing.

7. Cora’s Sexuality: Trauma, Repression and Release

As just seen, Cora’s experience represents in many ways the double oppression suffered by black women during the slavery system. She is the victim of several kinds of abuse, all of them related to her sexuality. At very young age, she is ordered to take a husband in order to get pregnant, and her breasts are checked by one of her masters as if she was an animal. Because of her bad reputation, she is victim of all kinds of sexual rumours among other slaves, and later gang-raped by some of them. Already outside the plantation, she is almost raped again by Boseman. Besides this, she is aware of other kinds of abuse suffered by black women, such as the clinical experiments in South Carolina.

The protagonist, being the victim of so many ways of violence, cannot help having flashbacks about many of these situations, sometimes connecting all of them, being “over and over . . . transported to the night of the smokehouse, held down by the nurses at the hospital as Terrance Randall grunt[s] and thrust[s] above her” (Whitehead, *UR* 143). Cora’s constant flashbacks can be interpreted as a consequence of a sexual trauma because of her traumatic experience and relation with her sexuality. In fact, as the author said, he wanted to show how Cora’s “trauma and abuse she’s experienced determine her idea of romantic freedom,” especially when she “gets close to Caesar” (Preston).

As previously mentioned, till Caesar, "no worthy man [had] paid her notice" after the day she was gang-raped (Whitehead, *UR* 24). Throughout the novel, there are several occasions in which it is possible to see a kind of sexual tension between Cora and Caesar, which starts from the moment when they are on the train:

> At one point it shook so much that Cora put her arms around Caesar and they stayed like that for a good wink, squeezing each other at the more urgent tremors, pressed against the way. It felt good to grab him, to anticipate the warm pressure of his rising and falling chest. (89)

Once in South Carolina, he calls her "my lady" and she cannot "prevent her from smiling" (93). Later on, the narrator, focalizing on Cora, tells how he "had tried to kiss her" but she "pretended it didn't happen" (102); however, she contemplates the option of kissing him one day, but that never occurs. Once she has escaped alone from South Carolina, she thinks about having "made Caesar her lover" (145) and remembers the time when she "nested against [his] warm body" during their journey to South Carolina. As can be seen, Cora also likes Caesar, but always seems repressed when he tries to get closer to her.

Later in the novel, Cora starts a more intimate relationship with Royal, one of the men who rescued her from Ridgeway in Tennessee. With him, she behaves in a more receptive way and, although having "made him wait," she finally lets him kiss her (271). However, she never has any kind of sexual relation with him. One night, he knocks on her door to give her an almanac, and she takes him "into her room for the first time." They spend the night together, but they do not have sex. Cora, however, opens up to him in a different way:

> She told him about her childhood in Randall . . . when she told Royal about the night they took her behind the smokehouse and she apologized to him for letting it happen, he told her to hush. She was the one due an apology for all her hurts, he said . . . He folded his body into hers to quiet her

> shaking and sobs and they fell asleep like that, in the back room of a cabin on the Valentine farm. (280)

This part of the novel can be interpreted as a kind of release in which Cora opens up for the first time and talks about her traumas. By apologizing for having been gang-raped, she once more demonstrates the perception that she has about her sexuality. Even though there is no sex, this is the first time she lets a man get close to her, both physical and emotionally, her first "real conversation" or "slow dance." This can be interpreted as the "previous step" that Cora needs before having sex, since maybe she needed to externalize her traumatic experiences before.

At the very end on the novel, Ridgeway murders Royal and catches Cora again. That is when she regrets having "put Royal for so long" and thinks that "he must have known she loved him even if she hadn't told him" (Whitehead, *UR* 299). Moments later, after having discovered that Terrance Randall is dead and having defeated Ridgeway, which means she has finally stopped being persecuted, she tries to get out of the underground and walks for very long, falling asleep several times,

> dreaming of her and Royal in her cabin. She told him of her old life and he held her, then turned her around so they faced each other. He pulled her dress over her head and took off his trousers and shirt. Cora kissed him and ran her hands over the territory of his body. When he spread her legs she was wet and he slid inside her, saying her name as no one had ever said it and as no one ever would, sugary and tender. She awoke each time to the void of the tunnel and when she was done weeping over him she stood and walked. (304)

Here, the narrator lets the reader enter not only Cora's thoughts but also her dreams. In this very moment, for the first time, Cora shows some kind of sexual desire, which heavily contrasts with her repressive attitude during the whole novel. This can be interpreted as

some kind of liberation or release in which she becomes partially reconciled with her sexuality.

Even though it was probably not the author's intention, by including all these abuses in the novel and making Cora victim of many of them, she can represent, in some way, black womanhood and black women's intersectional location since the slavery system. Her trauma, then, could be interpreted as the collective trauma of all these women as victims of sexual violence, constantly stereotyped and doubly oppressed throughout history. Although there is a release at the end of the novel, it cannot be interpreted as a total reconciliation or healing, since racism and sexism towards black women continue being a reality till today. Because of this, and taking Cora as a representation of black womanhood, the novel cannot have a happy and completely close ending, since that liberation of women of color has never completely occurred.

Conclusion

The Underground Railroad is a great example of the double oppression that enslaved women suffered during the Antebellum South. From the very beginning of the novel, with Ajarry's backstory, it is possible to see instances of how female slaves were valued on the slave markets according to their reproductive capacities and forced to marry in order to "produce" more slaves. The novel also illustrates these women's apparent agency over some of the sexual relations with their masters or overseers, as well as the sexual abuses by other slaves. The author, however, not only shows their struggles on the plantations, but also their hard situation once free, being victims of clinical experiments such as forced sterilization programmes.

The novel, as an example of historiographical metafiction, not only manipulates the metaphorical concept of the Underground Railroad, making it a literal subway, but also other historical elements; such as The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment or the forced sterilization programmes, which are moved in place and time in order to illustrate that reality in the novel and make Cora witness it. The author uses an omniscient third-person narrator focalized on Cora, allowing the reader to get into her thoughts and dreams. In terms of structure, he alternates chapters about Cora's and other character's experiences, and starts the novel with a backstory about Ajarry's life. In this way, the novel also illustrates the struggles lived by other enslaved women, showing the multi-layered nature of slavery and sexism.

There are also several inter-related symbols in the novel, such as Cora's plot, which is a symbol of strength and persistence, inherited from her mother and grandmother, that can represent black women's resistance. Hob symbolises that oppression, trauma, and stereotypes which black women have always had to deal with. The act of dancing is also a very powerful symbol in the novel, since it is presented as ambivalent to represent both the slaves' agency over their actions and their oppression and victimry. Cora herself can also be interpreted as a representation of all the struggles of black women throughout history, and her trauma as the collective trauma of all these women.

There are, however, several moments of release during the novel. The first of them takes place in Cora's bedroom, when she opens up and talks about her traumatic experiences to Royal. The second release occurs when she confronts Ridgeway, the slave catcher, a moment that she compares to a slow dance. The way she sees this confrontation can represent some kind of reappropriation of her body, as she gains agency and control.

Finally, the last release takes place at the end of the novel, when she dreams about having sex with Royal, a moment that could be interpreted as a partial reconciliation with her sexuality. These moments, however, do not mean Cora's complete healing and liberation, since black women's oppression did not end in the slavery system, as the emancipation of slaves never meant the complete liberation of women of color.

In conclusion, *The Underground Railroad* clearly illustrates the harsh reality that female slaves had to live during the Antebellum South, as well as the effects that this oppression could have on these women's perception of their sexuality. The author exemplifies this situation with Cora, allowing the reader to feel closer to her experiences, thoughts and feelings in order to better illustrate her sexual trauma. This novel, then, proves the need for an intersectional approach to the experiences of black women, not only during the slavery system, but also to their current situation, since their manifold oppression is still a reality.

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