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## Racial Capitalism and the Architecture of Captivity in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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### Abstract:

This article approaches *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead as a novel that renders slavery as a system of racial capitalism instead of condensing it to singular acts of interpersonal savagery. Through close reading with the concepts of the racial capitalism, carceral geography, and spatial power, the paper defines captivity as a recurring production by using designed settings, mobility checks, administrative practices and institutional discourse in the novel. It takes the plantation as the production architecture, South Carolina as politics of medicalized and exhibition-based governance, North Carolina as domestic and civic erasure, Valentine Farm as a flimsy counter-space and the underground railroad as a precarious counter-

infrastructure. Combining these sources, one can observe that Whitehead introduces domination as an organization of space, the evolution of history, and material reproduction. The article thus adds a better literature based explanation of how the novel connects slavery, contemporary institutions and constructed environment.

**Keywords:** racial capitalism; architecture of captivity; carceral geography; neo-slave narrative; *The Underground Railroad*; Colson Whitehead; Black fugitivity

### 1. Introduction:

#### 1.1 Context and problem statement:

The recent scholarship is more and more reading *The Underground Railroad* as a neo-slave narrative, which restates the format of the nineteenth-century slave narrative to re-establish the relationship of slavery with the formations of the present. Rather than seeing slavery as a closed historical event, Whitehead introduces slaves as a regime that structures labour, movement, knowledge, and punishment because of the various spaces and institutions. Such an interpretive

orientation is particularly apparent in literature that analyzes the novel in terms of the transformation of genres and via its constant focus on the racism of modernity (Ferreira, 2022). Even though the novel is treated in this article as a narrative of suffering and escape, it is also presented as a map of the construction of domination into plantations, roads, museums, clinics, attics, patrol routes, and temporary refuges. The main issue discussed in this case is that the discussions on cruelty between people may fail to realize the sharper observation of Whitehead, which is that the captivity is planned, practiced, and constantly restructured by using space itself. The newer research on policing and reproductive oppression also substantiates the relevance of reading the coercion in terms of systems of surveillance, care, and bodily regulation as opposed to introducing the spectacles of violence alone (Pendleton & Dettlaff, 2024). The fact that the underground railroad is being literally translated is consequential since it causes infrastructure to be seen as a form of rule as well as resistance (Bieger, 2024).

### 1.2 Key concepts:

Racial capitalism in this article is the interdependence of racial hierarchy and capitalist accumulation. Race is not simply an incidental addition to capitalism, but a mechanism of stabilization that is sustained over time, the disorganization of unequal labour systems, distributions of resources as well as life chances. More recent literature has re-established that the divisions of racialization can be useful in making unequal capitalist orders look ordinary, inherent, and repeatable (Bright et al., 2025). The literature on race, labour, law, and capitalism also explains that it is legal status and regulation of mobility which may condition the value put upon labour in unequal political economies (Butera, 2024).

This is what is referred to as the architecture of captivity as it is defined to represent material and spatial structure of domination. It comprises not only official prisons, but also plantation, domestic interiors, attic, roads, checkpoints, clinics, museums, and transport networks, which control the visibility, movement, dependence and exposure. This more generalized approach is aligned with the recent research in carceral geography that demonstrates that coercive power tends to manifest itself in porous and quasi-carceral space, as opposed to isolated and enclosed prison form (Conlon, 2024). Comparable studies on carcerality and space-making also highlight the necessity of understanding practices of freedom as a space-making due to the fact that rights claims are created, constrained, and realized through the spaces people traverse (Abdelkarim, 2023). Related carceral scholarship further demonstrates that gendered and institutional forms of confinement extend coercive power into everyday spatial arrangements beyond the formal prison (Chakraborty & Repo, 2024).

By bringing these ideas into the same plane, the novel can be read as a mapping of the spatial organization of the racialized extraction and how built environments facilitate the transformation of domination into the banal. It is not, however, about what happens to Cora and how every place she goes is organized to discipline, categorize, contain, or reroute Black life.

### **1.3 Research aim and questions:**

This paper examines how The Underground Railroad represents slavery and its afterlives as a racial-capitalist infrastructure sustained through spatial design, mobility control, and institutional repetition. It analyzes recurring sites and transitions in the novel in order to show what these spaces do: how they discipline bodies, extract value, produce racial knowledge, erase autonomy, and regulate movement.

#### **Guiding research questions are:**

Why does Whitehead show slavery as a structure of racial-capitalist infrastructure and not just inter-personal brutality?

What are the repetitive spaces of confinement which are present throughout the novel, and what are the roles they play (discipline, extraction, surveillance, knowledge production, erasure)?

What does the literal underground railroad mean as a mode of counter-architecture- and what are its constraints as far as its liberating potential is concerned?

What are the sustainable forms that the narrative implies exist between plantation space and subsequent order of confinement featured in modern world regimes (carceral polity, importance of borders, surveillance-states)?

### **1.4 Thesis contribution and roadmap:**

The article states that The Underground Railroad provides a picture of slavery as an architecture of captivity: a historically adaptive ensemble of plantations, domestic enclosures, medical institutions, exhibitionary spaces, patrol systems, and transport routes that transform Black life into extractable and governable value. To the contrary, the literal underground railroad is a counter-infrastructure that disrupts the surface order intermittently, despite Whitehead insisting on its vulnerability, discontinuity, and vulnerability to recapture.

The value of the article is that it brings together the latest scholarship on the neo-slave narrative form and racial capitalism, infrastructure, and carceral space into a single interpretive framework based on close reading. Methodologically, the paper accords spatial coding as a heuristic device of structuring textual analysis instead of a literary interpretation tool. The following section outlines the analytical process and interpretive framework, subsequent to which the findings follow plantation space, contemporary institutional incarceration, home carcerality, sanctuary, and counter-infrastructure and finally pulls out the implications of the article in the discussion and conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review:**

The recent criticism of The Underground Railroad has shifted beyond viewing the novel as a matter of a historically valid reconstruction and has viewed it as an overtly conscious neo-slave narrative. The most convincing arguments point to the fact that Whitehead claims the genre by making Black women the focus of the story, denying the comfort of a linear narrative and transforming the idea of escape into a structural problem, instead of a moral one. The significance of this change lies in the fact that it does not lead to the interpretation as summary but as form and voice and into the politics of narration structuring. It is particularly helpful that Sohail considers

Cora as a dissenting Black female subject since it demonstrates that the novel is assigning resistance a discursive and spatial scale of resistance and not confining it to heroic action alone (Sohail, 2024). Other sources related to Whitehead employing the neo-slave form also emphasize the fact that the novel rediscovers the history of the antebellum to reveal its current methods of domination (Ferreira, 2022).

Another line of recent critique is that modern neo-slave discourse is increasingly turning to anti-realist, spectral, or postmemory-related methods of making the past slavery related to the present-day racial violence. Such a shift is important to Whitehead since the literal railroad, the sudden state-to-state disjunctures, and the episodic form are not ornamental, but are formal means that render the structural violence readable both through time and through institutions that transform. The fantastic does not escape history in this work of work but it re-scales history and makes visible long afterlives. According to Lado-Pazos, the modern neo-slave discourse is shifting to an anti-realist form of representation to express the present-day Black precarity (Lado-Pazos, 2024). In another example of a neo-slave setting, Van Rens demonstrates that even the form of narrative may serve as a source of negotiating inherited trauma and implication (Van Rens, 2023).

The third body of literature is closer to the current article since it prefigures infrastructure, medical rule, and historical redesign in the novel by Whitehead. These works are particularly useful, since they shift the argument out of symbolism into systems, to enquire what sorts of material configurations ensure domination is sustained and what sorts of shared labour render escape possible. Bieger also explicitly describes the Underground Railroad as infrastructure, and doing so is significant because it changes the emphasis on the use of symbolism only to labour, coordination, route-making, and material support (Bieger, 2024). Ferreira argues much in line with this that the whole way Whitehead rewrites the railroad as a literal underground system reveals the past and continued existence of slavery and a form of racist modernity, in particular, the medical and eugenic logic of the South Carolina chapter (Ferreira, 2025).

The general theoretical literature applied in this paper further explains why this kind of reading is required. Racial capitalism is reiterated by Bright and colleagues as a theory of explaining how racial inequality contributes to stabilizing imbalanced capitalist structures (Bright et al., 2025). Developing a theoretical framework that links racial capitalism to structural harm has become an increasingly important methodological concern across disciplines (Uzzi et al., 2024). The review of racial capitalism, urban geography, and infrastructure by Fonseca Alfaro indicates that the concerns of circulation, built form, and access to space have come into the spotlight of the contemporary spatial analysis and controversy (Alfaro, 2024). Such interventions are helpful in that they shift the focus out of metaphor and enable one to inquire of how the roads, borders, administrative categories, and uneven infrastructures actively arrange the dispossession. They also contribute to understanding the reason why the novel by Whitehead may be interpreted as the literary argument about logistics, built form, and the social production of vulnerability.

Lastly, the recent carceral scholarship gives a solid ground on why spaces of hiding, transit, and temporary refuge that Whitehead addresses should not be seen as a free or unfree

phenomenon. The discussion of quasi-carceral geography by Conlon focuses on the process of spatialization of legal violence in seemingly banal routes and spaces (Conlon, 2024). According to Moran et al. (2025), the carceral boundaries are permeable and may stretch into domestic and social life outside prison. Set in the same environment as Whitehead attic, museum, dormitory, road, farm scenes, this scholarship helps postulate that the central understanding of the novel is that captivity traverses through institutions, scales and daily settings. The disconnect in the recent literature is that these provocations have seldom been put together into a single sustained exegesis of the novel as an architecture of captivity; this article takes the gap squarely head on.

### **3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology:**

#### **3.1 Research Design:**

Literary close reading is the main technique used in this study. The novel is discussed as a textual case where structural power is analyzed on the levels of narrative structure, structure of the scene and repetitive spatial patterns. Instead of adapting a social-science model to its own requirements on a wholesale basis, the article relies on a restricted vocabulary of codes just in order to systematize the focus of attention throughout the novel, as well as to enable the interpretive activity to remain transparent. This is important since Whitehead renders systems legible with the use of staging, movement and repetition, thus close reading is required in order to demonstrate how structure becomes form. Close reading as an analytical mode has been shown to be particularly effective in revealing how dramatic staging and character placement construct social meaning in literary texts (Pearce, 2021).

A spatial reading of the novel is accompanied by the close reading. It is not settings that are seen as passive backdrops, but rather as active set-ups that allocate visibility, vulnerability, access and constraint. The key point is that each of the key episodes will be read in terms of the two closely related questions: what kind of domination or resistance is in play, and how is the space structure aiding in the creation of that effect?

#### **3.2 Theoretical Framework:**

**Lens 1:** Racial capitalism. The lens offers explanations of how the process of racial categorization in the novel operates in an economy of extraction. It contributes to the understanding of why labour, property, punishment, reproduction, and movement are habitually connected to racial ordering and why these relations seem to be both institutionally stable and not individual or occasional.

**Lens 2:** Carceral power. This lens views captivity as a form of control that is exercised by surveillance, intimidation, enclosure, exposure and administrative control. It further permits the analysis to appreciate that the carceral force in the novel tends to work beyond the prison itself, via dormitories, attics, clinics, roads, checkpoints, and civic routines.

**Lens 3:** Spatial and architectural power. This prism predicts the impacts of constructed form and movement. It focuses on thresholds, sightlines, routes, internal divisions and hiding spots so as to depict how Whitehead turns environment into argument. Research on spatial practices during

periods of confinement similarly demonstrates how built form and movement restrictions actively shape social experience and power (Mironowicz et al., 2021).

A combination of these three lenses allows one to relate value extraction, governance, and built space to one interpretative framework.

### **3.3 Data/Corpus and Unit of Analysis:**

The principal one is *The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead. It is based on the space-episode as the unit of analysis: a narrative-bounded location in connection with a specific place and with a specific structure of emergence, surveillance, and exposure. Working with this unit maintains the focus of the analysis in terms of how each setting restructures captivity instead of the reduction of the novel to plot summary or character psychology only. Interviews, reviews, and commentary in another place are considered to be contextual paratexts (McCutcheon, 2022). They can explain reception or framing, but are not exploited to pay much attention to establishing claims on the inner logic of the novel.

### **3.4 Analytical Procedure:**

The analytical process is regarded as an interpretive audit trail as opposed to an assertion of statistical replicability. First, the novel was mapped by enumerating key places, places of transition listing the sites in charge of people, places under rules and how movement is facilitated or impeded. Second, excerpt lines had been clustered in tandem with similar mechanisms like extraction, enclosure, surveillance, forced circulation, institutional care, and refuge. Third, the development of such clusters into the thematic sequence with which the Analysis section will be presented was such that every result is generated by a plurality of the scenes and not by an isolated example. This procedure aligns with published recommendations for thematic analysis which emphasize progressive familiarization, iterative coding, and transparent linkage between claims and textual evidence (Ayre & McCaffery, 2021).

The elucidation of the code was kept reflexive and light. The categories were not necessarily strict boxes but heuristic prompts extracted, carcerality, visibility, circulation control, knowledge regimes, sanctuary and counter-infrastructure. The category language had to be rewritten in memo notes whenever a passage overcame the original labels, in order that interpretation should be receptive to the novel. Through this, a close reading is facilitated by coding which makes the argument appear more disciplined and traceable, and the literary analysis is the dominant mode of inquiry.

### **3.5 Trustworthiness and Limitations:**

Credibility to this article relies on the comprehension of the procedure as opposed to numerical confirmation. It is reinforced by an interpretive framework applied uniformly, by recidivism to return to scene evidence and by repetition of various episodes to support any significant assertion. This approach is consistent with recent methodological guidance which emphasizes hybrid coding and reflexivity as markers of rigor in qualitative textual analysis (Kaur et al., 2025). The key weakness is that the article is devoted to a single literary work and therefore the findings are interpretive, as well as text-specific, and cannot be applied in a statistical manner.

#### 4. Analysis:

##### 4.1 Finding 1: The plantation as an engineered carceral economy:

###### 4.1.1 Plantation space as “production architecture”:

Whitehead does not just start the story of Cora in the Randall plantation to put historical context in place, but to reveal a system that acts like a programmed working space and a prison location simultaneously. Plantation is introduced as a designed surrounding where the where of the enslaved life fields, quarters, paths, the big house, work regions, and boundaries of the property are more decisive than the where of violence since it is space where the work is orchestrated and the compliance is enforced. The existence of everyday life is channelled into habitual forms (to the fields, to definite tasks, and back to quarters), and these habitual forms are what cause the human body to become legible: bodies become visible through schedules, supervision, and the ever-present threat of being interfered with (by punishment). In this regard, the plantation acts as a blueprint which transforms living beings into a controlled resource when making their time and movement controllable (Hughes, 2023).

Amongst such blueprint, Whitehead anticipates details that reveal how production will be based upon spatial control and not consent. The boundary between work and life is erased: the geography of the plantations makes it impossible to fully distinguish rest, sociality, and privacy, as they are always subject to the expropriating agendas of extracting. Even the inherited garden plot of Cora, which can be read as individual inheritance and a sense of the weak autonomy, also demonstrates the logic of the plantation: the cultivation is permitted in such a manner that it does not endanger the overall regime of power, and even the soil itself is a disputed territory where subsistence and owning land are imposed in the shadow of the appropriation. Differently put, the plantation is constructed in a way that it is possible to envision minor spaces of agency, yet it contains the agency within the scope of a bigger mechanism of capture. As literature scholarship on the neo-slave narrative of Whitehead makes obvious, the survival strategy of Black women in the novel is recurrently formed as a practice that has to be undertaken within the oppressive framework instead of being undertaken outside of it because the plantation environment is designed in a way to de-levantiolate the stability of freedom (Sohail, 2024).

On a larger scale, the plantation production architecture also serves as a regional infrastructural network that connects the violence with accumulation. Not only a private property, but Whitehead plantation in Georgia is also a point of an economy that demands rigorous work, routinized force, and territorial control to remain profitable. In other words, the plantation is an economical institution that has to be spatially reproduced, i.e., subjected to land control, the immobilization of labour and controlled vulnerability so that extraction appears normal and sustainable to the beneficiaries of the process (Butera, 2024). This aspect can be explained with the help of the current studies of the continuation of plantation legacies to form infrastructures of racial capitalism: the plantation is not only a historic site of labour but a pioneering spatial arrangement of generating unequal vulnerability as an economic resource (Constance et al., 2023).

#### 4.1.2 Captivity as property logic:

When the visible purpose of the plantation is production, the grammar of property will be the rules of space, repeated and again, of the slave as not just a forced labouring object but as an object of a more fundamental structure, a movable, transferable, and penal, object in another landscape. Whitehead illustrates how the plantation system controls the normal human capacities, speaking, collecting, moving, being intimate, etc., by making them not rights, but permissions. The location of one, whom one is to visit, when one sleeps and the way one should establish attachments are all questions of space since the environment of the plantations is so engineered to ensure that collective life does not become collective power (Bright et al., 2025). It is the quarters that are so significant as the fields, because they are not, in a liberatory sense, home, but a controlled area harbouring social reproduction without yet concealing it, but remaining open to disruption (sale, assault, reallocation, reprisal) (Abdelkarim, 2023). By so doing, space transforms captivity into an order that could be dispensed on a daily basis without the need to engage in direct violence on such a constant basis, since the built order in itself is doing the job of constraining possibility (Moran et al., 2025).

The logic of property is also reproductive: the plantation space regulation does not only control labour-time, but also life-making, since the births, kinship relationships, and care giving all potentially jeopardize the power of the master, and since they open up the possibility of escape by means of support systems. The story by Whitehead would like the reader to believe that family, sexuality, and parenthood are never beyond the realm of ownership as such that the most personal spheres of life are as well the places of extraction and domination. This is in line with recent research regarding the historical functioning of regimes of policing and control as reproductive forms of oppression - how the bodies of others could be coerced into productive reproduction, on whose behalf, and whose family was allowed to persist (Pendleton & Dettlaff, 2024).

#### 4.1.3 Terror as spatial policy:

Terror secures the economy of labour and property in the plantation, but Whitehead describes terror as a geographical strategy instead of indiscriminate cruelty. The expression of punishment is designed in such a way that it travels: violence is placed in a place where it is visible, gossiped and recalled becoming an integral part of the plantation environment in which fear spreads even when one is not being whipped. It is not simply to dismember an individual body but to control the multitude by staging out repercussions in open or semi-open areas in such a way that people come to realize the price of disobedience. The plantation is then a kind of so-called disciplinary theatre wherein the technology of visibility to pain forms part of the technology of rule. Slavery and punishment historians note that the use of violence in the plantation societies can be conceptualized through a structured association among economic pushes, legal policies, and implementation customs than through individual sadism (Ferraro, 2023).

The description of Whitehead also explains why the spatial management cannot exist without terror: the surveillance and the punishment are connected with each other since the threat of violence is best in case the progress is controlled and when there are not many escapes within the

environment (Conlon, 2024). Police, guardians, and informers are on the one hand assimilated into the constructed order and transformed into streets, sides, and vistas, upon which the functions of judgment become operative. The very fact that it is possible to be disguised, little cover, space between, dark, is even politicized, since it is the concealment that enables flight (Mironowicz et al., 2021). The opening of the novel in the plantation trains the reader to perceive geography (i.e. what is visible, what can vanish, how swiftly pursuit can be assembled).

It is here that we start to think of the plantation as a larger carceral system as opposed to a single location. The reasoning of the plantation, to produce value by rendering a racialized population immobile, to make people obey by watching them, to make excessive use of violence acceptable is already foresight of subsequent networks of confinement, which cross institutions and spaces. The theorization of the modern security state as a carceral archipelago based on colonial legacies comes in handy here since it clarifies the manner in which confinement is not usually restricted to a single building, but extends to the interconnected locations, practices, and infrastructures that govern mobility and exposure (Axster et al., 2021).

Lastly, Whitehead emphasizes the fact that terror is time based as well: by rendering planning, bonding, and hope expensive, terror robs the future. One reason is that captivity is not merely a current state but an institution, with the effect of reducing the time horizon of the captives, requiring them to focus their attention on survival in the short term, and to make long-term plans (education, family stability, land, safe movement) structurally vulnerable. Recent open-access studies of the afterlives of slavery conceptualize this time theft as an ongoing process of racialized harm, which will help explain why the plantation scenes in Whitehead seem like an argument about life opportunities, rather than just an argument about past suffering (Wrigley-Field, 2024).

## **4.2 Finding 2: Infrastructure and the logistics of racial capitalism:**

### **4.2.1 Roads, patrols, documents, and routes:**

The novel by Whitehead demands that racial domination is not just practiced when violence is the order of the day but that it is stabilized by means of circulation regulation: who has the right to move where and how and under what authority and with what justification. This attention is consistent with the recent literature that defines racial capitalism as both supportive of the free movement of markets and heightened systems of surveillance that categorizes, limits, and makes visible racialized movement as a danger to social stability (Castellanos, 2023).

In the story, roads are not mere neutral routes, but spaces of operations in which the power is set to move and extend the territories of the plantation with patrols, gun searches, the possibility of attachment at any moment. Logical reasoning has been logistical, a wider-spreading ecology of transport makes the wished flight arduous not just with fences or guardians, but the movement it generates becomes risky, in the sense not only of various places, but also of every journey a shadow of pursuit stalks. Whitehead predicts the findings of other studies on carceral mobility: mobility can be a governing practice, and restraint, transportation, and compelled circulation can prolong confinement even beyond the location of a specific site (Turnbull & Moore, 2024).

Legitimacy becomes portable and deniable with the help of documents and permissions which make this logistical order more intense. Though the novel is not hung on the specific bureaucratic embodiment of a pass, it keeps revisiting the principle of the same: the mobility is handled as something that needs to be approved, and the ones that are not approved are made searchable, capturable, and punishable. That is why the issue of papers has a role at the level of theme even where violence is still candid--since documentation turns domination into procedure, where coercion is then manifested in terms of enforcement but not theft. Modern research on border and migration governance demonstrates the operation of identification technologies and administrative devices (biometrics to mobile apps and data systems) as control infrastructure to reorganize routes, increase surveillance and alter the strategies that individuals use to move in any way (Cabrera-Medina et al., 2024).

Lastly, the novel shows the routes as economic in themselves: the movement control creates a marketplace of capture, direction and captivity. The slave catchers, informants, and intermediaries flourish since movement becomes expensive and this cost can either be exploited by predation, or by a fee paid. This is similar to the results of open-access mobility regimes research which has demonstrated that infrastructures of monitoring, blockage, and (im)mobility creates local economies around the latter in which the same infrastructures that facilitate movement can also be deployed to harvest value out of it (Doevenspeck & Donko, 2023).

#### **4.2.2 The railroad as material metaphor and system:**

In opposition to the superficiality of the police patrol roads, lines, and documentary suspicion, the literal underground railroad of Whitehead is a counter-architecture that needs to make an argument: that liberation is not just a moral accomplishment or an individual choice, but an infrastructure, routes, shelter, coordination, and collective maintenance (Bieger, 2024). The tunnels and stations of the railroad are conceived as the unseen backside of a hostile terrain, according to which freedom would have to be constructed as an alternative mode of circulation which is capable of transporting people across and under the spaces that are meant to accommodate them. This accentuates the studies of infrastructures of (im)mobility, which imagines mobility as a relational network of material paths, social organization and technological configurations that could be reused and abused by the same immobilized (Doevenspeck & Donko, 2023).

But the novel does not even allow any romantic simplification of the network. The railroad of the underground is piecemeal, discontinuous, unpredictable: the stations are run by people with varying abilities, understanding is partial, and the system can be broken and failed without any warning. In doing so, Whitehead makes counter-infrastructure a precarious, but not a victorious phenomenon: an emergency technology created under the pressure, in which every successful flow of an object reveals the next vulnerability. Border enforcement and internal bordering studies aid in explaining why this precariousness is structurally generated: as governments increase the number of checkpoints and surveillance in the ordinary space, those on the move are forced to seek illegal paths and rely on middlemen, as well as create makeshift structures that might malfunction or be abused (Willers, 2023).

The single most significant formal action taken in the novel is to literalize what was previously metaphorical and a secret operation, making the Underground Railroad a visible machine with tracks, engines and labour. The fact in real life is not escapism fantasy; a literalized form of the text is an interpretative strategy that compels the reader to acknowledge infrastructure as both the location of entrapment and universe as well as the place of escape, and recognize how the genre itself could be re-constructed to reveal system power. The recent open-access journal article about Whitehead rebranding the slave-narrative conventions demonstrates how the Underground Railroad reinvents the genre using hybrid form and revision and makes the past readable by redefining narrative expectations instead of simply reproducing the historical reality of the archives (Salván, 2020).

Meanwhile, Whitehead silently confounds the formula of movement is equals to freedom. The railroad transports Cora but it cannot promise her safety and permanency and recognition, spaces on the surface are still designed to reimprison her and the conditions of her locomotion are still dictated by external danger. This contradiction reiterates a major point of carceral mobilities research that systems of domination can integrate mobility into their workings, meaning that mobility can coexist with containment, and not cancel it (Turnbull & Moore, 2024).

### **4.3 Finding 3: “Modern” institutions as redesigned captivity (South Carolina & North Carolina)**

#### **4.3.1 South Carolina: assimilation, display, and medical governance:**

The episode in South Carolina by Whitehead redefines the notion of captivity with the terms of improvement: Cora is exposed to a regime that is said to be orderly, hygienic, and progressive, with paid labour, housing, and education seemingly having become what is literally known as a clean sheet out of the plantation violence. However, the story has turned modernization into an experience of redesigning confinement instead of its rejection, in the sense that the generosity of the state cannot be independent of its insistence on governing the life of the Blacks as a policy object. The important change of space is the shift of coercion inside and into the office: the occupied apartment, the routine of the working day, and the timetable of the institution are repackaged domination as security which indicates that racial capitalism will work best when it poses as care. This is what became dynamic in scholarship that interprets the chapters of Whitehead on South Carolina through the prism of progressive eugenics where reformist aesthetics conceals racialized experimentation and population control behind the euphoria of uplift (Ferreira, 2022).

The scene at the museum further strengthens this criticism by demonstrating how space generates discourses of Black bodies. The exhibit acts as an architectural script by instructing visitors on how to look: it arranges the past into framed scenes and transforms the life of slaves into a readable spectacle and turns violence into a mouth-edible lesson. The museum does not merely represent Black history; it is a manufactured object, someone who can be exhibited, described, and put into place within the narrative the museum intends to create. What Whitehead means by that is that knowledge in this case is not neutral; it is embedded in walls, lighting, paths,

and display logic, such that the process of walking through space is no longer an act of receiving an approved narrative (Lado-Pazos, 2024). The modern study of human remains collection and exhibition can assist in explaining the larger process at play: scientific racism used to be based on body collection, classification, and exhibition and those actions determined the ways institutions defined humanity and difference as objective facts (Raber & Morris, 2025).

Whitehead then links up exhibition to experiment by associating the frontal aspect of progress to the sub-systems of medical authority. The image of hospitals, clinics, regular check-ups come to mind as an area where the Black life is controlled, under the pretext of being healthy, but the novel gives it all away by showing that the surveillance and treatment are entangled in the reproduction control. The state interferes in the most personal sphere, the possibility of Black women to bear children safely to make sure that the health issue becomes a means of controlling the population and labour prospects. This text is resonant with the open-access medical humanities literature that has demonstrated that sterilisation and hysterectomy have often become involved in the work of population control on numerous occasions, and that they have been predominantly used on the marginalized groups, demonstrating how medical power can be a manipulation of governance instead of merely a place of treatment (Moore, 2022).

What makes this episode so stingy is that Whitehead insists that the violence, in this case, is not an exception of modern rationality, but one of its outcomes: the science of improvement is turned into the morality of extraction and containment. In the South Carolina of the novel, the state is not subject to the daily showing of the whip since it can regulate bodies with paperwork, through appointments, through test regimes, through institutional access, forms of coercion more bureaucratic and, thus, more difficult to call violence. This is reflective of modern-day scholarship claiming that race science and eugenic reasoning become effective only by claiming to be a neutral science, with the power of the science itself to naturalize hierarchy and legitimize interventions harmful to the lives of racialized families (Chatters et al., 2022).

Lastly, the chapter of South Carolina shows that assimilation is a spatial project: the city provides Cora with a mapped life a worksite, housing, school, clinic the safety of which requires her to remain within the lanes that are prescribed to her. According to Whitehead, racial capitalism is not simply the extraction of labour, but it is an extraction of compliance as well, providing conditional belonging, in which security is traded with legibility to institutions. The bureaucratic tranquillity of the novel is thus another structure of captivity: it also trains its subjects to take surveillance as the cost of existence and to see restriction as opportunity. Studies of reproductive coercion and medical mistrust in Black women health assist in dating this reasoning back in time by viewing the development of mistrust casing medical institutions over time through slavery and subsequent institutional forces of control (Adekunle, 2025).

#### **4.3.2 North Carolina: domestic architecture as micro-prison:**

North Carolina turns the modernity described in the novel into a nightmare of cleansing, where the anti-Black rule becomes direct and comprehensive. When South Carolina conceals the coercion with the betterment, North Carolina takes the mask off and redefines the social world as a

terrorized public street, shops and civic activities are a tool of exclusion, and the threat is not merely to capture but to eliminate. The built order in the town acts as an ideology of space, the whiteness is not only imposed by legislative means but also by the means of policing the visibility, surveillance of movement as well as the public space becoming a continuous trial of who is permitted to be visible. Such reasoning will be familiar to the public health literature that considers policing and police violence as an institutional factor shaping life opportunities, where surveillance and enforcement are not the reactions to the existence of crime, but the cause of racialized vulnerability in life through the daily government (Herd, 2025).

In this regime, the house in which Cora is hiding turns into a micro-prison and the attic is the cell. Domesticity of the novel is meant to erase her off the streets: the attic assumes solitude, stasis, darkness, and dependence which makes shelter a restraint of self where survival can only exist by constraining oneself. What Whitehead is not saying is that she is concealed, but that concealing reconstitutes her personhood, that time becomes slack, speech rationed, physical needs logistical issues, and the threat of being discovered pervades even the most rudimentary of activities (Moran et al., 2025). The argument of confinement being transferred to the house and turning domestic space into a place of punishment and control even in the absence of prison walls can be reinforced with the open-access criminology research on electronic monitoring and house arrest (Granja, 2021).

Another way of how the captivity could be created with the help of visibility and not chains is shown in the attic. Cora is required to observe through cracks/window without being observed, and such a one-sided economy of looking estranges the town, where people are at liberty to see, look, and patrol, and Cora is subjected to one-sided observation, which cannot be transformed into the one. This narrative-wise creates a kind of living erasure, she is there but she is not that, she is alive, but she is considered to have no right to be where the rest of us are. The representation provided by Whitehead is consistent with open-access literature about anti-Blackness that explains that the rejection of complete belonging can serve as a form of social death, though literal death is not being practiced (González-Doğan, 2023).

On the level of town design, North Carolina consists of a comprehensive total environment: the principles are ingrained in movement, and penalty ingrained in civic spectacle. The form of the public space conveys the idea that the black life is not just undesirable but physically impossible to the imagined community of the town and, as such, the built order creates some form of non-life to its intended audience. This geographically distributed disposability may be theorized as the recent open access arguments about race, space and social death which have connected white spaces with premature death and the continual generation of Black non-belonging as a state of being into space treated space as a medium of racialized harm (Harris, 2024).

Lastly, Whitehead contrasts the stillness of the interior of the attic with the exterior logic of patrol in the town to demonstrate how the modern logic of captivity can be executed: it can be done via institutions of the state (as in South Carolina) or via spatial terror of the community (as in North Carolina) but in both cases captivity depends on engineered environments which govern

appearance, mobility and reproduction. The novel thus considers domestic architecture and civic architecture as the same captivity system, one conceals and incarcerates the fugitive, the other produces a world of citizens, where the life of the fugitive cannot be recognized. In this respect, North Carolina is not about replacing slavery with something new; it simply shows how racial capitalism can transform the extraction to elimination when it establishes a population as unfit into the social order, and makes this establishment long-lasting by creating it as part of space (Brazelton, 2021).

#### **4.4 Finding 4: Sanctuary architectures and their precarity (Indiana/Valentine):**

##### **4.4.1 Community space as counter-design:**

Venturing to develop what could be termed a kind of freedom architecture, the Valentines farm of Indiana is the scene of the longest effort to create the kind of social, public, future-oriented environment in which Black life may develop without directly losing its invisibility or self-preservation instinct. The farm is not just a secure place on a map but an established system of practices, collective work, collective space, and common decision-making that attempts to transform the survival into community. Whitehead, relative to narrative, to a space of expansion and expanded geography: a space of work done on communal advantage, not forced extraction, of a house that supports family life and is not constantly breached by alienation and commercial interests, and a space in which argument and political imagination can take place. That community-making is more of a spatial project is consistent with Black geographies scholarship which comprehends placemaking as a healing and political practice in which anti-Black spatial violence is challenged by making Black space on purpose, providing care, and in refusal (Carney et al., 2022).

The aspect, which renders the space of Valentine legible as counter-design, is the fact that it is geared to relational life as opposed to domination. Various histories of terror come with them, but the farm provides habits of re-training the body out of pure reactivity: work remains work, but can be rendered meaningful as it is associated with group survival rather than the gain of an owner. Whitehead gives particular emphasis to institutions of ordinary autonomy-education, cultural assemblies, debate, as they imply that as much as one is guarded against harm, one is also cultivating the ability to speak, learn, disagree and plan (Whitehead 210). This is why the political conflicts within the farm are significant: it is the sign that the community is not just coexisting but living and that freedom needs to be governed as much as it needs an escape path. A literary explanation of the genre hybridity of the novel can explain this change in narrative role: now Valentine turns out to be the place where the text ceases its episodic flight toward the possibility of a life in mutual forms, and no longer one of ceaseless disappearance (Al-Rikaby et al., 2021).

Concurrently, Whitehead does not make Valentine a utopia; he makes it an improvisational haven constructed in close proximity to the system it denies. That would also fit in a larger sense of the term *marronage* and fugitivity wherein one is creating alternate community under duress, in which refuge is not an ultimate exit, but a tenuous restructuring of existence within confrontation of being run down (De Laforcade, 2023). Valentine architecture is counter-architectural, in that

way, just because it is collective: it involves cooperation, trust, and maintenance, and freedom is created and practiced in the building and not in the moment of arrival.

#### **4.4.2 Fragility: defence, invasion, and the limits of refuge:**

The promise of Valentine cannot be discussed outside of its vulnerability, and this vulnerability is spatial as Whitehead makes it spatial. There is freedom in the farm to allow community living, but this freedom also leaves it vulnerable: roads that lead to the aggressive land, points of entry to strangers, and a visibility that can be analysed as an indication of danger. In contrast to previous episodes which dramatize captivity by containment, the captivity in the episode dramatized by Valentine is by penetration: white violence has no need to return to the plantation to ruin the farm, when the racial order around it already encompasses the means of penetration. The description that is presented by Whitehead makes sense in terms of the long-term logic of white supremacy being adaptive instead of episodic—the snake that takes a new shape and strikes once again—to such a degree that any Black advancement can provoke a reaction and the renewal of assertiveness in this regard (Dubek, 2023).

The consequence of the attack on Valentine reveals the structural limits around sanctuary since the society at large is allowed the right to determine Black autonomy to be illegitimate. Even when a refuge is internally consistent, economically productive, ethically based, politically structured it remains dependent upon whether external force allows it to survive. This is why the sanctuary that Whitehead creates cannot be interpreted as a resistant state of being; it can be more similar to a conflict zone, where the right to stay is continually discussed. This critique of the novel can be identified with recent studies of sanctuary as an institution promise: that safety can be proclaimed through sanctuary, yet in reality, sanctuary does not always persist and remain unshaped by the opposite structures of exclusionary policies (housing, labour, policing, and racialized threat) (Houston et al., 2023).

Whitehead also demonstrates that the precariousness of sanctuary is both constructed internally and externally, not due to the moral failure of the community, but because sanctuary is a matter of strategic decisions on constraint. The arguments at Valentine, how conspicuous they are, how to respond to the white institution, how much to rely upon legal recognition, are not just ideological but decisions of survival do we make more exposure or conceal ourselves. By theatricalizing these conflicts within the communal space, Whitehead indicates that freedom architecture is always constructed using incomplete information and unequal distribution of risks to women, who, over the course of history, have been the historical subjects of both the extraction of labour and reproductive control (Pendleton & Dettlaff, 2024). Then, in that regard, the destruction of the farm is not a narrative twist that nullifies the freedom-making, but the argument of the novel about scale local counter-spaces can be constructed, but the enforcement aspect of racial capitalism is networked, mobile, and can re-enter the sanctuary through state and para-state violence (Chakraborty & Repo, 2024).

The outcome is a harsh assertion regarding the boundaries of refuge: sanctuary is able to give life and sense, but not to completely withdraw itself, disconnect, to the power of the system it

surrounds to cut, burn, grab and destroy. Whitehead thus views Valentine as the clearest image of shared freedom and the clearest example that freedom cannot be limited to a secured space but also entails a reconfiguration of the bigger infrastructures which determine which lives can safely occupy space (Alfaro, 2024).

#### **4.5 Finding 5: Narrative form as an “architecture of captivity and flight”**

##### **4.5.1 Episodic stations, compartments, thresholds:**

Whitehead does not just criticize in a thematic way, but in a formal way. The novel is constructed as a series of enclosures linked by doors: both of the conditions exist as enclosed rooms with their race, labour and legitimacy regulations and each movement stands as a forced entry and exit through a gate as identity undergoes reassessment. Such an episodic form resembles the thinking of carceral in the sense that it returns Cora again and again to closed regimes that seem complete in their duration despite her being technically on the move (Lado-Pazos, 2024). Flight is a series of temporary architectures instead of a direct liberation process: plantation, the secret transport, the institutional prison, the hiding at home, and at the community level, and the reinvented pursuit. With the help of structuring the narration according to these changes, Whitehead has the reader witness to a structural truth, namely the captivity is adaptive; all new spaces redesign control rather than terminate it (Van Rens, 2023).

The formal effect is even more heightened by the railroad which makes transition itself an architectural experience. The underground stations are not resolution segments but transitional areas where the rationality of the surface world is suspended only and never resolved in the downward stations where the space of travel (lack of assurance, reliance on operators, unbalanced safety) reveals that escape would need systems, work, and repair. A free-access exploration of the underground areas of the railroad assists in formalizing the importance of this: the presentation of stations as wormhole-like spaces prefigures the manner in which the narrative switches between the realms of racial governance, the geography is connected to the disruption of time and place instead of the more realistic narrative of traveling (Brown, 2022).

The novel also addresses the reader using this formal architecture. Rather than providing a single consistent explanatory frame that describes slavery and its legacy, Whitehead employs genre hybridity, history, speculative fiction, allegory, and neo-slave narrative conventions, to make the reader continually re-orient, as though he or she, too, had to continue learning new rules of space. In that regard, the structure of the text is an extension of the critique: it does how domination operates by altering designs, and fugitivity operates by improvised routes which will never be sure to sustain (Goyal, 2023).

#### **5. Discussion:**

The discussion indicates that *The Underground Railroad* is not a linear escape narrative, but rather a systems narrative. Whitehead illustrates that domination continues to exist in the plantation since domination is capable of being reallocated in space, scale, and the institutionalities. Captivity in the novel cannot be then brought down to spectacle violence, despite the fact that violence is at the heart of the matter; it is also reliant on routine, routes, line of sight,

permission, and developed dependence. Another important thing that is explained in this reading is the fact that mobility control is as significant as immobilization. Whitehead demonstrates that power does not merely contain, it hunts, trails, logs, classifies, and retrieves. Roads, patrols and documentary suspicion transform movement as such into a space of racial rule such that escape becomes a subject to one more field of regulation instead of the mere reverse of incarceration.

This is important because the railroad responds to domination at the same level of infrastructures that domination works. Whitehead makes the Underground Railroad literal so that to demonstrate that freedom takes material coordination, concealed labour, stations, service, and shared risk. Simultaneously, the network is not completely defined and closed, thus not allowing the novel to romanticize resistance as being entirely exterior to the system it is fighting. South Carolina and North Carolina make a point sharper by demonstrating that the captivity may be modernized. The language of improvement in South Carolina is coercion reform, education, exhibition, and medicine repackage. In North Carolina, this is more blatantly eliminatory logic, and micro-carcerality is transformed into domestic concealment: it is a matter of survival by silence, immobility, and control of visibility.

Valentine Farm is a demonstration of the potential of counter-design as well as its boundaries. It provides a social environment based on study, argumentation, shared existence, and relative safety, yet Whitehead makes it clear that refuge is still unsafe when the order around is still authoritarian to invade and annihilate Black autonomy. This is further supported by the episodic form of the novel where each new location is shown as a new regime redesigned instead of a consistent arrival.

## **6. Conclusion:**

As has been argued in this article, The Underground Railroad can be considered a spatial and institutional design issue and not just a history of individual brutality. In the shifting places of the novel, Whitehead demonstrates that captivity is constructed by the environments, paths, habits, and authorizations which make the Black vulnerable productive and manageable. The discussion has further revealed the domination in the novel to be logistical. The logic of the plantation is furthered beyond the plantation itself with the help of roads, patrols, documents, boundaries and checkpoints and the underground railroad is presented as a counter-infrastructure that transforms freedom into a collective material practice and not an abstract desire.

The chapters of the South Carolina and North Carolina also show that contemporary establishments do not end captivity, but they redevelop it. Medical government, open exhibition, urban organization, and domestic secrecy become various methods of controlling the life, reproductivity, talk, and future of Black people. Valentine Farm helps reveal the need to make freedom visible with the help of community, yet it also reveals the fact that refuge is easily lost when it fails to separate itself out of the larger frameworks of racial power. Whitehead then denies the despair as well as triumphalism: there must be resistance, but it must not be shut out by any means. In general, the significant intervention of the novel is the materializing of structure. People

are the foundation of captivity and according to Whitehead, resistance should also be constructed, collectively, spatially, and infrastructurally, in order to challenge the system of domination.

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The researcher declares that there are no known financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this paper.

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