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The Neo-Gothic Imaginary and the Rhetoric of Loss in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Abstract: The aim of my paper will be to discuss the African-American reworking of the Gothic tradition in Colson Whitehead's neo-slave narrative. I want to argue that the figure of the protagonist Cora may be seen as the embodiment of losses that span over generations of black women. Cora's melancholia is a strategy of dealing with the horrors of slavery and a sign of a black woman's failed entry into the Symbolic. While the novel's narrative technique is a symbol of the ever-present past that haunts black subjectivity, the underground railroad may be read as a metaphor for the repressed content of American national unconscious.

Keywords: African-American gothic, loss, melancholia, slavery, affect

“Not a house in the country ain't packed
to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief.”
—Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

The Underground Railroad, Colson Whitehead's National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, revolves around a trope whose historical, political and emotional potential has turned it into a popular topic of book-length scholarly studies, films and fictional works. In her article titled “The Perilous Lure of the Underground Railroad,” published in *The New Yorker* in 2016, Kathryn Schulz astutely observes that nostalgic stories about the adventures of blacks escaping slavery with the help of noble whites are alluring as they provide us with moral reassurance and “a comparatively comfortable place to rest in a profoundly uncomfortable past.” Indeed, as Laura Dubek points out, telling the story of the Underground Railroad requires a more thoughtful confrontation not only with American history but also with the American psyche, as it involves “navigating the complicated psychic landscape of a country whose people seem intent to remain in perpetual flight not just from their past, but from any understanding of the deep and enduring contradictions at the core of their national identity” (Dubek 69).

In numerous interviews following the publication of *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead, asked about his reworking of historical facts in the novel, explained that his major goal was not to tell the facts but to tell the truth. Asked by Oprah Winfrey why we need another story about slavery, Whitehead responded that though we all know slavery as a historical fact, our understanding of the “aftereffects” of African American history remains insufficient. Like many other African American writers then, Whitehead, born and raised in New York, feels “*compelled* to confront the American South and all its bloody history” as a peculiar form of a rite of passage, an attempt to come to terms with his complex sense of identity (Harris). Indeed, as Trudier Harris demonstrates in *The Scary Mason-Dixon Line: African American Writers and the South*, no black author can consider himself or herself a true African American writer without confronting the idea of the South – both attractive and repulsive to them

– in some decisive way. As Harris’ study reveals, for many black authors writing about slavery not only involves a psychological journey in time and space back to a place of unspeakable historical traumas, but also becomes an almost visceral experience.

In what follows I want to argue that Whitehead’s fictional neo-slave narrative, while referring to actual facts, defies historical accuracy and chronology to tell an affective history of African American experience. By revisiting slavery as probably the most horrific trauma haunting American consciousness, Whitehead’s novel becomes a meditation on the history of social, cultural and personal losses and the process of unresolved mourning that continues to shape African American identity. At the same time, by making literal the metaphor of the Underground Railroad, and therefore by demythologizing it, the novel reveals the complex mechanisms of racial melancholia and challenges some of the myths of white America. Hence, in Whitehead’s narrative the Underground Railroad provides an alternative route through the history of racialized America, where the past cannot be erased but has to be confronted. It is a journey not only across states but also through the history of abuse, bringing up shameful facts from America’s past, which refuse to be forgotten.

American literature has a long tradition of excluding uncomfortable details from national memory. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison investigates the ways in which blackness and slavery were fundamental for the construction of white American identity. As Anne Cheng observes, “[b]y citing African American presence as the formative but denied ghost in the heart of American literature, Toni Morrison has essentially identified the national literary canon as a melancholic corpus” – melancholic “because of what it excludes but cannot forget” (Cheng 12). In her influential *The Melancholy of Race*, Cheng reverses Morrison’s perspective and looks at texts by minority writers to explore the double nature of racial melancholia. According to Cheng, a non-white subject may be seen as both the object of national melancholy and a subject of racial melancholy, which results from an accumulation of injuries and losses encrypted inside the racialized ego. The long history of racial oppression, going back to the dramas of separation from the African homeland, through the torments of the Middle Passage to the humiliation and terrors of chattel slavery, leaves the black subject in America burdened with a long history of unresolved grief passed from generation to generation.

Whitehead’s novel, though inspired by realistic accounts of slave narratives does not follow the rules of factual or chronological accuracy. Escaping from a plantation in Georgia, the teen-age protagonist, Cora, travels through several states constructing a fictional and almost mythical landscape out of the history of African American experience. This includes the inhuman conditions of cottonfield work, terrors of bondage, medical experiments on blacks, including the infamous Tuskegee Study, and the ritual killing and lynching of runaway slaves. The uncanny retelling of some of the most shameful facts from American history brings back – in a truly Gothic fashion – what has long been repressed or purposefully erased from the national unconscious. The novel relies on a classic Gothic plot in which an imperiled heroine (Cora) running away from an oppressive male (the slave-owner Randall) is followed by another cruel male antagonist (the slave-catcher Ridgeway) and becomes lost in a dark, labyrinthine and imprisoning space (the underground railroad). By turning the metaphor of the

railroad into a physical structure, Whitehead invests the narrative with another Gothic trope: a subterranean, gloomy maze of railways full of dead ends and ghost stations. Also, the very life of a slave, as Maisha L. Wester observes, is undoubtedly a Gothic existence: “[t]he murders/suicides, rapes, entrapment and escape cycles, torture (brutal whippings), and familial secrets (illegitimate births) that make up numerous gothic plots constitute real, daily existence under slavery” (35). The South in Whitehead’s novel is a haunted and gloomy landscape troubled with terrors and tortures, which challenge America’s national myths of purity, equality and innocence. Finally, the book’s protagonist is the embodiment of the Gothic Other – she is black, female and an outcast even in her own community, who considers her mentally unstable and puts her with other insane slave women in what they call a Hob.

More importantly, however, by revisiting the story of slavery as America’s most unbearable trauma, Whitehead’s novel speaks the unspeakable and exposes – with horrific detail – the dark underbelly of American history. According to Teresa Goddu, who believes all American Gothic is haunted by race,

The nation’s narratives – its foundational fictions and self-mythologizations – are created through a process of displacement: their coherence depends on exclusion. By resurrecting what these narratives repress, the gothic disrupts the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history. Moreover, in its narrative incoherence, the gothic discloses the instability of America’s self-representations; its highly wrought form exposes the artificial foundations of national identity. (10)

Hence, by making the metaphor of the Underground Railroad literal, the book attempts to de-mythologize the monstrous past, which becomes as real and as uncomfortable as the dirty, derelict railcars that take Cora from one station to another. As in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the Gothic in Whitehead’s novel serves to “re-materialize” African American history and proves that slavery and racial oppression continue to haunt the American literary imagination like a “ghost in the machine” (cf. Goddu 154–6). When Cora begins her journey on the Underground Railroad, she is told, “If you want to see what this nation is all about . . . you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (83), but all Cora can see is “darkness, mile after mile” (84). Indeed, the protagonist’s journey – one of American literature’s favorite tropes – makes her realize that “America was a ghost in the darkness, like her” (216). The Declaration of Independence, which states that all men are created equal, recited by one of the slaves, sounds like a joke, and the idea of Manifest Destiny celebrated by the Ahab-like, obsession-driven Ridgeway only proves that “America . . . is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes – believes with all its heart – that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn’t exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are” (341). As the slave catcher ironically observes, “[w]e come up with all sorts of fancy talk to hide things” (266).

One of Cora’s most eye-opening experiences is her work in the Museum of Natural Wonders where she performs the role of a slave in an exhibit educating white people about their national history. Acting in three different settings – Scenes

from Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship and Typical Day on the Plantation – Cora becomes physically enframed into a fabricated white script which neatly erases all the horrifying truth about slavery. Rather than showing a kidnapped slave “chained belowdeck, swabbing his body in his own filth,” the museum offers images of black boys running the decks and being patted on the head by their white kidnappers (138). In other words, the exhibition demonstrates how African American suffering – the blood, death and anguish, that is the Kristevan *abject*¹ – has been exorcised from the official national narrative in which “[t]ruth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking” (139). Forced to participate in this officially sanctioned falsehood, Cora chooses one spectator every hour and offers them what bell hooks would call an “oppositional gaze.”² Looking back at the white spectators (a gesture forbidden for slaves), the protagonist challenges the image of a black person and the version of black history contrived by white mythology: “It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too” (151).

While *The Underground Railroad* undoubtedly challenges the white mythology and exposes the cracks in its racial logic, the novel also dramatizes the experience of slavery as an ever-growing reservoir of losses. The book opens with the story of Ajarry, the protagonist’s grandmother, who was captured in her African village and brought to America on a slave ship. Though Ajarry has long been dead when the novel begins, her life of unbearable suffering serves as a prologue to the story of Cora. First, when she was a girl, Ajarry lost her mother; then she was kidnapped and separated from home and family. Becoming a slave on an American plantation only multiplied her losses: deprived of dignity, safety and freedom, she lost three husbands and four of her five children, “one after another.” Unable to cope with her pain, Ajarry acquired a “new blankness behind her eyes” (8) and disintegrated emotionally: “her burdens were such to splinter her into a thousand pieces” (5). As a consequence, the grandmother’s unending mourning turns her into a melancholic subject whose only legacy – like the legacy of slavery – is unresolved grief.

In his “Mourning and Melancholia,” an essay published in 1917, Freud explains the complex relationship between loss, the denial of loss and its incorporation into the ego. He differentiates between mourning, which he believes is a healthy though undoubtedly painful process of acknowledging loss, and melancholia, which he sees as pathological. As Freud observes, in the state of melancholia the ego, unable to accept the loss, identifies with the lost object, which becomes incorporated into the ego, causing a split in the subject. As a consequence, “an object-loss [is] transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between the critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification” (Freud

1 In Julia Kristeva’s definition, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (*Powers of Horror*, 4). In this sense, abjection involves a “throwing off,” or exclusion of historical horrors to facilitate the construction of coherent national identity.

2 As bell hooks has argued, repeated desires to repress the black gaze have resulted in “an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze.” Like Foucault, hooks interprets the act of looking, or looking back, in terms of power relations and insists that the “gaze” is always political and may be an act of resistance (94-5).

249). In his later work, *The Ego and the Id*, Freud goes on to suggest that “there is no non-melancholic loss, no mourning that leaves the ego unchanged” and that “the very character of the ego is formed by its lost objects” (Flatley 49). In their rereading of Freud, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok propose that the refusal to part with the lost object leads to a fantasy of “incorporation” of the loss into the ego, which is meant to protect the object and help the mourner deal with the loss: “The words that cannot be uttered, the scenes that cannot be recalled, the tears that cannot be shed—everything will be swallowed along with the trauma that led to the loss” (130). The inability to express the sorrow leads one to the creation of a psychic crypt, which preserves the memory of the lost object and “entombs the ‘part of ourselves that we placed in what we lost’” (Abraham and Torok 127; Singleton 53).

The story of Whitehead’s protagonist begins with her identification with her grandmother as an ancestor whose unresolved pain and loss of self she has inherited. Therefore, initially, when approached by Caesar, another slave who is planning an escape to the North, Cora says what her grandmother would have said: “no.” When three weeks later she says “yes,” she refuses to remain encrypted in the impossible mourning of generations of slaves. Like her mother, Mabel, who also integrated Ajarry’s melancholy into her life, and whose overwhelming sadness and silent suffering Cora so well remembers, she decides to break the cycle of continuous grief and losses-of-self and move on. At the same time, in her decision to escape, Cora identifies with her mother – the only slave ever to run away from Randall’s plantation and whose loss she does not want to accept. In her refusal to lose her mother, who abandoned her when she was still a child, Cora preserves her inside her psychic crypt and part of her becomes Mabel. She cultivates her mother’s tiny plot of land and, in a motherly gesture, protects the little Chester from the master’s rage “ben[ding] over the boy’s body as a shield” (40); finally, she has “the same reluctance to mix, the burden that bent her at all times and set her apart” (64). Most importantly however, she does what her mother did: she steps outside her master’s property and never returns.

But Cora, like generations of black women before her, also has to incorporate and encrypt her own denigrated self. Abandoned by the mother, physically and sexually abused, and cast out of the slave community to live in the Hob as an outcast, Cora displays some typical symptoms of melancholia: she retreats into alienation and silence, avoids contacts with others, and feels intense hatred for her mother for leaving her. The crypt as melancholia’s central trope appears throughout the novel in the form of small, enclosed spaces, in which Cora hides from the world. Though she has just escaped from the most horrible of cages – the plantation – as a runaway slave she finds herself continually trapped between captivity and freedom, life and death. In order to survive, she has to move from one hideaway to another, travelling through narrow, underground tunnels in tight, uncomfortable boxcars. The most conspicuous of her crypts, however, is the suffocating, “cramped nook” in the attic of Martin Wells’s house in North Carolina, where Cora hides for several months. It is here, in the most confining of her prisons that she begins to ponder the nature of freedom. Contemplating white people’s racial violence through a tiny hole in the wall, she recognizes “they were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear” (216), scared to death by “[t]he shadow of the black hand that will return what has been given,” and realizes that “she was one

of the vengeful monsters they were scared of” (206-7). Cora’s refusal to look at the morbid, grotesque ceremonies of the ritual lynching of a black person taking place every Friday night at the town’s main square is her gesture of resistance – this time by averting her gaze from what is intended to terrorize and humiliate her, Cora again opposes white racist ideology in the only manner available to a slave. Recognizing the affect behind “the American imperative,” she realizes that for a black person “[b]eing free had nothing to do with chains or how much space you had” (215), but involves the necessity of freeing oneself from the oppressive memory of the past and unresolved pain of one’s ancestors. If, as Abraham and Torok suggest, melancholic incorporation means almost literal “swallowing” of the lost object in a refusal to mourn, Cora reverses the process by finally losing the contents of her stomach and bowels in the small space of her crypt-like nook. As she metaphorically purges her inside of all unwanted burdens, she is, in a sense, brought back to the beginnings of her trauma: she has a dream about herself being transported from Africa on a slave ship, chained below decks together with hundreds of captives crying in terror. Thus embracing the painful history of slavery and rejecting the impossible weight of inherited losses, Cora chooses to confront herself with grief and finally leave it behind:

List upon list crowded the ledger of slavery. The names gathered first on the African coast in tens of thousands of manifests. The human cargo. The names of the dead were as important as the names of the living, as every loss from disease and suicide – and the other mishaps labeled as such for accounting purposes – needed to be justified to employers. ...

The peculiar institution made Cora into a maker of lists as well. In her inventory of loss people were not reduced to sums but multiplied by their kindnesses. People she had loved, people who had helped her. The Hob women, Lovey, Martin and Ethel, Fletcher. The ones who disappeared: Caesar and Sam and Lumbly. Jasper was not her responsibility, but the stains of his blood on the wagon and her clothes might as well have represented her own dead. (258)

While melancholia has been traditionally understood as an individual psychic condition, recent scholarship has explored the relationship between prolonged mourning and collective memory. As Julia Stern observes, “[w]hen entire groups endure unrelenting experiences of dehumanizing, disabling treatment and recurrent separation and death, the notion of mourning itself might be better understood as collective melancholia” (62-3). In “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia,” David Eng and Shinhee Han argue that mourning may be understood not only in individual but also in cultural contexts, as a response both to personal losses and collective traumas. The refusal and inability of racialised subjects to forget the past should no longer be treated as pathological, but must be seen as a “militant refusal” that lies “at the heart of melancholia’s productive potentials” (Eng and Han 365; Kaplan 514). Similarly, Jose Esteban Muñoz believes that, for queers as well as for people of color, melancholia functions as an integral part of daily existence and a certain strategy of survival. Rather than seeing melancholia “as a pathology or as a self-absorbed mood which inhibits agency,” Muñoz claims that “it is a mechanism that helps us (re)construct identity and take our dead with us to the various battles we must wage in their names – and in our names” (qtd. in Eng and Han 363).

Whitehead's rendering of racial melancholia in *The Underground Railroad* shows the African American subject formation as "an ongoing process of legislating or feeding on loss" (Singleton 46). Yet, it is Cora's recognition of melancholia's productive potential that allows her to emerge out of the gloomy, imprisoning tunnels of the underground railroad and her own traumatized self, and keep going. As the protagonist gradually gains power and agency, she begins to grieve for every individual person she lost, or for whose death she may have been responsible. By the time the slave-catcher finally finds her, "she had finished mourning [Caesar]" (264), then "shutters swung out inside her and she saw the boy [she had killed in self-defense] trembling on his sickbed, his mother weeping over his grave" and realizes she "had been grieving for him, too, without knowing it" (265). It is the recognition of loss and the utterance of grief that grants Cora agency she never had being a slave. In the last pages of the novel, and in a gesture reminiscent of another Gothic tale – Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" – Cora attacks her pursuer Ridgeway "lock[ing] her arms around him like a chain of iron" (361) and, like Poe's Madeline, brings him down to the floor "a victim to the terrors he [as a white man must have] anticipated" (Poe 95).³ Leaving the slave catcher behind, Cora finds herself alone in the darkness of an underground ghost station from which she has to find a way out. In the most unrealistic passage of the novel, Cora seems to be digging the tunnel herself, thus constructing it: "On the one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light" (363). After the arduous journey through the gloomy underside of America, the light at the end of the tunnel implies a new beginning for Cora, whose symbolic birth is an act of leaving behind the dark past to face the future. The new self that emerges out of the tunnel, however, brings with herself an awareness of the necessity to confront one's legacy of suffering and loss, of the need to travel the underground railroads of both America and one's self.

Whitehead's novel does not offer full narrative closure, nor does it suggest racial injuries can be forgotten, or that there can ever be an end to trauma. As one character says: "Here's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade" (340). And yet, as Cora emerges out of the darkness into a place she does not know, she meets an old black man and joins him to travel in an open carriage to California. As she wonders "where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he travelled before he put it behind him" (366), Cora, covered with a blanket whose rough fabric reminds her of her life as a slave, seems to understand that African American sense of community must be built on their common cultural memory of lost lives, lost selves, lost possibilities. As Judith Butler points out, "there is something else that one cannot 'get over,' one cannot 'work through,' which is the deliberate act of violence against a collectivity, humans who have been rendered anonymous for violence and whose death recapitulates an anonymity for memory" (468). It is undoubtedly

3 Several scholars have suggested that "The Fall of the House of Usher" may be read in the context of American slavery. As Harry Levine observes, the story "acquires a sociological meaning when it is linked with the culture of the plantation in its feudal pride and its foreboding of doom" (*Power of Blackness* 160). More recently, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet argues that Poe's tale offers interesting insights when read against the backdrop of slavery and, especially, the fear of slave revolt (*The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* 49-53).

Whitehead's achievement to understand melancholia not only as "a private, backward-looking phenomenon of paralyzing psychic conflict" but, more importantly, "as an embodied individual and collective psychic practice with the political potential to transform grief into the articulation of grievances that traverse continents and cross time" (Kaplan 513). Whitehead's novel, while showing melancholia's productive potential, is yet more proof that slavery and its terrible legacy remains America's most excruciating trauma, which perhaps can never be adequately mourned (cf. Stern 79).

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