

NO PLACE TO ESCAPE TO: RACIALIZED SPACE AND THE PERSISTENCE OF DOMINATION IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

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لا مكان للفرار: الفضاء المُعرَقَن واستمرار الهيمنة في رواية السكة الحديدية السرية لـ كولسون وايتهد

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الملخص

يتناول هذا البحث تمثيل الفضاء المُعرَقَن في رواية السكة الحديدية السرية (*The Underground Railroad*) للكاتب كولسون وايتهد، بالاعتماد على مفهوم الفضاءية المُعرَقَنة (Racialized Spatiality) الذي طرحته كاثرين ماكيتريك. وينطلق البحث من فرضية مفادها أن الرواية تُشيد الجغرافيا بوصفها آلية فاعلة تُنظّم من خلالها الهيمنة العرقية، ويُعاد إنتاجها، وتُكيّف باستمرار، بدلاً من كونها مجرد إطار محايد تجري فيه الأحداث التاريخية. ومن خلال تحليل تنقّل كورا بين ولايات جورجيا، وساوث كارولينا، ونورث كارولينا، وتينيسي، وإنديانا، يبيّن البحث أن كل ولاية تمثل نظاماً مكانياً متميزاً ينظم حركة السود، وانتماءهم، وفرص بقائهم عبر تشكيلات جغرافية مختلفة. وعلى الرغم من اختلاف هذه الفضاءات في تنظيمها المكاني، فإنها تكشف مجتمعةً أن الانتقال من مكان إلى آخر لا يقود بالضرورة إلى الحرية، لأن الهيمنة العرقية تعيد تشكيل نفسها باستمرار من خلال صور مكانية جديدة. ومن ثم، يسهم هذا البحث في إثراء الدراسات السابقة من خلال إبراز الجغرافيا بوصفها بُعداً أساسياً في ممارسة السلطة العرقية، وبيان الكيفية التي يوفر بها إطار ماكيتريك النظري مقاربةً فاعلةً لفهم استمرارية الهيمنة العرقية عبر الفضاءات المتغيرة في الرواية. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن وايتهد يعيد تصور الحرية لا بوصفها بلوغ مكان متحرر، بل بوصفها حالة تظل مقيدةً على الدوام بفعل الإنتاج العرقي للفضاء.

Abstract

This paper examines the representation of racialized space in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* through Katherine McKittrick's concept of racialized spatiality. It argues that the novel constructs geography as an active mechanism through which racial domination is organized, reproduced, and continually adapted rather than as a neutral setting for historical events. By analyzing Cora's movement across Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, the study demonstrates that each state operates as a distinct spatial regime that regulates Black mobility, belonging, and survival through different geographical configurations. Although these landscapes differ in their spatial organization, they collectively reveal that changing place does not necessarily produce freedom because racial domination continually reorganizes itself through new spatial forms. Thus, the article contributes to existing scholarship by foregrounding geography as a central dimension of racial

power and demonstrating how McKittrick's theory provides a productive framework for understanding the persistence of racial domination across the novel's shifting landscapes. The findings ultimately suggest that Whitehead reimagines freedom not as the attainment of a liberated place but as a condition continually constrained by the racial production of space. Keywords: Whitehead, The Underground Railroad, McKittrick, racialized spatiality, geography, racial domination.

Introduction

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* reimagines the history of American slavery through a narrative that combines historical reality with speculative elements. By transforming the Underground Railroad into a literal railway network beneath the United States, the novel enables its protagonist, Cora, to travel across a series of states that each embody distinct manifestations of racial oppression. Rather than presenting slavery as a fixed institution confined to a particular historical moment, Whitehead constructs a landscape in which racial domination is continually reorganized through changing geographical conditions. As Cora moves from Georgia to South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, she encounters different spatial arrangements that appear distinct yet remain connected through persistent structures of racial domination. Scholarly discussions have approached the novel from historical, feminist, narratological, poststructuralist, and sociological perspectives. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the novel's richness as a critique of slavery, racism, and American national identity while also revealing areas that remain underexplored. Constante González Groba (2019) has interpreted the novel as a revisionist Black epic that exposes slavery as foundational to American capitalism and national development, arguing that each state represents a distinct manifestation of racial domination. Similarly, Afsaneh Askar Motlagh (2020) has examined the novel through conceptual metaphor and Black feminist theory, emphasizing the relationship between freedom, oppression, and identity formation. Moreover, Manuela Fernández Morgade (2021) has explored how Whitehead transforms the historical Underground Railroad into a literary device that reveals the continuity of racial oppression across different historical moments. Other scholars have focused on the novel's formal and ideological dimensions. For example, Koffi Eugene N'Guessan (2022) has examined fugitive subjectivity and subtle acts of survival through the concept of "absent presence," whereas Lucy Yoka Indriyani (2022) and Pinggala Adi Nugroho (2023) have investigated the operation and normalization of racial domination. While these studies make significant contributions to understanding *The Underground Railroad*, they primarily focus on metaphor, narrative form, violence, feminism, historical revision, or ideology. Less attention, however, has been paid to the role of geography in organizing racial domination and to the ways different spaces reproduce racial domination through distinct spatial conditions. Although several scholars acknowledge that each state represents a different racial regime, they do not systematically examine how these shifting geographies participate in the production and maintenance of racial power. To address this gap, this article adopts Katherine McKittrick's theory of racialized spatiality to examine how geography functions as an active mechanism of domination throughout the novel. By analyzing the contrasting spatial regimes of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, this study argues that Whitehead exposes the persistence of racial domination not despite changing place but through it.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative textual approach based on close reading to investigate the spatial organization of racial domination in *The Underground Railroad*. Drawing on McKittrick's concept of racialized spatiality as its primary analytical framework, it examines racial domination through the spatial dimension of postcolonial theory. McKittrick challenges the assumption that geography is neutral, fixed, or merely a passive setting for historical events. Instead, she argues that space is socially produced through relations of racial power, such that the organization of place actively participates in the production and maintenance of racial hierarchy. As she explains, geography's appeal often lies in "the idea that space 'just is,'" an assumption that obscures its political construction and makes racial domination appear natural rather than historically produced (6). Within this framework, systems such as slavery and racial exclusion become embedded in plantations, states, borders, and regions, transforming geography itself into a mechanism through which domination is organized and sustained. Significantly, movement across space does not necessarily produce freedom, as mobility itself often remains structured by systems that determine where Black subjects can go and under what conditions. As McKittrick argues, technologies of movement "also contribute to the formation of an oppositional geography" (5), suggesting that practices such as forced migration, displacement, surveillance, and restricted mobility generate new spatial arrangements that continue to reflect racial power. Movement therefore does not exist outside domination; rather, it becomes one of the means through which racialized space is continually reorganized. Similarly, McKittrick's

observation that Black subjects are relegated to “the last place they thought of” (28) demonstrates how racial power assigns Black lives to spaces marked by exclusion, neglect, and marginality. Such spatial positioning is not incidental but constitutes a deliberate geographical organization of racial hierarchy. Consequently, different locations do not merely reproduce identical forms of oppression; they reorganize domination according to distinct spatial conditions, allowing racial control to persist through changing geographic forms.

Geography of Unfreedom: Spatial Regimes of Racial Domination

Space in *The Underground Railroad* functions as an active mechanism in the production and maintenance of racial domination rather than as a neutral backdrop to historical events. Whitehead constructs a series of distinct geographical landscapes in which racial power is organized through different social, legal, and political arrangements. As Cora moves across states, she encounters spaces that appear separate and unrelated but remain connected through their regulation of Black life and mobility. This representation reflects McKittrick’s argument that space is socially produced through relations of power and that geography participates in the organization of racial hierarchies rather than merely containing them. The novel therefore challenges the assumption that movement across geographical boundaries necessarily produces freedom. Instead, each new location reveals how racial domination is embedded within space itself and continually reproduced through changing spatial forms. The novel develops this spatial logic through its construction of each state as a distinct racial regime. This becomes explicit when Lumbly, the underground agent, explains that “every state is different, . . . Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and ways of doing things” (Whitehead 68). Although the statement initially suggests variety and freedom, the novel repeatedly demonstrates that these “possibilities” remain structured by racial domination. This logic is reinforced by Groba, as he observes that Whitehead uses the Railroad to move Cora through “different Americas” and through “different phases of the black experience of perpetual unfreedom and inhospitality” (5). The movement between states therefore does not mark progression toward freedom but exposes the changing geographical forms through which racial domination persists. Also, reflecting on the movement of labor across different places and populations, Cora realizes that the white beneficiaries of slavery have not altered its underlying logic. As the narrator observes, “They had merely switched the fuel that moved the pistons” (Whitehead 157). The image of pistons continuing to move despite a change in fuel suggests that the machinery of oppression remains active even when its outward forms are altered. What changes are the particular forms, locations, and populations through which domination functions, while the underlying structure remains intact. As Groba further argues that Ridgeway’s movement through different geographical and historical contexts reflects the recurrence of Black exploitation, which “adopts different guises, depending on the place and the historical period,” while still operating through the same underlying imperial logic of domination (8). Therefore, racial domination does not disappear as people move through space, but reorganizes itself through new geographical and social arrangements. Georgia establishes the first spatial regime of racial domination in the novel. Rather than functioning as a neutral setting, the plantation is organized as a space in which violence, surveillance, and control structure everyday life. This becomes evident in the social arrangements governing the enslaved community itself. Describing disputes over the garden plots assigned to enslaved residents, the narrator explains that whenever an owner decides to sell an enslaved person, “the contract wasn’t dry before someone had snatched up your plot” (Whitehead 22). Those seeking control over the land can also employ “methods of intimidation” without consequence because “there were no judges here” (Whitehead 22). The absence of legal protection demonstrates that the plantation operates according to its own racial order rather than any system of justice. Whitehead reinforces this condition through the narrator’s observation that on Randall plantation: “There was no recourse, were no laws but the ones rewritten every day” (Whitehead 24). The plantation therefore functions as a self-contained racial space in which authority is continually reproduced through arbitrary power rather than stable legal principles. The violence sustaining this spatial order becomes even more explicit through the novel’s descriptions of everyday life on the plantation. Reflecting on the punishment awaiting Chester, Cora recalls that “she had seen men hung from trees and left for buzzards and crows. Women carved open to the bones with the cat-o’-nine-tails. Bodies alive and dead roasted on pyres. Feet cut off to prevent escape and hands cut off to prevent theft” (Whitehead 38). These images illustrate that violence is not exceptional but foundational to the organization of plantation space. The purpose of such spectacles is not merely to punish individuals but to regulate movement and suppress any possibility of resistance. The plantation’s control extends beyond physical violence to regulate movement itself, turning geography into a mechanism of racial domination. Enslaved people may move within the plantation’s boundaries, but any attempt to cross those boundaries transforms movement into a punishable offense. This becomes clear when the narrator describes Ridgeway’s visit to a neighboring plantation,

carrying “as proof of capture the heads of two runaways in a leather sack” before explaining that “crossing the state line was a capital offense in Georgia” (Whitehead 45). The severed heads function as a public warning that the limits imposed on enslaved people are not merely social but geographical. By making escape punishable by death, the state converts its borders into instruments of racial control. The violence attached to crossing these boundaries demonstrates that Georgia is organized to keep Black bodies confined to designated spaces and to prevent any movement that might challenge the plantation order. Cora’s escape further reveals the significance of space in the organization of power. As she travels through the swamp with Caesar, the narrator states that this was “the farthest she had ever been from home,” and that “even if she were dragged away at this moment and put in chains, she would still have these miles” (Whitehead 59). The statement shows that distance itself carries meaning because every mile traveled weakens the plantation’s immediate hold over her body. This sense of spatial transformation is reinforced in Whitehead’s own reflection, where he suggests that “[Cora] gains more agency. The further she gets from the plantation, the further she enters into herself” (Audible). However, the possibility of being recaptured remains present, indicating that the threat of domination continues to follow her beyond the plantation’s borders. This connection between movement and freedom appears again when Cora reaches Fletcher’s house. Although uncertain about the world beyond Georgia, she believes that “every mile between her and the plantation was a victory. She would add to her collection” (Whitehead 64). Significantly, her victories are measured not in legal rights or lasting security but in distance from the plantation. Whitehead thus presents geography as an active force in the struggle between domination and resistance. The importance Cora attaches to each mile demonstrates how thoroughly plantation space has shaped her life, while the constant danger of capture reveals that racial domination does not disappear through movement alone. Instead, Georgia establishes a spatial order in which freedom is imagined through mobility but continually threatened by the structures that seek to restrict it. If Georgia organizes racial domination through the open violence of the plantation, South Carolina reorganizes it through a different spatial arrangement that appears to distance Black residents from slavery while continuing to regulate their movement and position within the social landscape. Upon arriving in the state, Cora experiences forms of mobility previously unavailable to her. As the narrator observes, “She walked down the sidewalk as a free woman. No one chased her or abused her” (Whitehead 85). The image contrasts sharply with the plantation space, where attempts to move beyond the boundaries of Georgia can provoke severe punishment and death. Nevertheless, the significance of South Carolina lies not in the disappearance of control but in its spatial reorganization. This transition is symbolically captured when Sam provides Cora with new clothes and she reflects that “cotton went in one way, came out another” (Whitehead 89). The statement links Georgia and South Carolina through the same economic and racial system while emphasizing a transformation in form. Although Cora has crossed a state boundary, the structures that organize Black life have not vanished; they have been rearranged within a new geographical setting. The spatial logic of South Carolina becomes clearer through the organization of the town itself. During one of her visits to the Griffin Building, Cora becomes aware of the city’s racial geography. The narrator describes, “To the east side of the Griffin were the white people’s houses and their new projects—the expanded town square, the hospital, and the museum,” while Cora herself crosses westward “where the colored dormitories lay” (Whitehead 112). The description reveals that racial segregation is built into the geography of the state itself. Public institutions, housing, and civic development are distributed according to racial boundaries, producing separate spaces for white and Black residents. Cora ultimately recognizes that crossing into South Carolina has not freed her from the structures that govern life in Georgia. After escaping South Carolina and entering the Underground Railroad, Cora reflects that “the South Carolina chains were of new manufacture—the keys and tumblers marked by regional design—but accomplished the purpose of chains” (Whitehead 135). The metaphor directly connects geography to domination. Although the mechanisms differ from those of the plantation, they perform the same function of regulating Black existence. The state line therefore marks not a transition from oppression to freedom, but a movement from one racialized spatial order into another. North Carolina intensifies the spatial logic of domination by reorganizing the landscape around the exclusion of Black presence altogether. After escaping South Carolina, Cora initially believes she has reached a safer destination. Upon arriving at the underground station, the narrator remarks that “North Carolina was an improvement, beneath the surface” (Whitehead 140). The irony of this observation becomes apparent as soon as Cora emerges above ground. While being transported by Martin, the station agent, she encounters the state’s most visible spatial arrangement of terror: The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments. Some of them were naked, others partially clothed, the trousers black where their bowels emptied when their necks snapped. Gross wounds and injuries marked the flesh of those closest to her, the two caught by the station agent’s lantern.

One had been castrated, an ugly mouth gaping where his manhood had been. The other was a woman. Her belly curved. Cora had never been good at knowing if a body was with a child. Their bulging eyes seemed to rebuke her stares, but what were the attentions of one girl, disturbing their rest, compared to how the world had scourged them since the day they were brought into it? . . . In what sort of hell had the train let her off? (Whitehead 142)

Martin later explains that the townspeople call this route the “Freedom Trail,” a name whose irony exposes the state’s racial logic. Rather than marking a path toward freedom, the road is lined with mutilated Black bodies and functions as a public instrument of terror designed to deter Black mobility. The landscape itself becomes an instrument of racial control, functioning as a political message written on Black flesh, warning against movement, resistance, and even existence. By extending the spectacle of violence from the countryside to the town, North Carolina transforms geography into a mechanism of terror that continually reinforces the belonging and authority of white residents while marking Black people as lives to be excluded and eliminated from the state. During one of the town’s Friday festivals, Cora notices something that distinguishes North Carolina from every place she has previously encountered: “Everyone was white” (Whitehead 145). The observation follows her memories of South Carolina, where Black and white people occupy the same streets, workplaces, and public spaces despite profound inequalities. Here, however, racial segregation has progressed beyond separation into near-total erasure. As Morgade observes, North Carolina’s abolition of slavery is accompanied not by racial equality but by the systematic eradication of Black presence within the state (30). The narrator therefore remarks that “in North Carolina the negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes” (Whitehead 145). The statement does not simply indicate exclusion from public life. It suggests that Black people are allowed visibility only in death. Their presence survives solely through hanging bodies displayed before the community, transforming racial violence into one of the state’s defining spatial features. This project of racial elimination emerges from the fears that Martin later explains to Cora while recounting the Justice Convention, where influential politicians, planters, and lawyers gather to discuss the future of North Carolina. Their discussions are driven by anxieties about growing Black populations, slave uprisings, and the possibility that whites might eventually lose control of the region. These concerns reflect broader historical anxieties surrounding Black population growth. Henry Louis Gates, Jr argues that the rapid increase of the Black population before the Civil War intensified white fears of rebellion and the loss of racial control (67). Martin recounts that, during the Justice Convention, some of the white participants proudly conclude that they have finally abolished slavery. Oney Garrison, however, immediately counters this claim, replying, “We abolished niggers” (Whitehead 152). The distinction is crucial. The objective is not to transform labor relations but to remove Black people from the state’s geography altogether. This vision of a white-only territory becomes formalized through laws that forbid “colored men and women from setting foot on North Carolina soil. Freeman who refused to leave their land were run off or massacred” (Whitehead 152). Control therefore operates through territorial exclusion, legally defining white residents as the only legitimate occupants of the state while forcing Black people beyond its geographical boundaries. Even so, Whitehead demonstrates the paradox produced by this system through Cora’s own reflections while hiding in Martin’s attic. Confined for months within a space so small that she cannot stand upright, she wonders: “What a world it is, Cora thought, that makes a living prison into your only haven . . . On the plantation, she was not free, but she moved unrestricted on its acres . . . Here, she was free of her master, but slunk around a warren so tiny she couldn’t stand” (Whitehead 164). The contrast reveals that freedom cannot be measured simply by geographical movement. Although Cora has crossed state lines and escaped her owner, the spaces available to her remain structured by racial power. North Carolina thus demonstrates how domination adapts spatially by transforming an entire state into a territory where Black existence itself is rendered unlawful. The later sections of the novel further reinforce the instability of Black spatial belonging across the American landscape. Unlike Georgia’s plantation order, South Carolina’s institutional regulation, or North Carolina’s regime of exclusion, Tennessee appears as a devastated landscape marked by a great fire that has transformed the state itself. As Cora, Ridgeway, and the rest of the group enter the state, the narrator describes how “The world was scorched and harrowed as far as they could see, a sea of ash and char from the flat plains of the fields up to the hills and mountains” (Whitehead 183). The destruction extends across the entire terrain, making Tennessee a geography already shaped by environmental catastrophe rather than by the visible institutions of racial rule. Initially, Cora interprets the devastation as justice against those who enslaved her people and stole the land from its original inhabitants, believing that “the whites got what they deserved,” but she later realizes that Tennessee’s destruction is “the fruit of indifferent nature” (Whitehead 196–97). Yet the altered landscape does not diminish her own vulnerability. The unfamiliar geography, marked by the ominous red sky, makes Cora “dread the rules of this next territory” (Whitehead 188). Her response reflects an

awareness that every new territory imposes unfamiliar conditions upon Black survival. Tennessee therefore functions less as another institutional racial regime than as a transitional geography, revealing that movement into a different landscape does not free Cora from the uncertainty that accompanies Black mobility throughout the novel. Cora's fears soon materialize as she moves through the devastated landscape. Observing the destruction around her, she realizes that there is "Nowhere to hide. No refuge between those black stalks, even if she weren't fettered. Even if she had an opportunity" (Whitehead 184). This observation shows how the physical environment itself restricts movement and limits possibilities for escape. Whereas concealment remains possible in earlier locations, Tennessee's ruined terrain exposes those who move through it, transforming geography into a condition of vulnerability. This realization expands into a broader reflection on the state, where the narrator observes that "if Tennessee had a temperament, it took after the dark personality of the world, with a taste for arbitrary punishment. No one was spared, regardless of the shape of their dreams or the color of their skin" (Whitehead 197). By connecting Tennessee to the broader "personality of the world," the novel suggests that vulnerability cannot be escaped simply through movement from one place to another. Instead, Tennessee dispels the illusion that mobility guarantees safety, revealing how different geographies reproduce vulnerability through different spatial conditions. Even in this devastated landscape, the novel reinforces McKittrick's argument that space is never neutral but actively shapes the possibilities and limits of Black life. This description emphasizes that violence in Tennessee is not unique to this landscape but reflects a broader condition of vulnerability and arbitrary threat that extends beyond any single geography. Tennessee therefore reinforces the novel's broader argument that movement across space does not itself produce freedom, since Black survival continues to depend upon the conditions each geography makes possible. Against this devastation, Valentine Farm in Indiana initially appears to offer an alternative spatial order grounded in Black autonomy, communal labor, and mutual recognition. Upon arriving, Cora finds a place unlike any she has previously encountered. The narrator observes that "the entire farm was something beyond her imagination" and that "[t]he Valentines had performed a miracle" (Whitehead 229). For Cora, the farm represents more than physical safety. It creates a spatial environment in which Black people exercise control over their labor, relationships, and futures. This possibility is reflected in Valentine's guiding principle to "stay, and contribute" (Whitehead 231), a philosophy that links belonging to collective responsibility rather than coercion. The narrator further emphasizes the uniqueness of this space when Cora joins a gathering of residents and realizes that she is surrounded by people who have been "born in Africa, or born in chains," yet are now "free and black and stewards of their own fates" (Whitehead 254). So, the farm appears to challenge the racial geographies that have structured every previous state, offering a rare vision of Black self-determination and communal belonging. However, Whitehead simultaneously exposes the precariousness of this refuge. While Valentine Farm seems removed from the violence of Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee, it remains situated within the same national geography that produces those spaces. This contradiction emerges when Royal takes Cora to the abandoned station beneath the farm. Looking into the tunnel, she develops the unsettling impression that "as if in the world there were no places to escape to, only places to flee" (Whitehead 235). The realization transforms movement itself into a condition of perpetual displacement. Refuge becomes temporary rather than permanent, and safety appears contingent rather than secure. The same idea resurfaces when Cora challenges Royal's claim that she is free, insisting, "I'm still property, even in Indiana" (Whitehead 246). Her response demonstrates that crossing geographical boundaries cannot fully dissolve the structures that define Black existence. As McKittrick argues, racial domination is embedded within spatial arrangements themselves, and the novel repeatedly reveals how even seemingly liberated places remain entangled within broader systems of racial power. This fragility becomes explicit during the community meeting on the farm. Responding to hopes that Valentine might provide lasting sanctuary, Lander acknowledges its impossibility while defending its necessity. He argues that "Valentine Farm is a delusion" because history offers no evidence that Black people should possess a place of refuge, yet he insists that "here we are" (Whitehead 257). His repeated emphasis on presence transforms the farm into an act of collective resistance against the spatial logic that continually denies Black belonging. However, the novel ultimately confirms the vulnerability that Mingo has earlier identified when he warns that nearby whites will not "endure our impudence forever" (Whitehead 256). Shortly afterward, a white mob destroys the farm, and the narrator depicts "the white posse" dragging men and women into the darkness (Whitehead 259). The destruction demonstrates that Black autonomy remains exposed to forces operating beyond the farm's boundaries. Consequently, the farm is indeed "a delusion" (Whitehead 257). This recognition crystallizes the central logic of racialized spatiality throughout the novel: different locations alter the form of domination, but no geography exists fully outside its reach. The novel's final movement further reinforces the instability of Black

spatial belonging. After the destruction of Valentine Farm, Cora once again enters the underground network and moves westward without any guarantee of arrival or safety. The narrator describes her journey as leading “into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere” (Whitehead 274), before redefining the destination simply as “northness” (Whitehead 274). The significance of this ending lies in its refusal to provide a final geography of freedom. As Afsaneh observes, Whitehead does not conclude the novel with the attainment of a liberated society but instead sends Cora “into the unknown” (11). This uncertainty is reinforced when Cora reflects that ahead there may be “an exit” or merely “a dead end” (Whitehead 275). The North therefore functions less as a destination than as a possibility. Rather than resolving the spatial tensions that structure the novel, the ending suggests that movement itself remains unfinished. In this sense, Whitehead ultimately presents the America of The Underground Railroad as a racialized landscape in which movement repeatedly shifts Black subjects from one structure of control into another. Even when domination changes its appearance, from plantation violence, to institutional regulation, to exterminatory terror, to precarious refuge, its underlying structure persists across space.

Conclusion

This study has argued that The Underground Railroad represents racial domination not simply as a social or historical phenomenon but as a spatial system that continually reorganizes itself through changing geographical landscapes. By examining the novel through McKittrick’s concept of racialized spatiality, the analysis demonstrates that plantations, towns, territories, devastated landscapes, and places of refuge actively shape the possibilities and limitations of Black life rather than functioning as passive settings. This spatial perspective contributes to existing scholarship by showing that movement across different locations does not necessarily disrupt oppression but instead reveals the adaptability of racial power through successive spatial configurations. Rather than emphasizing individual acts of violence or isolated institutions, the study highlights the geographical organization through which domination is continually reproduced. More broadly, this study suggests that Whitehead’s fictional geography invites reflection on the continuing relationship between race, space, mobility, and freedom beyond the novel itself. By exposing how landscapes regulate movement, belonging, and exclusion, the novel encourages readers to question the spatial arrangements through which inequality is produced and maintained, demonstrating that struggles over freedom are inseparable from struggles over space. The present study is necessarily limited by its exclusive focus on McKittrick’s theory of racialized spatiality. Other perspectives, including postcolonial, Black feminist, ecocritical, or memory studies approaches, may illuminate additional dimensions beyond the scope of this analysis. Future research may therefore combine racialized spatiality with other critical frameworks to explore further the intersections of geography, race, identity, and resistance in Whitehead’s fiction.

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