



The Absence-Presence Configuration of Black Being: Signifying Enslavement and Resistance in Colson Whitehead's *the Underground Railroad*

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Abstract: The most prominent theme running through Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* is freedom. Here the question of black freedom is a question of black ontological being. Black being is continually degraded and denied, making him an absent being. However, as object or commodity, black being is a slippery object that keeps shifting and changing in the imposed margins of racial oppression. To understand this slippery nature of black being, which is an outlet of black resistance, this paper suggests that black emancipation is best viewed as an absent presence, something that oscillates between reality and non reality. Put differently, forms of resistance fall below acts of dehumanization; they hide underground. Inherent to this idea is the Derridean's concept of the "presence of the absence" that I use to explore the dialectic of objectification and humanization (subject/object dialectic) in order to show how black being is configured in the margin of different practices and mechanisms of objectification. How does the author articulate slaves' resistance or struggle within objectification? In other words, the study demonstrates that blacks' subjectivity and subjection are imbricated in the embodied ambivalence of their dehumanization.

Keywords: absence, dehumanization, existence, freedom, presence, slavery, subjection, subjectivity

1. INTRODUCTION

The *Underground Railroad* dramatizes blacks' bondage and freedom, their enslavement and resistance, with a particular emphasis on a rhetorical dissolution of the white subject/black object paradigm. This basic operational configuration exemplifies the tension between presence and absence, being and nonbeing, a fictional recreation of the Fugitive Slave Act and the Underground Railroad, which historically, operated as two opposing forces in the issue of American slavery. The Fugitive Slave Law is supposed to maintain whites' property rights on blacks, and the undercurrent network, the abolitionist undermining organization referred to as the Underground Railroad is a system designed to help slaves escape to freedom.

In this dialectical configuration, blacks' objectification is embedded with ambivalence and ironically bear signs of disruptive potential. Based on the instability of racial objectification, this paper purports to read black resistance through object hood. In other words, it aims at showing how the author shapes the modes of underground resistance that disrupt the obvious historical master-slave dialectic.

Slavery has exposed African Americans to social as well as physical death (Patterson, 1982). Though they became theoretically free after Emancipation Proclamation, they remain continuously caught in the spiral of domination and oppression, an ontological insecurity (Calvin Warren, 2017; Dann J. Broyle, 2019). Police shootings, routinized humiliations are symptoms of their existence without Being. Today, "Black Lives Matter" sounds like a desperate cry to assert blacks' humanity or their grounding against their ungrounding.

This dialectical structure of ontological blackness is artistically dramatized in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Beyond the question of freedom, the novel unfolds the possibilities of blacks' resistance between presence and absence, a psychic resistance located in their subjection. Subjection, indeed, according to Judith Butler (1997, 27) is "the paradoxical effect of a regime of power in which the very 'conditions of existence,' the possibility of continuing as a recognizable social being, requires the formation and maintenance of the subject in subordination."

In *The Underground Railroad*, blacks' subjection or their absence is always haunted by a presence: the specter of their resistance to enslavement seen as the most radical form of unfreedom. Most critics of Whitehead's novel on the impossibility of black freedom, eluding the underground patterns of slaves' resistance. Without completely blotting out this perspective, this paper aims at putting into crisis the metaphysical dichotomies of presence and absence and trace out a space of resistance in the margin of African American dehumanization.

Leaning on Derrida's theorizing, I use the dynamic play of absence and presence of meaning to explore the relationships between whites and blacks. I focus on an interpretive space between absence and presence, non-being and being, trying to reassess the novel by bringing to the fore the modalities of black resistance imbricated in their subservience, which put into crisis their total domination.

To achieve its objective, the paper articulates two interrelated sections. The first one explores the dehumanizing rhetoric or symptoms of blacks' absence or their ungrounded being through the ecologies of death. The second section deals with the spectral of black presence in subjection.

2. BLACKS' ABSENCE OR THE SYMPTOMS OF UNGROUNDED BEING

The most common way in which the blacks are absent is the negation of their existence, as they are excluded from the categories of humanity. Enslaved blacks are objects of an unresolvable contradiction between presence and absence. The conflicting presence of value and non value persists in them. The subject/object relationship confines them in an ontological position of a thing. As slaves, they are defined by law as the master's exclusive property, and are treated like an object. Their humanity is denied and they are condemned to social death (Patterson, 1982). All the same, as Kashif Jerome Powell writes in his "Hauntology of Blackness" (2017, 85), "the black body is thrust into an intimate relationship with death."

Slavery is a system which subjugates the black (the object) to the absolute power of the white (subject). The core narrative of *The Underground Railroad* is centered on this debasing system. This dehumanizing process validates his social death, and confines him in an absent world. The black is a figure of absence; and this absence is signaled through his objectification. As the narrator clearly announces on the opening pages of the novel, "In America the quirk was that people were things" (6). Slavery makes blacks into commodities to be used according to the need of their owner. As Nathan Huggins asserts, "One was a thing to be bought and sold, traded for money, land, or other objects. One was a living animal – like a horse, a cow, a pig – so that one's seed was part of the bargain" (1990, 115-116).

In Whitehead's novel, an example of this abstraction of blacks is evoked in the following words: "A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing – a cart or a horse or a slave – your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place" (6-7). This implied hierarchical system of the plantation distances blacks from their humanity. Actually, there are two categories of individuals: the white subject and the slaves who are objects along with "cart," and "horse." The slave exists only in his use value for the master. In the system of chattel slavery, the slave woman's offspring is the downright property of her owner, a chattel property which "can be traded and transferred as any other object of value" (Nathan Huggins, 1990, 115).

As an instrument for the white man's economic purposes, the negation of the slave's humanity starts at the auction block. "At the auction block they tallied the souls purchased at each auction, and on the plantations the overseers preserved the names of workers in rows of tight cursive. Every name an asset, breathing capital, profit made flesh" (215). Once a property, the slave's life depends on his owner, who exerts his property right on him. As such, the slave's life is made of subjection, radical dependency, and therefore a non-being or an absent being. This negation or reification of his humanity occurs in southern slave states as well as in free states according to the narrative, and through diverse forms of terror and violence.

Whether in slave zones or free ones, the relationships between whites and blacks function on the basis of a stratified racial contract: the hierarchy of white supremacy and black inferiority. In this dialectical logic, violence and terror constitute the common disciplinary regime, either by the slave owner, the overseer, or the slave catcher in order to subjugate blacks. On Randall plantation, the slaves are

always exposed to terrorizing masters. As the narrator points out, this disciplinary regime is perpetrated from father to son: "Terrance took after the father, tall and owl-faced, perpetually on the verge of swooping down on prey" (29). The result is the absence of blacks in the social world.

Whites disparage and dehumanize the slaves. All their interactions with them are undergirded by the dominant and supremacist ideology. Thus, around the vortex of nonexistence, or non-presence, blacks are presented as properties or livestock. According to the narrator, Randall's plantation employs more than one hundred and fifty slaves referred to as "heads" to underline their livestock status: "The two plantations were well-stocked, ninety *head* of nigger on the northern half and eighty-five *head* on the southern half" (emphasis mine, 7). The objectification of the slave reverberates in the narrator's use of "head" as if they were animals.

Blacks' absence is therefore materialized by the abstraction of the metaphysical grounding of their social and human existence. As Calvin Warren argues, the Negro is outside the precincts of ontology (2017). This exclusion from the realm of humanity is the cause of slaves' degradation and unfreedom. Colson Whitehead dramatizes this absence of humanity, this non-being, and therefore underscores the idea of black inescapable nihilism, as Calvin Warren has elaborated in an article entitled "Black Nihilism and the Politics of Hope," where he postulates: "This is certainly an audacious claim, but any critical analysis of black existence in the twenty-first century will have to contend with black nihilism—either reluctantly or otherwise. It is the inescapable interlocutor in every utterance about blackness" (2015, 224).

In the same vein, Kashif Jerome Powell, in his "Hauntology of Blackness," writes that "slavery constructed a 'black hole' that bifurcated being into two categories: the nonexistent and everything remaining" (2007, 101). What emerges from whites' subjection of blacks is the affirmation of the latter's absence, as it manifests in various scenes in Whitehead's novel. Blacks' exclusion from the full human status recurs throughout the whole narrative. Blacks are defined as nothing, and their nothingness goes with the obliteration of their being. One manifestation of this nothingness is their expulsion from the social life of the plantation. They are isolated, constrained in a place, "the Hob," which is a locus of destruction, and serves as a site for their dehumanization:

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

This objectification of slaves finds "rational" justification among whites. Indeed, pro-slave advocates have elaborated a racial logic of hierarchy and power referred to as "the American imperative," a theory which allows them to continue to excluding and exploiting the slaves: "Here was the true Great Spirit, the divine thread connecting all human endeavor – if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent. The American imperative" (80). The natural consequence of that dehumanizing rhetoric is the impossibility of blacks' freedom and the inescapability of white supremacy. For, according to Ridgeway, "If niggers were supposed to have their freedom, they wouldn't be in chains. If the red man was supposed to keep hold of his land, it'd still be his. If the white man wasn't destined to take this new world, he wouldn't own it now" (80). This is therefore all about a divine right, as Ridgeway further explains:

All these years later, I prefer the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate. Our destiny by divine prescription – the American imperative. (221-222)

The articulation of this American imperative makes blacks into commodities to serve the master's economic self-interest. As the narrator reveals, James Randall, one of the inheritors of Randall plantation: "wrung out every possible dollar. When black blood was money, the savvy businessman knew to open the vein" (23). In that way, blacks are instruments subjected to white power and discipline. As Ridgeway conceives, "You need to be strong to survive the labor and to make us greater. We fatten hogs, not because it pleases us but because we need hogs to survive. But we can't have you too clever. We can't have you so fit you outrun us" (223).

In this politics of object-oriented value of blacks' absence, blacks' emancipation is a source of crisis and anxiety within white American communities. Ridgeway, the famous slave catcher is an incarnation of such an anxiety in the narrative. He strongly rejects and fights the underground railroad system because it violates and threatens blacks' natural status of ontological instrument. He considers the underground railroad as a "criminal conspiracy devoted to theft of property" (81). As Warren (2017) contends, the free black destabilizes the metaphysical structure. "If the human is to maintain its fiction of ontological coherence, it must exterminate the problem" (Warren, 2017, loc.1338). As slave catchers, Ridgeway and his gang are invested with the role of "exterminating the problem;" that is to crush any act from slaves that tends to violate the hierarchical contract. In a conversation with Cora, he reveals his role that is associated with his name Ridgeway:

"The name of punishment, dogging every fugitive step and every thought of running away. For every slave I bring home, twenty others abandon their full-moon schemes. I'm a notion of order. The slave that disappears – it's a notion, too. Of hope. Undoing what I do so that a slave the next plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too. If we allow that, we accept the flaw in the imperative. And I refuse." (223)

The "American imperative" is the exclusion of blacks from the realm of humanity. And the notion of free black amounts to what Calvin Warren (2017) refers to as "the transmogrification" between being black and being human. Blacks' freedom is an abomination that threatens the human-animal order in an anti black world. In an anti black world, as he argues, "The free black is the nothing that terrorizes whites, that destabilizes the metaphysical structure and ground of existence. When the black becomes free, 'the boundary between human and property and freedom and unfreedom are thrown into crisis'" (loc.635).

In the logic of this human-property structural hierarchy, the slave's emancipation is a transgression, a "flaw," according to Ridgeway. He "had called Cora and her mother a flaw in the American scheme. If two women were a flaw, what was a community?" (265) In this scheme, whites have the divine right to possess slaves who are less than human beings. This status of property and object transpires in the white rhetorical world and ideology. Thus, talking about blacks, their language is riddled with animal references, as in this passage where runaway slaves are directly equated with pigs by white men. Pigs, indeed, connote filth and baseness. Comparing the slaves to pigs is strongly dehumanizing.

The runaways were different sort of beast but more remunerative. There was no mistaking the identity of the trio, given the specificity of the bulletins. Two of the hog hunters tackled the smallest of the party, pinning her to the ground. After being so quiet for so long – the slaves to escape the detection of hunters, and the hunters to escape the detection of their prey – all of them cried out and shrieked with their exertions. (59)

Other debasing stereotypes include whites' paternalistic attitudes toward blacks. For instance, Mrs. Garner, Caesar's former mistress is strongly convinced that the people of the African tribe need whites' protection and care: "She didn't agree with the popular arguments for slavery but saw it as a necessary evil given the obvious intellectual deficiencies of the African tribe. To free them from bondage all at once would be disastrous – how would they manage their affairs without a careful and patient eye to guide them?" (49)

Beyond these debasing attitudes, whites indulge in various other mechanisms or acts of subjection with the purpose of showing the absence of blacks' humanity. In this system of denegation, the patrollers and the slave catchers play a central role. They make white supremacy inescapable even after the law that abolishes slavery. As one of them says: "In effect, they abolished slavery. On the contrary, Oney Garrison said in response. We abolished niggers" (165). Or, as the narrator puts, "In North Carolina the Negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes"(156).

Ultimately, those acts of subjection include using death. The suppression of blacks' being is the fate reserved to runaway slaves, when they are captured by patrollers. Those slaves are lynched and publicly exposed along the road ironically baptized the "Trail of Freedom":

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. (152)

Slaves are harnessed without human value. The systematic suppression highlights the absence of their humanity. They lack an ontological ground outside the oppressive logics of use value. And as Calvin Warren (2017, loc. 936) argues, "The Negro is born into absence and not presence." This idea is somewhat substantiated throughout Whitehead's novel. Ajarry, Cora's grandmother has noted that the zone of blacks' nonbeing is inescapable: "To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible" (8). And freedom is also impossible for blacks in zones of freedom. As Cora experiences, far away from her master's plantation, she remains an object, a thing in the hands of whites who use some "technicalities" (92) to bring blacks into subjection. Actually, what changes about the slaves' conditions is the shift of yoke, from individual properties on the plantations to government ones, exposed to new forms of dehumanization, as is the case of women in this passage: "the women were still being herded and domesticated. Not pure merchandise as formerly but livestock: bred, neutered. Penned in dormitories that were like coops or hutches" (124).

In addition, as Cora soon realizes, those women are not just livestock; they are unknowingly subject to sterilization by government agents: "With the surgeries that Dr. Stevens described, Cora thought, the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies – steal their future" (117). This technicality aims at containing the growth of the black population so as to maintain white hegemony: "America has imported and bred so many Africans that in many states the whites are outnumbered. For that reason alone, emancipation is impossible. With strategic sterilization – first the women but both sexes in time – we could free them from bondage without fear that they'd butcher us in our sleep" (122).

Other whites' technicalities to have a total control on blacks include white doctors' plan to suppress any form of rebellion or uprising among blacks, the ones who are "predisposed to nervous disorders" (121). Dr. Bertram intends to annihilate such "diseased" attitudes by acting on the mind of slaves. In a public address to his fellows, he says:

What if we performed adjustments to the niggers' breeding patterns and removed those of melancholic tendency? Managed other attitudes, such as sexual aggression and violent natures? We could protect our women and daughters from their jungle urges, which Dr. Bertram understood to be a particular fear of southern white men. (121-122)

These technicalities appear as the solutions to the Negro problem and result from the white ideology of negating black humanity. Definitely, freedom and blackness are incompatible concepts. To use Stuart Hall's phrase, it is not just a "floating signifier," but an "empty signifier." True freedom with blacks remains unachieved. Beyond this impossibility, and as Calvin Warren (2017) notes, "Black freedom does not arrive in the place of Being's unfolding, it is just a presence that is absent in its lack of being (appearance without Being)" (loc.2232). The slave or the black being is confronted to destruction, exclusion, and object hood, which obviously call his humanity into question. Then, if blacks are a human abstraction or absent beings, how do they escape the reifying cycle of signification as it is deployed in Whitehead's novel? The following lines shall focus on the author's signification of blacks' resistance as it is imbricated in their subjection.

3. BEYOND TOTAL ABSENCE AND TOTAL PRESENCE

According to Johnathan Culler, the acts of signification of freedom depend on differences. As he writes, "Freedom appears as a Master Signifier. It contains a paradoxical element which stands in for what eludes it. The signifier "freedom" has inherent paradoxes, radically shifting meanings in different contexts. The condition of signification produces differences. "Acts of signification depend on differences" (2007, 96). In the light of this paradox, this section explores the performance of resistance in the dynamics of absence and presence: the transformative relationship between absence and presence, as epitomized in the very title of the novel. Indeed, the underground railroad designates the marginalized term in opposition with The Fugitive Slave Act, the privileged pole. Thus, in *The Underground Railroad*, the slave's subjection to white power paradoxically initiates the slave's agency. Based on an inverted hierarchy of absence/presence, this section highlights traces of resistance, or the modes of blacks' resistance to their "social death" that de-freeze the play subject/object relations.

As Judith Butler elaborates right in the introduction of her *Theories in subjection. The Psychic Life of Power* (1997),

As a form of power, subjection is paradoxical. To be dominated by a power external to oneself is a familiar and agonizing form power takes. To find, however, that what “one” is, one’s very formulation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon that very power is quite another. We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order. This is surely a fair description of part of what power does. But if, following Foucault, we understand power as *forming* the subject as well, as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are. (1-2)

Blacks’ existence without Being in an environment that Calvin Warren (2017) calls an “anti black world” entails a particular form or mode of resistance that can be qualified as underground resistance. It is a resistance that is absent but yet present. This ambivalence or absent presence that operates simultaneously and characterizes African Americans finds echo in what Ralph Ellison (1953) terms “the black mask of humanity,” or the syndrome of invisibility that he theorizes in his “Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity,”¹ and dramatizes in *Invisible Man*.²

Slaves’ acts of resistance operate underground, which is a figurative locus for a space of subversion, the interiority of blackness. Acts of resistance on the part of blacks are any attempts to claim and secure independence, so as to express their humanity against an institution that defines them fundamentally as property as in *The Underground Railroad*. This struggle to survive enslavement variously deploys in the form of absent presence introduced in the narrative by Ajarry, the main character’s grandmother.

Against defeat and the valley of nihilism, during the time of her enslavement, Ajarry has opposed optimism and hope, a form of resilience to her enslavement and dehumanization. Though an absent figure, she can be considered as the first person to have instigated resistance that has later been handed over to Mabel, her daughter, and then to Cora, her grandchild. Definitely, Cora’s mother and grandmother, as Constante Gonzalez Groba (2018) argues, provide her “the genealogical backdrop of her subjectivity” (131). With Ajarry, for whom, “To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible” (Whitehead 8), the ideal of freedom has sometimes been just evasive, or imaginative. To overcome the burden of slavery and relieve her separation from her relatives, she refrains from thinking about the cruelties they were certainly confronted with, and resorts to fantasies that give her “comfort when her burdens were such to splinter her into a thousand pieces” (4). As the narrator reveals,

For the rest of her life she imagined her cousins worked for kind and generous masters up north, engaged in more forgiving trades than her own, weaving or spinning, nothing in the fields. In her stories, Isay and Sidoo and the rest somehow bought their way out of bondage and lived as free men and women in the city of Pennsylvania, a place she had overheard two white men discuss once. (4)

In addition, confronted with whites’ structures and systems of black oppression and annihilation, Ajarry devises a particular expression to preserve a modicum of freedom, a mythic form of liberation. Enslaved on Randall’s plantation, she seeks, finds and owns a patch of land in the swamp where she used to cultivate her garden. This small territory, about “three yards square” (14), which grants her a sort of freedom later becomes a family legacy. Ajarry keeps watching over that land, and according to Mabel, she: “Said she’d dig a hammer in they heads if they so much as looked at it” (14). Mabel has inherited it from Ajarry and after her, Cora holds on this family heritage. According to the narrator, the plot of land is a garden where Cora “ended up every Sunday when their half day of work was

¹ Ralph Ellison, “Twentieth-Century and the Black Mask of Humanity.” *Within the Circle. An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism From the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*. Edited by Angelyn Mitchell. Durham: Duke University Press, 1994.

² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, New York, Penguin Books, 1984.

done: perched on her seat, looking for things to fix. She owned herself for a few hours every week was how she looked at it (12). It symbolizes the mask of black humanity, a gage of freedom and resistance that Cora preserves against all odds, as her mother has done before her. Actually, the land ownership underwrites black subservience. In other words, possessing a land is an expression of blacks' essential humanity.

This humanity is also performed through the freedom drive that immensely animates Mabel, Cora's mother who vanished from Randall plantation when Cora was only eight years old. For the people on the plantation, by succeeding in running away, she has defeated slavery: running away. "Of Mabel there was no sign. No one had escaped the Randall plantation before" (41). As Dann Broyld (2019, 172) asserts: "Whatever the case running away signified optimism for an imagined future of freedom." Running away is a form of resistance, which is actualized through the underground railroad, as a system for the refusal of the subservient status. It is therefore supposed to help blacks emerge into presence from concealment. As Constante González Groba (2018) notes, "The railroad has always been a crucially important symbol in African American literature and culture, signifying, among other things, spiritual hope and a vehicle of freedom" (256). Actually, the underground railroad threatens the very infrastructure of the Peculiar Institution: the white human and his black equipment, white domination and black subjection, and helps actualize the slave humanity.

The underground is the place of subversion, where an existential affinity and kinship of slaves is proven. Slaves' resisting the predation of social death prompts them into this underground mode of being, an empowering world of existence, which above all, represents a hope for their freedom. The belief in a brighter future is crucial for blacks' in an anti black world. Thus, though it is a highly risky path to freedom, it is nonetheless worthy of undertaking for Cora who remains stubbornly attached to her dream for freedom: "In the light of morning she convinced herself that her scheming had been a dream. Those were not her thoughts, not at all. Because to walk around with that in your mind and do nothing was to die" (99). Cora is relentlessly enlivened, charged up by the dream of freedom, a pervasive ideal amongst slaves, and a form of resistance she has inherited from Mabel, her absent mother.

Despite her apparent absence, Mabel is an absent presence which remains a central figure having an afterlife through her daughter. On the one hand, Mabel is the symbol of black nonexistence, black invisibility, or black absence. She is dead and absent in the narrative. Yet, on the other hand, her absence and invisibility function as strategies of defense and resistance. This non-presence or remarkable deathly presence and material absence point to a form of presence or a tactic of resistance. Significantly, she is a spectral presence that shapes Cora's strong desire for freedom. Cora is a kind of surrogate who fills the space left by her mother, as Ridgeway, the slave catcher states about her: "You're your mother's daughter through and through" (301).

Mabel plays the role of an excluded outsider, yet she is significantly present in her daughter. For Cora, her mother must be alive, and certainly out of bondage life. She is permanently remembered, and is present in the memory of both blacks and whites. The idea of her presence and the belief in her being free somewhere provide the backdrop of Cora's resistance and struggle for freedom. This hope is crucial to the freedom drive she is animated with, and that agential force of being prompts her into a fugitive life. Cora's agency is therefore shaped by her absent mother. Indeed, the play of absence and presence is made vivid through the voice of liberty that speaks in Cora's innermost. Everything happens as if Cora were haunted the spirit of her mother. This hauntology or logic of the ghost infuses her with a strong desire for freedom that is enhanced by her naturalistic stoicism, her intrepidity, or unyielding courage.

When Caesar comes to Cora to suggest her to escape together, he certainly knows that she is deeply imbued with this family fugitive impulse. She is naturally audacious and immune to pain and suffering. "No chains fastened Cora's misfortunes to her character or actions. Her skin was black and this was how the world treated black people. No more, no less" (216). Once she coaxes into escaping, she sets in an impossible but yet move, trying to move out of the confines of slavery.

This zeal toward death is displayed on many occasions. One such occasion is her confrontational encounter with Terrance Randall who beats Chester, a young slave, for inadvertently spilling wine on Terrance's shirt. In a willful obstinacy, Cora finds a way to say no to the master's abuse by offering her body to receive the beatings destined to Chester:

No one else in the village made a move to help the boy – how could they? They'd seen it a hundred times before, as victim or witness, and would see it a hundred times more until they died. But Cora did. She shielded the boy with her own body and took his blows for him. She was a stray through and through, so far off the path it was like she'd already run from the place long ago. (235)

Cora knows that this act of imprudence is a violation of the contract of deference in the slaves' relationships with the master, and therefore incurs severe punishment. Yet, this does not prevent her from confronting him. This act of bravery shows that the humanity that is denied to her is always present: "This night the feeling settled on her heart again. It grabbed hold of her and before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her, she was bent over the boy's body as a shield..." (34). The figment of freedom referred to in the foregoing passage as "the feeling" is the unbaiting agential force of being, the expression of humanity that counteracts her subjection.

The performance of black humanity that overcomes the regime of powerlessness and non-humanity is imbricated in acts of subjection. In the bleakness of slavery, seeking freedom has always been on slaves' mind. Freedom is not a palpable material "something you could hold in your hand, like dirt," (117). As Cora describes it, it is fictive and elusive; that is "something you could not (hold in your hand)" (117). In this apprehension, freedom is like a dream, which is continuously present in the slaves' mind. Whatever the circumstance or context, the slaves yearn for freedom: "Every slave thinks about it. In the morning and in the afternoon and in the night. Dreaming of it. Every dream a dream of escape even when it didn't look like it" (56). Most of the time, this secret is not easily discernible, yet it is always there, and worn as a mask of humanity. Cora could not detect that mask in Lovey, her friend, who joins her and Caesar in their plan to escape: "Cora was acquainted with this squeamish quality of Lovey's, but she did not recognize the other side of her friend, whatever had overtaken the girl and made her run" (56).

Though active physical defiance of blacks is rare, whites' dehumanization of blacks remains incomplete for the slaves always long to run away. Resistance for them therefore amounts to how to elude complete erasure of their being. This absent presence that signals the ideological status of black being in subjection is manifest in other instances of black performances of humanity. For instance, beyond the shackles of slavery, death constitutes a form of resistance. The case of the people from the Igbo tribe in the following passage is very illustrative:

Did Sam know that the Igbo tribe of the African continent is predisposed to nervous disorders? Suicide and black moods? The doctor recounted the story of forty slaves, shackled together on a ship, who jumped overboard en masse rather than live in bondage. The kind of mind that could conceive of and execute such a fantastic course! (121)

For whites, this collective suicide of the Igbo people showcases a particular psychological disease. While for whites, committing suicide is a cowardice act, for these Africans, it is not a refusal of life, but a form of resistance to slavery. This deathly presence contradicts their absence or lack of humanity. Finally, death reveals a means of assertion of their human value, as echoed in Ernest J. Gaines' novel: *A Lesson Before Dying*, in which, Jefferson, the main character has to confront death in order to overturn the myth of black non-humanity.³

Resistance as presence operates variously in the narrative of *The Underground Railroad*. It opposes power in its relation to appropriation. One such form concerns the slaves' celebration of their birthdays, as in the case of the completely ruined old Jockey. Indeed, as the narrator indicates, "Everybody knew niggers didn't have birthdays" (11). However, the white master makes an exception and tolerates slaves' gathering to celebrate old Jockey's birthday:

No one minded his caprices. It was enough that he was the oldest colored man they had ever met, that he had survived every torment big and small white men had concocted and implemented. His eyes were clouded, his leg lame, his ruined hand permanently curled as if still clenched around a spade, but he was alive. The white men left him alone now. Old man Randall said nothing about his birthdays, and neither did James when he took over... The white men were silent. As if they'd given up or decided that a small freedom was the worst punishment of all, presenting the bounty of true freedom into painful relief. (25)

³Ernest James Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*. New York: Vintage Books, 1993.

Whenever Jockey uses his wit to negotiate and gain such a privilege, the other slaves benefit from it, and the celebration exceeds the limits of “caprices,” and embodies a sign of resistance. Celebrations, generally, allow slaves to forget about their harsh condition at least for a while. Denied of personhood, this ephemeral and joyful experience is worthwhile for them to revive their spirits:

He had been attuned to a shared tension, a communal apprehension beyond the routine facts of their bondage. It had built up. The last few hours had dispelled much of the ill feeling. They could face the morning toil and the following mornings and the long days with their spirits replenished, however meagerly, by a fond night to look back on and the next birthday feast to look forward to. By making a circle of themselves that separated the human spirits within from the degradation without.(28)

During such celebrations, slaves are transported away from their daily realities. The music, the dance, and the dream break that routine of servitude. They are covert strategies of resistance to enslavement. When all this comes to an end, the hard reality resurfaces:

The music stopped. The circle broke. Sometimes a slave will be lost in a brief eddy of liberation. In the sway of a sudden reverie among the furrows or while untangling the mysteries of an early-morning dream. In the middle of a song on a warm Sunday night. Then it comes, always – the overseer’s cry, the call to work, the shadow of the master, the reminder that she [Cora] is only a human being for a tiny moment across the eternity of her servitude.(29)

The “tiny moment of a human being” is quite significant in proving blacks’ presence; it ineluctably helps conjure whites’ domination. The music and the dance therefore elude the cruelties of their enslavement: “Putting on a show for the master was a familiar skill, the small angles and advantages of the mask, and they shook off their fear as they settled into the performance” (33).

In this second section of the paper, I have tried to elaborate blacks’ resisting presence within the alienation of their presence. Ironically, being as presence takes place in their objectification. Though it is persistently pervasive, this objectification is completely ineffective. It does not deter forms of resistance among the slaves. Beyond the atrocities of slavery, and operating within the presumed framework of passivity, covert strategies of blacks’ resistance lie beneath acts of objectification; and those passive strategies aim at restoring their agency, dignity and full humanity. As John Hope Franklin and Loren Schweninger (2005) write in *Slavery in America: A Reader and Guide*, slaves demonstrated such values or personality traits as: self-confidence, self-assurance, self-possession, determination and self-reliance” (292).

4. CONCLUSION

The defining feature of Colson Whitehead’s *Underground Railroad* is racial objectification and resistance. The novel is a fugitive slave narrative that points to the masks of truth with which America hides its fictions of freedom. With slavery, the American ideal of freedom fades into irrelevance. This study has focused on the forms of reification of blacks, and on the space of subversion. It has been concerned with how the author imbues the trope of black objectification with a measure of resistance.

Following Derrida’s paradoxical deconstructive logic: the presence of the absence, I have argued that beneath the mechanisms of blacks’ objectification, *The Underground Railroad* formulates a language of resistance to oppression and dehumanization. Beyond their being negated, their absence swings paradoxically to presence in absence, or from the de centered subject to the resistant object. In this perspective the paper has elaborated on the discursive construction of blacks’ struggle for their humanity.

An autonomous subjectivity exists under forms that are absent but paradoxically present and underground resistance undermines slaves’ dehumanizing program. We can therefore assert that Whitehead rewrites the slave narrative to reveal blacks’ humanity by underscoring modes of their resistance to enslavement. As a matter of fact, the form of their social life is essentially one of fugitivity. On the one hand, the narrative evinces the ongoing racial oppression, or black enslavement, and their apparent impossibility of subjectivity, while on the other, it paradoxically suggests their objection to subjection: a form of resistance that propels black humanity in a fugitive condition. This ambivalence between the presence and absence in the narrative has been at the core of the present paper.

Finally, against the idea of blackness as an ontological impossibility, there is rather the potential of black subjectivity through modes of resistance that are pervading in Whitehead's work. Escaping to the North does not secure freedom, nor does abolition lead to equal citizenship. Nevertheless, in this uninterrupted captivity, one essential idea Whitehead seems to suggest is that one of the tasks conferred upon black writers is to define black humanity.

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Citation: N'GUESSAN Koffi Eugene. "The Absence-Presence Configuration of Black Being: Signifying Enslavement and Resistance in Colson Whitehead's *the Underground Railroad*" *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 10, no. 9, 2022, pp. 6-16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1009002>.

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