

# 'The Machinery of Progress': review of Colson Whitehead, The Underground Railroad

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**Published PDF deposited in Coventry University's Repository**

**Original citation:**

Knowles, T 2018, 'The Machinery of Progress': review of Colson Whitehead, The Underground Railroad' *Fantastika*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 162-164.

ISSN 2514-8915

Publisher: Fantastika Journal

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## THE MACHINERY OF PROGRESS

Review by Thomas Knowles

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**Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Little Brown, 2016. Novel.**

The brutal depiction of the nineteenth-century slave economy of the Southern American States in this multiple prize-winning novel owes much to Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), earlier slave narratives as well as memoirs such as Northrop Fry's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and in particular to Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred* (1979). Reflecting these literary, genre, and non-fiction influences, *The Underground Railroad* made Oprah's Book Club, President Barak Obama's summer reading list, won the (US) National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Science Fiction (SF), too. It is rare for a novel to attract such accolades from both mainstream and genre bodies.

Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999) saw rival elevator inspectors in conflict over the metaphysical nature of elevator technology, with one group aiming to design an elevator that dispenses with the empirical past and which would take its people (black Americans) into the future. The protagonist, Lila Mae, is trebly other in her world of blue-collar elevator inspection: she is black, female, and an 'intuitionist' – the novum or fantastic element in the novel. An intuitionist relies upon psychic readings of an elevator's functionality, rather than the physical signs of wear and tear that an 'empiricist' would diagnose faults by. The vertical transport of an elevator is a rich source of metaphor for ascent and decline, particularly between the hoped-for and violently resisted changes necessary in a pre-civil rights New York.

It is another nineteenth-century technology that drives the plot of *The Underground Railroad*, that of the steam locomotive and the engineering of underground railways – a horizontal transport to *The Intuitionist's* vertical, though the journeys undertaken are no less metaphysical. The Underground Railway is a historical metaphor for the network of safe houses, sympathisers, abolitionists, and freemen that risked their lives to help slaves flee from bondage in the south to relative freedom in the north. Whitehead's brilliant and thoroughly Science Fiction (SF) twist in this narrative is to make the underground railway a material reality, with branches and stations maintained by the secretive network. With the weight of historical description and indeed responsibility of such a story, one could argue that such a novel is only glancingly or superficially SF, but while the surface texture is in the realist mode, its deep structures are the genre at its best. Notions of racial 'passing' and genre hybridity here make *fabula* and *syuzhet* mutually interrogative, with journeys on the railroad shuttling passengers backwards and forwards in America's troubled history. The novel's realistic style, though, makes it difficult to detect anachronism in any given scene or chapter; thus, Lila Mae 'passes' in each iteration or American history, but taken as a whole we appreciate the fantastic nature of these passes through history. It is the deep – even hidden, like the titular Underground Railroad – nature of the SF and Fantasy elements that require the reader to think through such generic categories, as well as the boundary-policing of criticism, just as the plot viscerally interrogates racial categories, stereotypes, and simplistic notions of 'good' and 'bad.' A key example of this occurs when Lila Mae is employed as a living exhibit in a museum to act out racial stereotypes

of African village life. Returning the gaze of the white spectators at the museum, she also returns the readerly gaze and problematizes our literary enjoyment of her story.

The novel begins with seventeen-year-old Cora, a third-generation plantation slave who has been offered, by her fellow slave Caesar, the possibility of escape on the underground railroad. When she at first declines, we are told that "This was her Grandmother [Ajarry] speaking" (3). We are then given an account of Ajarry's kidnap and transportation from Africa, her subsequent sale and resale across the Southern states of America, and her long suffering at the hands of the Randalls – the brutal owners of the Georgia cotton plantation where she will spend the rest of her life. Three weeks later when Cora accepts Caesar's offer, "it was her mother [Mabel] talking" (9). Cora's mother fled the plantation six years before, abandoning her eleven-year-old daughter, and creating a split in Cora's personality – between acting like her mother and acting like her grandmother – which is played out over the course of the novel. As Andy Duncan has written of the affective power of alternative histories: "we, too, create and destroy alternate versions of ourselves through our actions everyday" ("Alternate History," *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, 217). Cora follows her mother's example, escaping the plantation, but she is unable to forgive Mabel for abandoning her as a child. What Cora will never discover, and what we are privy to as readers, is that her mother had intended to return to the plantation but in fact died alone out in the marshes. Cora is unable to see that she constructs the mother that she needed, and that without her seemingly selfish example of escape, she may never have left the plantation herself. Whitehead demonstrates here that abstract actions forgivable as human responses to atrocity are sites of deep wounding in strife between the victimised.

Cora's flight on the Underground Railroad takes her to South Carolina, North Carolina, Indiana, and finally to the north – where each locale seems to exist in a different time and possible reality. These journeys are as much about linking past and future selves as they are about geographical movement. Indeed, her final underground journey begins on a hand-powered cart and is completed on foot; the emergence from the darkness of the tunnel, leaving a bleeding pursuer behind her in the darkness, is figured as a rebirth into a historical period in which she is able for the first time to choose her next steps. Each station stop reveals a possible configuration of race relations in America. In South Carolina, a seemingly benevolent regime masks a Eugenics programme and system of exploitation that would eradicate the perceived menace of black population explosion by stealth. In North Carolina, an apocalyptic landscape is the backdrop to an avowedly genocidal regime, and Cora must spend months holed-up in the tiny attic crawl space of some extremely reluctant collaborators. Whitehead's invocation of Anne Frank here is characteristic of his tendency to align the struggles of black Americans with those of oppressed and displaced peoples, including Jews and Native Americans. This struggle is understood as predating the slave trade, incorporating the decimation of the indigenous peoples of America, and the continued struggles of black Americans in the twentieth and (by all-too-easy extension) twenty-first centuries. In Indiana, Cora joins a black community that represents a utopian pocket, a short-lived respite from the encroaching threat of the southern slave states that surround it.

The stops on the railroad give us the grand sweep of alternative history: sometimes we appear to be in the eighteenth, the nineteenth, and at other times the twentieth century, but Whitehead's SF-coding works on the minute and personal level, too. We see this in the branching options before Cora in which she behaves more like her mother, or more like her grandmother, and in the incomplete history of her mother that drives

her desperate flight beneath America. Lila Mae's internal dialogues with her heritage mark this an important aspect of Whitehead's project, as it was for Butler and Morrison before him. It is the combination of SF and Fantasy tropes, with the visceral horrors of slavery, that gives this novel its terrible power, lending to it an angry utopian dreaming of possibilities snuffed out. The terrible way in which solidarity seems impossible under such conditions is painfully well-realised; when there is so little to fight over, nonetheless small parcels of ownership and jealous possessiveness cause the enslaved to make life on the plantation, and in other social configurations worse than it could possibly be. This internalisation of slavery's structures and ideology has its corrosive effect on all of the characters in the novel, and the violence, progress, and setbacks of the sweep across history are seen in miniature at the Georgia plantation: Cora's tiny vegetable patch, under constant threat; the brief respite of a birthday party that ends in bloodshed; and the "Hob" house – an enclave of rejected women to which the orphaned Cora is banished.

The origins of the Underground Railroad itself remains obscure. Cora's questions regarding its construction, timetabling, and maintenance are answered enigmatically. This could leave the door open to divine provenance, or to some other supernatural element. However, I read this miraculous construct as a material edifice representing the wasted, backbreaking labour of slaves over the centuries – an unforgivable brake on human progress. Whitehead's impossible Underground Railroad seems possible when all of that alienated labour is taken into account. What, it seems to ask, if those resented years, months, weeks, days, and hours were directed towards a labour of love? *The Underground Railroad* shows us that it is not enough, though necessary, to represent; that a greater purchase is gained through something to compare horror to, and that such horrors are rendered so much more terrifying by beautifully-imagined, maybe impossible, examples of how things might and could be otherwise. Whitehead understands that the languages and stories of possibility that enable them are both our only hope and the source of all human strife. Through its SF machinery, this novel makes a compelling case for speculative pasts and futures.

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## BIONOTE

**Thomas Knowles** teaches English Literature at Birmingham City University, UK. Thomas has published on J. G. Ballard, Will Self and Iain Sinclair, and TV's *Supernatural*. His monograph *Lyrical Ballads: The Wounded Romanticism of J. G. Ballard* will be published in 2019 by Bloomsbury.