

Gateway to Freedom: Space Writing and Identity Construction in *the Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, with its profound insights both into historical and current issues, has won several literary awards and accolades up to now. It tells a story of an enslaved black woman Cora, making her way to freedom from Georgia plantation through the underground railroad. By utilizing "the underground railroad" as a core spatial metaphor, the writer deliberately portrays the physical space combined with the power in the space confronted by the protagonist Cora, constructs the psychological space with resistance against racism and patriarchy and creates the "third space" with the interplay of the physical and psychological ones, which collaboratively show the protagonist Cora's dynamic process of identity construction from marginalization, confusion and search for freedom in the end. Thus, this essay analyzes the active interaction between space and Cora's identity to focus on the black spirits in the African community and explores the possibility of equality among different races.

Keywords: Colson whitehead; *The underground railroad*; Space writing; Identity construction.

1. Introduction

Colson Whitehead, an African American writer, is considered as one of the most well-known contemporary American writers. After graduating from Harvard University, he wrote a column on language for the *New York Times* magazine. Notably, he is the first writer to win a Pulitzer Prize for consecutive books, his historical novels *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *The Nickel Boys* (2019). He has written nine novels and two nonfiction works mostly inspired by his life experience. Whitehead published his debut *The Intuition* in 1999, which earned widespread attention and made Whitehead the winner of The MacArthur Fellowship. His sixth novel *The Underground Railroad* (2016) was chosen by Obama in his summer book list in August 2016, winning the National Book Awards in November and the Pulitzer Prize in 2017. The novel centers around the story of Cora, an enslaved black girl, who fled from the plantation in Georgia to the north for freedom through the underground railroad after enduring innumerable hardships. With the support of many different people along the way, she travels the legendary underground railroad and makes different stops of the railroad, from Georgia's Randall Plantation to the hypocritical South Carolina, through the hellish North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana and farther north, all the way to her freedom and independence. The journey filled with adventures, unfair laws and even bloody violence, has gradually awakened Cora's awareness to freedom and identity. In different space, she experiences challenges and hardships catalyzing her identity construction. Whitehead endows different space with multiple spatial metaphors, so it is of great importance to investigate the roles of space played in Cora's identity construction.

Colson Whitehead has earned a high reputation and positive responses in the literary world for his notable works and far-reaching thoughts hidden in his words. His sixth novel *The Underground Railroad* has received extensive attention and studies from different perspectives both within and outside China since its publication. The first monograph *Understanding Colson Whitehead* written by Derek C. Maus in 2014, about Whitehead's writing styles and his works, made a detailed and comprehensive introduction to his works and attracted people's attention to the writer. Numerous studies and discussions by foreign experts and scholars can be found on foreign websites in the forms of book reviews, interviews and articles in newspapers and magazines. These can be divided into two main categories: themes and writing techniques.

When it comes to its thematic research, scholars mainly explored the topics including freedom and slavery. Cora's journey considered as a quest of freedom, self and her mother is analyzed by the O'Grady (2016) in his article "Colson Whitehead on His Spectacular New Novel, *The Underground Railroad*". Fauziah et al. (2019) points out that Cora has to undergo five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence to achieve her final freedom in his article "The Struggle of the Main Character to Obtain

Freedom in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*". As for theme of slavery, Dubey (2020) argues in his journal that Whitehead's literalizing move create an emotional, visceral engagement with the history of slavery.

Besides, the writing techniques in the novel are also put into discussion by the scholars, including its narrative strategies and writing styles. In "The Unfinished Project of Freedom in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*", Ward (2018) discusses the text within the tradition of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives. At the same times, she also focuses on intertextuality and fantastic elements within the text. In his article "The Neo-Gothic Imaginary and the Rhetoric of Loss in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*", Patrycja Antoszek explores Whitehead's reworking of the Gothic tradition in his novel.

Its Chinese translation of *The Underground Railroad* by Kang Kai in 2017 gave birth to related research and there have been more than 70 journals and academic papers so far. The perspectives and angles taken by domestic scholars mainly focus on themes and writing techniques.

In terms of themes, scholars in China catch their eyes on the themes of trauma, human nature and growth. Wang Yan (2019) discusses in her paper "An Analysis of Initiation Features Reflected in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*" that the escape journey of the Black slave Cora allows her to shed innocence and grow into maturity. The study of the Black female character's growth raises awareness of social issues existing among African Americans. Feng Dandan (2022) shows that Whitehead conveys trauma endured by African American through Cora's journey, portraying the devastation of slavery on families and the struggles of Black women as they navigate the dual oppressions of racism and sexism. Jingru (2022), demonstrates that the writer explores universal weakness within human nature and conveys the anticipation for better humanity.

Other scholars also concentrate on writing techniques, especially slave narrative and spatial narrative. In the paper "The Rewriting of Slave Narrative in *The Underground Railroad*", Sun Mengqi (2021) points that the writer rewrites the slave narrative through its themes, characters, and structure, offering a significant contribution to the genre of slave literature. As for spatial narrative, Jia Baifang (2023) discusses that the novel seeks to analyze the growing experiences of black slaves through the perspective of the protagonist, Cora.

In conclusion, both domestic and foreign research on *The Underground Railroad* primarily addresses two key areas: thematic analysis and writing techniques, with notable contributions in both. However, a closer examination reveals that while many scholars in China focus on racial issues and spatial writing, few have explored the interactive role between the space and identity construction. The different space in the text reveals the complex and challenges of identification and painful process of Cora's identity construction. This essay aims to integrate both the physical and psychological dimensions to provide a further interpretation of spatial writing and identity construction in the novel.

2. Theoretical Framework

By tracing the development of spatial writing, it is demonstrated that Frank and Joseph (1945) firstly put forward the term "spatial narrative" in his work *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*. Since then, plenty of scholars has shifted their focus on the study of spatial narrative. *The Poetics of Space* (1958) written by Gaston Bachelard has examined how the imagination imbues a space with spirit and meaning, while, in turn, how space especially "house" and "attics" evokes emotions, memories, and fantasies within the mind of its inhabitants. Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1901–1991) is widely regarded as a monumental work that has catalyzed the "spatial turn" in the field of social and cultural theory, introducing the concept of space as a critical interpretive tool in analysis of various texts. He has distinguished space into spatial practices, representations of space and space of representation, called as "tripartite model of space". Spatial practices are theorized as the physical transformation of the environment, while representations of space are understood as the theories and images of space found in fields like science and art. Space of representation linked to power, the body, ideas, and ideologies is seen as appropriated and dominated by certain social groups. In Lefebvre's framework, spatial practices produce "perceived" space, representations of space relate to "conceived" space, and space of representation correspond to "lived" space.

Edward W. Soja improved Lefebvre's "tripartite model of space" and came up with theory of Thirdspace. Soja's theory distinguishes among three types of urban space: "Firstspace", "Secondspace", and "Thirdspace". "Firstspace" refers to the physical built environment, which can be measured and "seen" in the real world. It is physical space shaped by power and identity over time. "Secondspace" is conceptual space, about how that space is imagined and understood by the habitants. It is psychological space, influenced by social norms that guide people's behaviors and actions within that space. "Thirdspace" represents the "real and imagined" space or lived space, which is the interaction between physical space ("Firstspace") and the psychological space ("Secondspace").

Meanwhile, identity theory seeks to clarify the meanings of individuals' multiple identities, the relationships between these identities, and how they influence behavior, thoughts and emotions. It also explores how these identities prompt individuals to integrate into society. Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets are prominent theorists in the field of identity theory. They made a definition towards identity, "an identity is the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" (Burke and Stets, 2009: 3). For Cora, her journey through various spaces forces her to constantly redefine her role—from a slave on the plantation to a fugitive on the run, to someone seeking safety and autonomy in the North. Space, as both a material and conceptual construct, offers a unique lens for exploring how identities are formed, represented, and transformed.

It is highly meaningful to apply identity theory and spatial writing to the analysis of *The Underground Railroad*. The novel reveals that space is not merely a passive setting but an active, constitutive force in the formation of identity, offering prosperity and momentum into the words. Exploring the interplay between her evolving identity

and the physical, psychological, and symbolic space she inhabits offers rich insights into the process of identity construction and space transformation to display the process of Cora's pursuit of liberation, and highlight the black spirit displayed by her under overwhelming oppressions.

3. Outline of the Essay

This essay aims to analyze the interplay of space and identity construction in *The Underground Railroad* with the theory of "Thirdspace" proposed by Edward W. Soja.

Part one gives an introduction to Colson Whitehead and *The Underground Railroad*, summarizes the previous studies at home and abroad, gives a theoretical framework for the later study and points out the outline and research significance of this paper. Part two elaborates the external or physical space surrounding the protagonist Cora, in which she has endured her mother's escape, marginalization from the ethnic group and the violent oppressions from black men. Also, it explores how space connects with invisible items from the society and how Cora's identity is defined and shaped by different space along her escape journey. Part three mainly discusses the process of Cora's continuous awakening of her identity consciousness and her different psychological cognitions of space. Compared with the physical one, it will further explore Cora's internal world and her response to the external world. Part four attempts to Cora's process of identity construction and her pursuit of the "Thirdspace". It will examine the steps she takes to seek an ideal world, striving for a life that surpasses the hardships and limitations of her previous existence. In this space, she can safeguard her safety and continue her mission of pursuing real freedom. Part five concludes that the motivation behind Cora's identity construction arises from both the external pressures imposed by dominant powers in the surrounding space and the psychological crisis stemming from her inner world. Her constant movement is, in fact, a search for an ideal world, or, in other words, the "Thirdspace"—where a black woman can experience freedom, both physically and mentally.

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how spatial writing in *The Underground Railroad* contributes to identity construction, particularly within the context of race, gender, and freedom. By focusing on the interaction between physical and psychological space, this research sheds light on how the protagonist, Cora, navigates and transforms her identity through her journey. Ultimately, this research endeavors to display the process of Cora's pursuit of liberation, and highlight the black spirit displayed by her under overwhelming oppressions. How do the spatial images such as the underground railroad participate in the narration of the works? What role do these spatial images play in shaping character images and how do they connect with the theme of the story? This essay will address these questions by analyzing different phases of space and discussing the process of identity construction within space, with the help of relevant theories.

4. Physical Space: from "Stray" to "Outcast"

Burke and Stets argue that people have different identities according to different social structures. "They are distinguished from each other by the way in which each of the identities is tied into social structure, and consequently by the way in which the verification process works" (Burke, 2004: 9). A person owns different identities in different social institutions. In the early parts of *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead largely depicts the plantation life of the black slaves and lays foundation for the escape of the black slave Cora. Plantation is definitely marginalized in the society, where various discourses and powers gather together to play their part. The superior can control the inferior by defining what is right or wrong or by establishing a standard within a specific space through the power. This influence shapes how Cora views herself and her place within the society, as well as how she tries to navigate the space along the way.

4.1. "The Plantation as Prison": A Strayed Girl

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead portrays the Randall plantation in Georgia as the central setting where the enslaved people live and endure their hardships silently and passively. The space "Hob" lived by Cora is defined by its smallness, overcrowding, and squalor, which characterize the harsh living conditions for the enslaved people. Generally, the word "stray" refers to an animal that has become lost or separated from its owner or to a person or thing that is out of place or detached from its kind (Hornby). However, in *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead redefines "stray" to symbolize a helpless and powerless orphan, encapsulating Cora's sense of abandonment and her isolation from any family connection.

In the context of family, Cora's identity is an abandoned girl, as she has no family of her own and is unable to form a new family. Cora is on a plantation where she has no friends and is ostracized by other blacks. Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, was kidnapped by Dahomeyan raiders from her village in Africa and shipped to America as part of a bulk purchase from Ouidah, a city on the coast of the Republic of Benin. After being sold, traded, and resold multiple times, Ajarry was ultimately purchased by a representative of the Randall plantation in Georgia, where she worked in the cotton fields until her death. What Ajarry transmits to Cora is an acceptance of her identity as a submissive slave. Grandmother's influence, rooted in a lifetime of suffering and survival, has shaped Cora's understanding of her place in the world. This ancestral legacy becomes a guiding force in Cora's life, subtly steering her decisions and actions. When Caesar approaches Cora with the offer of escaping to the North, she refuses because, as she believes, "it's her grandmother talking" (3). Cora's resistance to escape is not merely her own fear or doubt, but rather the internalized voice of Ajarry's submissive resignation, which has been passed down to her.

Cora's mother, Mabel is especially reliable toward other black slaves. "Mabel had extended an alibi to Calvin when some planting tools went missing. Connelly would have stripped the meat off Calvin's back if she didn't

concoct his defense” (Whitehead, 18). She protected Calvin from punishment in an incident by offering false evidence. She also provided great love to her daughter Cora and feels guilty for giving her such miserable life. “Cora slept in her stomach, the size of a fist, when Mabel apologized for what she was bringing her into” (291). Unfortunately, Mabel dies of a snake’s bite on her way back to plantation. Similar to Mabel, Cora’s father, Grayson, also sought freedom out of the plantation. He promised Mabel that he would buy their freedom, but he died of fever before Cora was born. As Whitehead writes, “His name never again crossed her lips” Whitehead (2016). With both of Cora’s parents dead, she can no longer have her family identity as there is no one left in her family.

While Cora was an orphan in her family, she was also rejected by the black community. After her mother disappeared, Cora was forced to move to the “Hob”, the madhouse in plantation. Cora’s internal living space, “Hob”, is depicted as a dark, isolated place for black slaves, a space that not only reflects Cora’s own difficult situation but also highlights the moral degradation of both the white slave owners and the other black slaves as they exercise their power by imprisoning others. In “Hob”, Cora finds herself in a place where survival becomes the primary concern so human connection or compassion seems almost impossible. The description of “Hob” is: “there was no recourse, no laws but the ones rewritten every day” (19). In this space, the absence of legal protection and the arbitrary enforcement of power symbolize the complete lack of agency that enslaved individuals, especially women like Cora. Hob represents a lawless, oppressive environment where no individual has true rights or legal standing—those without status are effectively invisible and powerless, merely passively accepting the mercy of others. Therefore, Cora’s lack of legal and social standing traps her in a cycle of fear and abuse, leaving her with little recourse for justice or change. The absence of any formal laws governing life in “Hob” highlights the profound sense of hopelessness and disempowerment that comes with enslavement. “Hob” becomes a symbolic space where the harshness of the plantation system, the cruelty of slave owners, and the injury of the enslaved people, are laid bare. It is in this space of darkness and deprivation that Cora’s difficulty is most acutely felt.

Therefore, Cora cannot obtain her identity as a daughter and a woman both in family and her community, suffering from racism and sexism. It is impossible for her to integrate into her community, so she feels strayed and perplexed about her identity. Everything that happened to her prompted her to leave the plantation and become an outcast, emphasizing her dissimilarity to them. In Cora’s eyes, the space of plantation is like a prison, leaving her alone and bullied after her miserable experiences.

4.2. “Escape Journey”: An Outcast from the Black Community

The underground railroad is generally a system utilized by enslaved individuals seeking freedom in the United States. It includes a covert network of routes, safe houses, and individuals dedicated to helping slaves escape from the oppressive conditions of the South. During the American Civil War, individuals seeking freedom fled to Union lines in the South to defend their liberty. It is estimated that by 1850, around 100000 enslaved people had escaped to freedom through this network. The line also plays a crucial role in helping enslaved individuals like Cora escape their harsh realities, offering a path to freedom and safety.

With the underground railroad, Cora passed from Georgia to South Carolina, where she encountered a series of harrowing conflicts. At first, she felt a sense of satisfaction, staying in South Carolina, as she could exchange her labor for money and buy the things that she desired. However, what seemed like a progressive policy toward black people in South Carolina was, in reality, a disguise that masked a series of brutal medical interventions such as sterilization surgeries, the syphilis experiments, and the infamous Tuskegee study. South Carolina was portrayed as offering a more enlightening approach to “black advancement than the rest of the South” (123), which attracted white families and free black people seeking opportunities. Yet, most black people in the state were subjugated and publicly punished by the government. To survive, Cora was forced to adopt a new identity and accept her status as the property of the United States Government. Like many black women, she was placed in the schoolhouse, where she was monitored by white Americans. Even worse, black children were routinely taken away from their mothers, leaving the only thing the mothers could do being to scream their children’s names as they were ripped from them.

The Natural History Museum was another source of conflicts for Cora in South Carolina. Although America was a young nation, the museum showcased exhibits designed to educate the public about the untamed flora and fauna, minerals, and other natural wonders (148). However, these exhibits distorted the truth, presenting a manipulated version of reality to the public. For Cora, her experience in the museum revealed the stark contrast between the idealized version of South Carolina that had been presented to her and the brutal reality she faced. South Carolina, with its false promises of progress, appeared to be a welcoming place for black slaves. In reality, however, the true nature of life there was far darker. The exhibits, much like the rest of South Carolina, obscured the truth, offering a twisted version of history designed to mislead and control the inferior. After her experience in the museum, Cora gained a clearer understanding of the world she inhabited. What Cora is traveling through, as she gets on and off the underground railroad, is not space, exactly, but history. She experiences the different guises of American racism, the different faces it has worn and continues to wear, in a continuous physical space. In South Carolina, Cora encounters what originally seems like kindness and liberal mindedness, but which eventually reveals itself as self-serving paternalism.

From South Carolina, Cora moved on to North Carolina, where she faced even greater horrors and realized that the North was not the promised land of freedom she had hoped for. Initially, she believed that the North held freedom, but upon arriving in North Carolina, she was confronted with the grim reality of the “Freedom Trail”—a path lined with the hanging corpses of black people, their bodies left to rot as macabre decorations. Some were naked, others partially clothed, their bowels emptied, and necks broken (206). Law enforcement was everywhere, constantly patrolling and ensuring that no fugitives could escape. Cora was forced to view the world through the tiny

window of an attic, where she gradually realized the terrifying truth: North Carolina was even more brutal than South Carolina. In North Carolina, the abolition of slavery was not an act of emancipation but an attempt to obliterate black people entirely. Through these painful experiences, Cora came to understand that the United States itself was a vast prison for black people (235). To gain true freedom, she would have to continue her difficult and perilous struggle against the harsh reality.

In the novel, the underground railroad consists of stations such as Lumbley Farm Station, Sam Station, and North Carolina Station, each serving as landmarks and temporary shelters, guiding Cora's journey northward. Many chapters of the novel are named after American states, including Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, each resembling the islands in *Gulliver's Travels*, with Cora playing the role of Gulliver and exploring new lands. Whitehead deliberately constructs the narrative like *Gulliver's Travels* to show the different realities of black life in various states, as Cora maps her escape across the country, seeking new space where she might find freedom and a place to call "home".

5. Psychological Space: from "Dilemma" to "Liberation"

Whether it's the plantation in the South or the states in the North, Whitehead deliberately uses spatial elements to illustrate Cora's varied psychological experiences. In this section, the paper will examine the inner world of Cora from two key perspectives. First, it will explore her confusion and inner conflicts related to racism and sexism. Moreover, it will analyze the mental depression she experiences as a female slave. These two aspects are crucial in understanding Cora's complex identity and her struggles with social expectations and personal self-acceptance.

5.1. Fragmented Selves from Racism and Sexism

Cora's inner conflict is first and foremost a struggle with the dual burdens of racial and gender oppression. As a black woman in the South plantation, Cora is subject to two distinct forms of social marginalization. Her racial identity is a source of dehumanization, as she is viewed as property and a commodity for labor. However, as a woman, she also faces additional layers of vulnerability and repression. Black women in particular, are doubly oppressed, subjected to both the physical and sexual exploitation by men and the emotional silencing within their own communities.

On the plantation, while whites enjoy vast estates, the slaves are confined to a mere three-square-yard space. When Cora's mother, Mabel, escapes, Cora is left to fend for herself. The other enslaved people, already at the bottom of the social hierarchy, show no concern for the 10-year-old girl. Instead, seeing Cora alone, they take advantage of her vulnerability, greedily seizing what little she owns. Blake, the one who covets Cora's few belongings, attempts to provoke her and steal what little she has. In contrast to Blake, Cora is physically weaker, but she summons the strength to defend herself and drive him away. Frustrated by his failure to profit from Cora, Blake retaliates by spreading malicious rumors, claiming that "Cora flapped her dress at him while she made lascivious suggestions and threatened to scalp him when he refused her" (24). In a world where survival often hinges on how others see you, the rumors become a form of psychological violence, stripping Cora of her dignity and sense of self. She finds herself shunned by those she might have turned to for support. Such event results in Cora adopting "her simpering posture and piteous aspect" (4). These deeply painful experiences are intricately linked to her African heritage, creating a heavy and almost insurmountable burden that she must carry.

In addition to the systemic degradation and physical abuse that black slaves endure on the plantation, black women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence. In the eyes of white men, black women are seen as undeserving of respect, occupying the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. White men hold the position, while black women are subjugated. Sexual violence, in this context, is not merely a byproduct of slavery; it is a tool of oppression that reinforces the power imbalance between races and genders.

The first space is the "smokehouse". Edward and two hands rape Cora behind the smokehouse. Cora is doubly oppressed, with no power or agency to resist the violence inflicted upon her. After the traumatic event behind the smokehouse, Cora is left in a state of silence and fear, unable to find support or solace from those around her. The brutalization she faces strips her of her sense of dignity, leaving her isolated and unable to connect with others. "Jockey's celebration" serves as another space in the novel where Cora's caught by the black men is starkly reflected. The party is a rare moment of respite, offering the slaves a brief escape from their daily hardships. In this space, they can momentarily replenish their spirits and experience a sense of joy and camaraderie. Such opportunities for celebration and leisure are few and far between in their lives, and the party represents a fleeting chance to find some semblance of freedom and happiness. In this space, Cora's senses and actions become numbed, a result of the abuse from the external world she has endured. The once vibrant and engaged person she has been replaced by someone on constant alert, disconnected from the world around her. As Whitehead describes, "Cora did not move. She was wary of how sometimes when the music tugged, [she] might suddenly be next to a man, and [she] didn't know what he might do" (34). Her self-protection system is perpetually on alert, as if danger could strike at any moment.

Under the oppressive system of slavery, Cora is not only subjected to the physical and psychological torture inflicted by her white masters, but also experiences further marginalization and mistreatment within her own community of black slaves. These double layers of oppression highlight the complexity of her experience as both a slave and a woman in a patriarchal society. The intersection of these two sources of oppression, the cruelty of slave owners and the gendered oppressions of black men, leaves a huge psychological shadow on Cora and makes her more isolated by the community.

5.2. Seeking Intimacy in the Journey

As a courageous and rebellious individual, Cora fights to the oppression of white people and black men. Her views on escaping highlight her brave and rebellious nature. “It was her grandmother talking that Sunday evening when Caesar approached Cora about the underground railroad, and she said no” (8). As Caesar firstly proposes the idea of escape, she directly showed her disagreement with him because of her grandmother’s influence, as she concluded that “to escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible” (8). It is not possible for a slave to run away from plantation and seek freedom successfully. However, at the second time, Cora agreed to Caesar’s plan about escape. “Three weeks later she said yes. This time it was her mother talking” (8). Her transformation in attitudes towards the invitation to escape demonstrates her stronger desire for freedom from the depressive community. She sought to redefine her identity by finding intimacy in the new space after fleeing from the plantation and she took two approaches: one was to search for her mother to reclaim her identity as a daughter and the other was to get married to gain a new identity as a wife.

She embarks on a journey to find her mother’s love and reclaim her identity as a daughter. Cora’s feelings toward Mabel were far more complex than simple. She constantly longed for her mother and made efforts to find her during her escape. Although she was unsuccessful, Cora often imagined what their reunion might look like. In her imagination, she found her mother “begging in the gutter, a broken old woman bent into the sum of her mistakes...Cora kicked her beggar’s cup, the few coins flew into the hubbub, and she continued on...” (172). Slavery, in its cruelest form, had robbed Cora of the maternal love she deserved. Even after escaping the plantation, Cora entered new space that enabled her to redefine a more normal relationship with her mother. However, on Mabel’s way back, she was bitten by a venomous snake and ultimately swallowed by the swamp. Cora’s search for Mabel was ultimately in vain, underscoring the inhumanity of slavery and how it twisted the bond between mother and daughter. In addition, escaping the plantation allowed Cora to think and discover her relationships with others. After realizing how Caesar treated her in a special way, Cora does not refuse to be close to him. More familiar with Caesar, she thought to herself, “Caesar was unlike any other colored man she had ever met” (49). During their escape, her reliance on Caesar is increasing as the time passes by. When they boarded the jolting underground train, Cora wrapped her arms around Caesar, thinking, “it felt good to grab him, to anticipate the warm pressure of his rising and falling chest” (90). This highlights the comfort and security she found in him, further deepening her growing emotional connection and dependence on Caesar.

Out of the plantation, she gradually sheds the shadow of slavery and oppression to construct her identity in new space. The loss of her mother and her growing reliance on Caesar highlight the complexity of her quest for freedom, love, and self-identity. While the scars of her past remain, Cora’s escape offers her the chance to seek intimacy with others and create a new life in new space, where she endeavors to seek her freedom and love.

6. Thirdspace: from “Safety” to “Freedom”

From South Carolina to Indiana, each location serves as a stage for her maturation, where she not only confronts the brutal realities of slavery and systemic oppression but also starts to understand what it means to be free. As she moves through these spaces, Cora’s understanding of freedom evolves beyond a mere physical escape. It becomes clear that true freedom is not simply about fleeing oppressive environments, but also about reclaiming agency and grappling with her place in the broader community. Cora continues to search for a space that transcends the limitations of both physical and social boundaries.

6.1. Back to Black Community

The apparent beauty of South Carolina is built on the exploitation of black bodies for experimentation. Once Cora uncovers the truth, she flees to the Valentine farm from South Carolina, which offers her a place of refuge. The farm in Indiana serves as a sanctuary for Cora, providing her with a safe environment where she can rebuild her life. The Valentine farm is described as “a place of healing” (317), where black people have access to education, a library, and a church. Women no longer fear the threat of medical procedures that were common in South Carolina, and the residents can enjoy the comforts of family life. For the first time, Cora no longer has to live in a crowded dorm with eighty people; instead, she has her own private room.

After Cora secures a safe space at the Valentine farm, she begins to rebuild her sense of self and make connections with the outside world. To repair her relationships within the black community, Cora actively works on forging new friendships and rebuilding trust. One of her first steps is connecting with Georgina, her teacher at the Valentine farm school. Georgina not only helps Cora improve her calligraphy and arithmetic but also teaches her how to communicate more effectively with others, making Cora a more approachable and congenial woman. Through Georgina’s guidance, Cora begins to develop the social skills that were denied to her during her years of enslavement. Cora also forms close bonds with two other women at the farm: Sybil and Molly. Sybil’s nurturing presence is particularly comforting to Cora. When Cora suffers from headaches, Sybil makes carpets for her to lie on, offering a physical expression of care. Molly, on the other hand, provides emotional support, often holding hands with Cora after school. Cora deeply appreciates this small gesture, as it marks a moment of connection and affection that she had not known since her childhood with Chester. Through these friendships, Cora begins to experience the warmth and companionship that had been absent in her life for so long. Sybil, Molly, and Georgina not only bring comfort to Cora’s life but also help her establish a sense of normalcy, guiding her toward healthier relationships.

At the Valentine farm, Cora is not only accepted but also integrated into a supportive and nurturing community. The farm allows her to reconnect with her roots and re-establish her place within the broader black community.

Although she has experienced deep isolation, the environment in the farm helps her regain a sense of belonging. The communal spirit of the Valentine farm provides a stabilizing force for Cora, who is no longer just a victim of her past but is now part of a collective, working together to build a better future. One of the most transformative aspects of the Valentine farm is its library, described as “the biggest collection of negro literature this side of Chicago” (326). The books offer Cora a window into new perspectives, new ideas, and a broader world beyond the confines of slavery. The library contains works that focus on the lives and struggles of black people, which allows Cora to see herself and her history reflected in literature. Through reading, she gains knowledge and strength, expanding her understanding of the world while healing her mind and spirit. The literary resources at the farm play a crucial role in broadening her horizons, making her feel more connected to her heritage and more empowered to define her future. Another vital aspect of the Valentine farm is the communal labor, which contrasts sharply with the oppressive, grueling work she endured on the plantation. At Valentine’s, “work needn’t be suffering, it could unite folks” (Whitehead 325). This reimagining of labor as a means of collective unity, rather than subjugation, is pivotal to Cora’s healing. On the plantation, work was a tool of exploitation, draining the spirits and bodies of the slaves. But at Valentine’s, work becomes a way to build solidarity and purpose. It provides Cora with a sense of pride and accomplishment, which further helps repair the psychological and emotional damage caused by her years of enslavement. In this environment, Cora experiences the beauty of community labor, something she had never known under the cruel, individualistic system of slavery. The communal labor, combined with the intellectual and emotional nourishment Cora receives at the Valentine farm, contributes significantly to her process of identity reconstruction and recovery from the previous suffering. It is at Valentine’s that Cora finds her place not only as a survivor but as an active participant in the rebuilding of her community. The environment, where people come together to work, learn, and support one another, plays a central role in Cora’s journey toward self-discovery and identity construction. Through this sense of collective belonging, Cora is able to repair her inner pain and move closer to the kind of freedom that transcends physical escape.

As Cora travels north along the railroad, her journey becomes not just a physical escape from slavery, but a deeper emotional and psychological journey toward freedom. Back to the black community, she gradually opens herself up to new experiences, relationships and space that allow her to begin the slow, difficult process of recovery and gradually construct her new identity. One must find ways to establish stable, supportive emotional connections with others, and seek out safe environments that foster growth and safety so that he can maintain his identity successfully.

6.2. Fight for Freedom

Life in Indiana made Cora confront the painful reality that her pursuit of freedom was far from over. At the Valentine farm, despite the apparent refuge it provided, Cora slowly realized that the illusion of safety was just that an illusion. Though black people could read, socialize, and even enjoy small pleasures like barbecues, the farm was not immune to the larger forces of systemic racism and oppression. Valentine, a key figure on the farm, bluntly admits that “Indiana is a slave state” and that “evil soaks into the soil” (380). His words reveal the deep-rooted nature of racial injustice, showing Cora that even in places that seemed like sanctuary, the poison of slavery was still pervasive.

The brutal truth came to light when a heated debate over the fate of runaway slaves culminated in gunfire, and Cora, once again, fell into the hands of slave-catchers. This moment of betrayal shattered any remaining illusions Cora might have had about the safety of Indiana. It forced her to reckon with the grim reality that the entire nation, from the North to the South, was built on systems of exploitation and violence. As she reflected on the history of America, Cora came to an unsettling realization: “The white race believed that it was their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers... This nation shouldn’t exist, if there was any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty” (391). These stark reflections are crucial to Cora’s understanding of her ongoing struggle. She begins to see that freedom, while possible, will not come easily, and the fight for it is far from over. The harsh reality that Cora confronts in Indiana, the violence, the racism, and the unyielding legacy of slavery, forces her to acknowledge the vastness of the journey that still lies ahead. The idea of escaping slavery, she realizes, is not just about crossing physical borders; it is about dismantling the pervasive systems of racial oppression that have been entrenched in American society for centuries. Cora now understands that true freedom is not simply a destination, but an ongoing struggle, which will require persistence, resilience, and a willingness to confront the profound injustices that exist in every corner of the nation. This sobering realization pushes her forward, even as it indicates the daunting nature of the fight she faces.

Just before the climactic moment at the ghost station, where Cora is once again persecuted by slave catchers, she has an epiphany that shifts her entire understanding of freedom and responsibility. In this crucial moment, Cora recognizes that, as a member of the black community, she must take action to protect her people, even if it means taking a life. Her decision to confront and ultimately kill Ridgeway, the relentless slave catcher, is a powerful act of resistance and transformation. As she rushes towards him, both Cora and Ridgeway tumble into the tunnel, with Ridgeway succumbing to his injuries. This moment marks a critical point in Cora’s journey, a form of “adult ceremony” where she steps into her role as a protector of her people, transcending her individual pain and becoming part of a larger collective struggle. Killing Ridgeway is not just an act of private revenge or personal hatred. It symbolizes Cora’s deeper understanding of her place in the black community and the responsibility she now bears to fight for the freedom and safety of others. Her act is symbolic of her transition from a passive victim of slavery to an active participant in the liberation of her people. In a way, Indiana becomes the place where Cora truly begins to understand what freedom means. It is here that Cora receives the news of the death of Terence Randall, the

plantation owner who had tormented her for so long. His death, a significant turning point, represents her final break from the physical and psychological chains of slavery. For Cora, this news signifies that she is now truly free not only from the literal bounds of the plantation but also from the fear that had held her captive for so many years.

Moreover, Cora's reunion with Sam in Indiana offers her a vision of solidarity and hope. Through Sam, she realizes that those who seek freedom, whether through the underground railroad or other means, are bound by a shared dream and a collective desire for liberation. Their reunion is a reminder that the fight for freedom is not an isolated struggle but one that can unite individuals across time and space. The ghost tunnel, which allows Cora to escape her pursuers, is a literal and metaphorical gateway to survival. It symbolizes the possibility of rebirth, as it leads Cora to a new life, one that is filled with renewed hope. The final image of Cora bathing in sunlight, a powerful symbol of hope and renewal, captures her transformation. With the sun shining on her, Cora embraces the belief that, as long as she remains united with her people, true freedom is possible. Her determination to advance, despite all the suffering she has endured, reflects the enduring power of collective struggle and the unbreakable spirit of resistance.

In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora's journey from Georgia to Indiana is more than just a physical escape; it represents a profound transition in her identity construction in transformation of space, where each stage of her journey contributes to her maturation. The various places she visits, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Indiana, each bring new challenges and revelations, forcing Cora to confront her own vulnerabilities and grow stronger in the process. Through these trials, Cora sheds her innocence and evolves into a more mature and self-aware individual, ultimately coming to understand the true meaning of freedom, not as an individual pursuit but as a collective struggle for the liberation of her people. Just as Whitehead poignantly remarks in the novel, "Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (414), it is through the conflicts, suffering, and harsh realities that Cora encounters on the underground railroad that she undergoes a profound transformation. These experiences force her to confront the brutal truths of American society, both the historical and contemporary injustices inflicted upon black people. The journey itself is not merely about physical escape, but also about grappling with the deeper psychological and emotional impacts of slavery, the trauma of betrayal, and the harshness of systemic oppression.

After enduring numerous trials, Cora realizes that the North, once a symbol of freedom, is an unattainable Utopia for a poor black girl. In the United States, where racial injustice is entrenched, the country itself feels like an unescapable prison. Whitehead starkly portrays the systemic oppression Cora faces, but despite the somber tone, it doesn't evoke despair. Instead, Cora's growth represents hope and resilience. Through her journey, Cora matures from a victim into a protector of her people. By the end, she gains a deeper understanding of herself and her role within her community, embodying empowerment and the desire to fight for freedom. Ultimately, Whitehead's novel is inspiring, showing that while the road to freedom is difficult, the power to change and fight for a better future lies within individuals and communities.

7. Conclusion

This essay delves into the profound journey of identity construction undertaken by the protagonist, Cora, as she escapes the clutches of slavery through various physical and psychological space. By employing Edward W. Soja's theory of Thirdspace, it has offered a layered exploration of how space and identity dynamically interact within the novel.

The essay has begun by exploring the physical space from "plantation" to the outer world in shaping Cora's identity. As Cora escapes, she moves through various physical spaces that challenge and reshape her understanding of herself and her place in the world. Each new space presents a different set of challenges and opportunities, forcing her to confront and redefine her identity in response to the new social and cultural contexts she encounters. When it comes to the psychological space, it has examined the dual plights imposed on Cora by racism and sexism. On the plantation, Cora is marginalized not only by the white power structure but also within her own community, where she faces ostracism and violence. Her experiences highlight the intersectionality of oppression, illustrating how multiple layers of discrimination can confine and complicate identity. Yet, it is within these confines that Cora begins to forge her path toward empowerment, seeking intimacy with her mother and becoming a wife. Moreover, the paper underscores the importance of communal support and collective struggle in Cora's journey. Cora's transformation from a victim of systemic oppression to a protector of her people symbolizes the resilience and hope inherent in the human spirit. Through her journey, Cora comes to understand that freedom is not a destination but an ongoing process, one that requires continuous vigilance, solidarity, and resistance against entrenched systems of injustice.

In essence, this essay has demonstrated that identity is not a static construct but a fluid and dynamic process that is deeply influenced by the spaces we inhabit and the social structures that shape our experiences. Cora's journey serves as a powerful narrative of resistance, resilience, and the quest for self-determination, offering valuable insights into the complexities of identity formation and the enduring struggle for freedom and equality. Thus, the black spirit that Cora displayed during her escape will continue to strengthen the black community and fight for their true freedom.

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