

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

by COLSON WHITEHEAD

Publisher: Doubleday, First Edition

Published: 2016

ISBN13: 978-0385542364

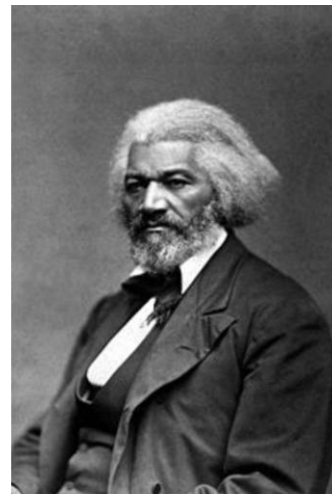
ISBN-10: 0385542364

pp 320; Price: \$15.41

Reviewed by: Olatoun Gabi-Williams



Harriet Tubman,
American abolitionist and political activist



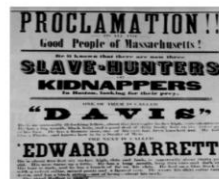
Frederick Douglass,
American abolitionist and statesman

The historic *Underground Railroad* of America which made legends of Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass was not located underground nor was it a railroad. A loose organised network with no clear, defined routes, the word *underground* relays the secrecy of the network's activities and the fear of exposure of slaves fleeing the hell of the confederate states. In his fictional interpretation of *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead keeps faith with recorded history in important ways even pasting as visual props and as prefaces to chapters, notices about runaway slaves with slave profiles and specifics about rewards for their capture. Rampaging the book's pages are the hordes of feral patrollers and slave catchers he unleashes, their blood singing as they go *nigger hunting*.



The Fugitive Slave Laws

- Passed in 1793
- Made it illegal to hide runaways
- 1850 the police were given power to recapture runaways
- Many slaves escaped to Canada
- If you were caught helping the runaways, you were fined \$2000 and given a sentence of 6 months of prison time.



But Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize winning novel transforms the metaphorical into the concrete. So new and yet so logical. Here, an historic symbol has become a real underground railroad. Here, tracks have been made through man-made tunnels burrowed far beneath the earth, connecting the states of America in what appears to be an endless maze leading to an unknown terminus. The tracks are plied by a succession – with interruptions - of steam powered trains: rusty, dilapidated box-cars without exception except once when a shining carriage appears -magically in the tunnel- to ferry the slaves onward, and to carry, in its attractive simplicity, a glimmer of a future of decency and of the kind of comforts they would never dare even to dream of.

Whitehead overstretches Ridgeway. He forces his lord of the hunt to serve zealously not only as a functionary of the confederacy but additionally as a megaphone for racism. Ridgeway articulates high-falutin thoughts which are not only chilling, they are unrealistic coming from the mouth of a blacksmith's son and a common if infamous slave-catcher. His speeches are even less realistic given the total lack of education of his audience, a runaway slave. She is Cora Randall, the story's heroine in flight from a plantation in Georgia, one of the confederate states which show no mercy towards slaves who try to read.



African Slaves in America

But if Ridgeway's intellectualism is misplaced, caricatural, the beliefs he expresses were common currency amongst patriotic whites whose predation on the fear they inspire in the slaves furnishes more of the book's landscape than the cotton fields in which the slaves labour. Ridgeway's articles of faith are: the inherent inferiority of the black race; the inherent superiority of the white race and America as a beacon of light.

Economic imperative – the booming cotton trade - and racist beliefs, combined to perpetuate the transatlantic trade of African men, women and children. Into one of his myriad, piercing sentences, the author inserts the idea that while Ridgeway's blacksmith father made tools, the son grew up to retrieve them. This must be the greatest understatement of the kind of torture meted out to Africans in America in the four hundred year span of their enslavement and this novel stands proudly as a showcase of black people as tools to be bought, sold, swapped, discarded, degraded and destroyed. Critically, Colson Whitehead's book stands as a museum of what the total objectification of humans looks like when it is carried out by powerful and godless men out of control. If with this novel the author successfully presents the extent of the damage done to the psyche of millions of slaves groaning under the yoke

of slavery, he is masterful in his exposure of the total degradation of the souls of the slave-masters.



African Slaves in America

Economic imperative additionally meant that the population of Africans in America would explode and the author uses North Carolina as an exponent of the reactions of the white American under this kind of siege. Speaking for his people, one character boasts that by hiring poor German and Irish migrants to work for meagre wages in the cotton fields, they had not abolished slavery: what they were in fact doing was '*abolishing niggers*' whom they expelled from North Carolina under new race laws rendering the slaves homeless, rendering them even easier targets of racial violence.

But if chains, manacles, cat o' nine tails, the gruesome iconography of slavery brand the novel's terrain, the road to freedom from those horrors emerges as the story - as history - unfolds . These early days in the civil rights movement are bearing rich fruit with the operations of the *Underground Railroad* front and center. Anti-slavery meetings connected to the UR take place with increasing frequency across the northern states. Long before he meets her, Royal, Cora's saviour and lover, has been active in them using their secret codes. "*I oil the pistons*" he says about his work in the *Underground Railroad*. We hear the ground-swell of freedom from the music the fugitives are making in the dormitories of South Carolina, a progressive state: symphonies of sounds originating from the slave plantations they have flown. Freedom is palpable in the education programmes and rehabilitation measures for wounded spirits and broken souls. Colson Whitehead paints these efforts in poignant scenes. Round the table at the fugitive sanctuary of Valentine Farm, abolitionists debate the coloured question. Luminaries who visit the farm deliver rousing speeches that quicken the blood of the negro residents. In the mounting resentment of the farm's white neighbours, freedom for Africans in America is brewing. The whites who witness the flourishing and prospering of this negro outpost in the middle of Indiana, sense with growing fear, the rising of a black nation. Freedom will come with the rise of courageous and generous men and women exemplified by:

Cora whose lion heart, loving spirit and sufferings are the heart of this story;

Royal, born free and destined to capture and bind the slave-catcher with his own chains;

Elijah Lander the rich, brilliant mulatto who could have been anything, living in his own peculiar and privileged space, *'happily rising alone'* but who chose to inspire his people with his words and to dedicate his life to making ***'room for others'***.

Published in the UK by Fleet, an imprint of Little, Brown Book Group, ***The Underground Railroad*** is deceptively easy to digest on a first read. It took a second read for me to comprehend the grandeur of the novel which Colson Whitehead has written. On my second read, I discovered an epic poem constructed with a tiered magnificence that conjures the mountainous land out of which a multitude hands –black and white – have carved out and mapped out pathways to freedom. A multitude lives risked and often lost to free from oppression not only those who disembarked onto American shores fleeing poverty or persecution in Europe but those others who were brought (and bought) against their will, captives, human cargo on the Transatlantic slave trade route.



Colson Whitehead,
Author, *The Underground Railroad*

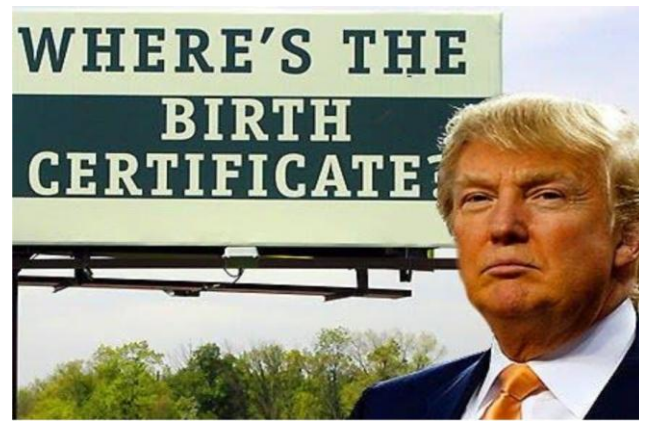


The novel's stature as a great parable dawned on me gradually, an unfolding revelation of *'the real Great War'* proclaims a character in the book, the one *'between blacks and whites'*. In the brightening light of old and new testament vision, I began to see in the tribulations of the slaves of America, the world's age old struggles between order and disorder, mercy and hate, gratuitous cruelty, the discipline of kindness; courage and cowardice. The age old binary of victim and victor began to manifest as the story of humanity which Christians call His-story. At its heart stands the cross. Before it, the perpetual groaning of slavery. Through and beyond it, the indestructible, glorious freedom of Easter morning.

The racial division and injustices which drive Colson Whitehead's historical fiction read like a clarion call to evaluate the progress the United States of America has actually made in ***'making room for others'***.



Barack Obama and families, President of USA (2009 - 2017)



Donald Trump, President of USA (2017 - Till date)

What comes quickly to mind are the racial divisions which came hot on the heels of Donald Trump's controversial victory in the presidential polls of 2016. Across the globe, witnesses described Trump's success as a *'white-lash'* - a reaction of white nationalists (whether or not they describe themselves as such) against the two term presidency of Barack Obama which preceded it. It is hard to forget Donald Trump at the helm of the Birther Movement which challenged the truth of President Obama's American citizenship. Across the states of America, lifted high above motorways, the movement sponsored billboard after billboard making the humiliating demand that the sitting African-American president produce his birth certificate.



The acquittal of George Zimmerman in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin is hard to forget and the **Black Lives Matter** movement which started in 2013 on social media to protest that verdict was impossible to ignore. In full view of the world yes, but don't you hear echoes of the unwieldy, historic **Underground Railroad**? Think of its growth and spread. From unremitting protest on social media, it has become a national, decentralised network of over 30 local chapters with no formal hierarchy. Think of its grit and its determination to challenge police brutality, racial profiling and to end the innumerable killings by the police force, of unarmed black men. Ultimately the movement seeks to imbue with real justice, a criminal justice system which if newspaper reports and news broadcasts are to be believed, increasingly looks rigged against the black man. Statistics cited by Bryan Stevenson,

Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, are shocking: one in three black male babies are expected to go to jail in the United States.



Bryan Stevenson,
Founder of the Equal Justice Initiative



To my mind no-one today possesses greater moral authority than the *Equal Justice Initiative* founder to tackle issues at the heart of racial division in America and to propose solutions. And it is clear to me that the literary monument to slavery which *The Underground Railroad* represents, is Colson Whitehead's answer to the call for America's accountability. Stevenson makes this call everywhere he goes. He made it with moving clarity in a 2016 CNN interview. To his host, Fareed Zakaria, this is what he said:

“There is a narrative of racial difference in this country we have never confronted. I think we live with a kind of smog in the air: the history of racial inequality is a kind of pollution and we haven’t done the things you need to do to effect a different environment. We haven’t had the conversations you need to have; we are a post-genocidal society and we haven’t done the things to recover from genocide. There were millions of native people in this continent who were slaughtered by white settlers when this country was formed and we haven’t talked about that. It has made us indifferent to the victimisation of African American people who were enslaved. I don’t think the great evil of American slavery was involuntary servitude, I think the great evil of American slavery was the narrative of racial difference we created to legitimate it. We made up this ideology of white supremacy and we haven’t confronted it... In Germany, if you go to that nation, you will see a landscape where there are markers and monuments at the homes of Jewish families who were abducted during the Holocaust. The Germans actually want you to go to Auschwitz and Birkenau to reflect soberly on that history and because of that we have a different relationship with Germany than we would have if they refused to own up or talk about the Holocaust. But we do the opposite in America. It is the 21st Century and there is not a single place in this country where you can have an honest engagement with the history of lynching; there are hardly any places where we can deal with the legacy of slavery and we

have this landscape that is littered with the iconography of the confederacy which we romanticise...This disconnect has got to be challenged if we are actually going to become a society where the presumption of dangerousness and guilt doesn't undermine the aspirations of so many people"

In another interview, given in the same year, Bryan Stevenson produced his master-stroke of what Christian pastor, Reverend Tim Keller terms, his *'loving rebuke'*:

"In this country we do victory great; we do success great; we do power great; We do not do shame very well. We do not do guilt very well. We don't own up to our mistakes. The absence of shame is what makes us vulnerable to discrimination and bigotry and abuse of power... If you see two people who have loved each other for fifty years and ask them what their secret is, they have learned how to say sorry to one another..."

What the founder of ***Equal Justice Initiative*** is calling for is a nation which chooses repentance and renewal; which chooses to regenerate itself in order to build, starting from home, a world that works for all.



Reviewer, Olatoun Gabi-Williams