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Mapping the American Nightmare: The Hero's Journey in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Abstract I: Questo articolo dimostra come il romanzo *La Ferrovia Sotterranea* di Colson Whitehead utilizzi in modo creativo il modello narrativo del "monomito" teorizzato da Joseph Campbell e sistematizzato da Christopher Vogler, sovvertendolo e ristrutturandolo per porre al centro della narrazione tematiche quali schiavitù, razzismo e trauma. Concentrandosi sulla frammentazione strutturale e sulla funzione simbolica dello spazio, l'articolo illustra come questo innovativo "viaggio dell'eroe" destabilizzi tre narrazioni occidentali basate sul mito: il modello eroico di Campbell radicato nelle tradizioni narrative occidentali, oltre a due miti fondanti dell'America bianca, il "Destino Manifesto" e il "Sogno Americano". Con questa epopea di libertà, Whitehead crea un contro-mito di sopravvivenza che riflette le realtà storiche della resistenza delle donne nere, ampliando al contempo lo spettro narrativo della letteratura americana contemporanea.

Abstract II: This article argues that Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* draws creatively on the "monomyth" story-making model theorised by Joseph Campbell and systematised by Christopher Vogler, and can be read as reworking and subverting it to engage with slavery, racism, and trauma. With a focus on structural fragmentation and the symbolic function of space, it illustrates how this reimagined "hero's journey" destabilises three Western myth-making narratives: Campbell's heroic template embedded in Western storytelling traditions, plus two foundational myths of white America, "Manifest Destiny" and the "American Dream". With this epic of freedom, Whitehead crafts a counter-myth of survival that reflects the historical realities of black women's resistance, while expanding the possibilities of contemporary American fiction.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, The Underground Railroad, monomyth, mythopoetic, resistance.

Imagine a hero
In some muddy compound,
His gift like a slingstone
Whirled for the desperate
(Heaney 1998: 216).

To end up in a draughty lamplit station
After the trains have gone, the wet track
Bared and tensed as I am, all attention
For your step following and damned if I look back
(Heaney 1998: 218).

Introduction

Blending historical realism with speculative invention, Colson Whitehead's 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, which won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, digs into one of the most brutal periods in American history, revisits the realities of slavery, and interrogates the narrative frameworks through which stories of bondage and liberation have traditionally been told. The underground railroad, a historical network of escape routes for enslaved people and an enduring lore in American cultural memory, is transformed into a literal subterranean train system: historical realities are slightly altered or intensified, and this ingenious defamiliarisation pushes readers to see slavery and racism with fresh clarity, rather than as distant history. At the centre of the story is Cora Randall, a 15-year-old enslaved girl fleeing a Georgia plantation, whose flight from bondage becomes more than a physical escape and evolves into a journey of self-discovery, resistance, and survival.

This article argues that "the hero's journey", or "monomyth", a storytelling model proposed by Joseph Campbell (2004) and systematised by Christopher Vogler (2007), can be read as the spine of Cora's story and the scaffold of its narrative architecture. The rich and growing critical literature has surprisingly overlooked this defining element of the text, especially in the light of the acclaimed TV series based on it[1]; critics have elucidated crucial aspects of this experimental novel from historical, political, cultural, formal, and theoretical perspectives (Fauziah, Ratih & Natawiria 2019; Dischinger 2017; Kelly 2018; Antoszek 2019;

[1] While the monomyth works best with traditional forms of the quest – folk and fairy tales, legends, and other fantasies – it can be found in different genres or types of stories across history: it dates back to epic poems such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1960), *The Odyssey,* Homer (1996) and *The Divine Comedy,* Alighieri (1982), and informs novels like *Don Quixote*, de Cervantes (2003), *Moby Dick,* Melville (2003), *Treasure Island*, Stevenson (2007), *Gulliver's Travels,* Swift (2003) – which will be discussed in this article – and *Life of Pi*, Martel (2001), and sagas like *The Hobbit*, Tolkien (2012), *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone,* Rowling (1997), and *The Hunger Games,* Collins (2008), just to name some of the most popular. More importantly, the monomyth has become a blueprint for cinematic storytelling and has been employed to craft Hollywood blockbusters such as *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, *The Wizard of Oz, Braveheart*, *Rocky, Rambo: First Blood, The Terminator, The Last Samurai*, *The Last of the Mohicans* (also discussed later), *The Lion King*, *Fight Club*, *Avatar*, and *The Matrix*, amongst others. Unsurprisingly, the movie industry noticed the potential of *The Underground Railroad*'s innovative monomyth and produced a television miniseries, created and directed by Barry Jenkins: the series premiered in 2021, highlighted by the outstanding performance of South African actress Thuso Mbedu as Cora Randall.

Broyld 2019; Mellis 2019; Heneks 2020; Motlagh 2020; Friedman 2021; Leise 2021; Ferreira 2022; Klestil 2022; Nocera 2022; Waller 2022; Allen 2023; Gheytasi 2024; Shino 2024; Martinson & Gordon 2026), but four contributions are particularly relevant for the argument developed here, since they explore the theme of the journey (Ward 2017; Groba 2019), the novel's narrative structure (Martín Salván 2020), and the subversion of the traditional heroic mythology of the underground railroad (Dubey 2019). Despite their brilliant insights, these studies gloss over a key narrative feature of the story, and the aim of this article is to fill this critical lacuna and facilitate a deeper understanding and a fuller appreciation of this compelling novel. In addition, the article argues that Whitehead problematises the monomyth, elaborating a mythopoetic framework that decentres American cultural imperialism by tearing down two of its foundational myths: "Manifest Destiny" and the "American Dream".

Campbell's and Vogler's Monomyth: An Overview

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, mythologist Joseph Campbell investigates a story-making template traceable across time, traditions, and genres; influenced by Jungian theory on the collective unconscious, Campbell draws on recurring archetypes, images, and ideas from dreams and mythologies across various cultures[2], and illustrates how common patterns run through hero myths, no matter what culture the myth is a part of. In hero-quest ancestral stories the protagonist (The Hero) goes through basic stages that are part of a journey and engages with archetypical characters who facilitate his transformative parable: these symbolic figures (The Herald, The Threshold Guardian, The Mentor, The Villain/Shadow, The Allies, The Shapeshifters) represent universal human roles, forces, and psychological energies rather than just individual people. Campbell calls this narrative structure the "monomyth", which, on a deeper level, is a journey into the reader's psyche which reveals a universal story of transformation, growth, and self-affirmation. Divided into 12 steps and three acts, Vogler's "hero's journey" (2007) systematises Campbell's, and is organised along the classic Freytag Pyramid structure (Introduction/Rising Action/Climax/Denouement/Resolution; see Table 1). Despite referring to both models, for clarity this article examines Cora's journey through the prism of Vogler's (Table 1).

The monomyth describes a recurring narrative pattern in which an ordinary protagonist is called to leave the familiar (ordinary) world and enter an unexplored realm of trials that test, transform, and redefine them. Initially reluctant or unprepared, the hero accepts the call, crosses a threshold into the unknown, encounters mentors, allies, enemies, and increasingly difficult ordeals, ultimately facing a central crisis or symbolic death that leads to profound inner change and the attainment of a valuable "boon" or insight. The hero then returns to the ordinary world, bringing back the wisdom, power, or gift acquired through the journey for the benefit of themselves or their community.

In this article, these narrative patterns are critically used as a heuristic lens rather than an intentional modelling scaffold, to illuminate the structure, symbolism, and ideological interventions of *The Underground Railroad*, and to explore how the novel can be scrutinised as

[2] The edition consulted for this article includes a valuable introduction by writer and Jungian psychoanalyst Clarissa Pinkola Estés, author of the groundbreaking *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, Estés (2004: xxiii-lxv).

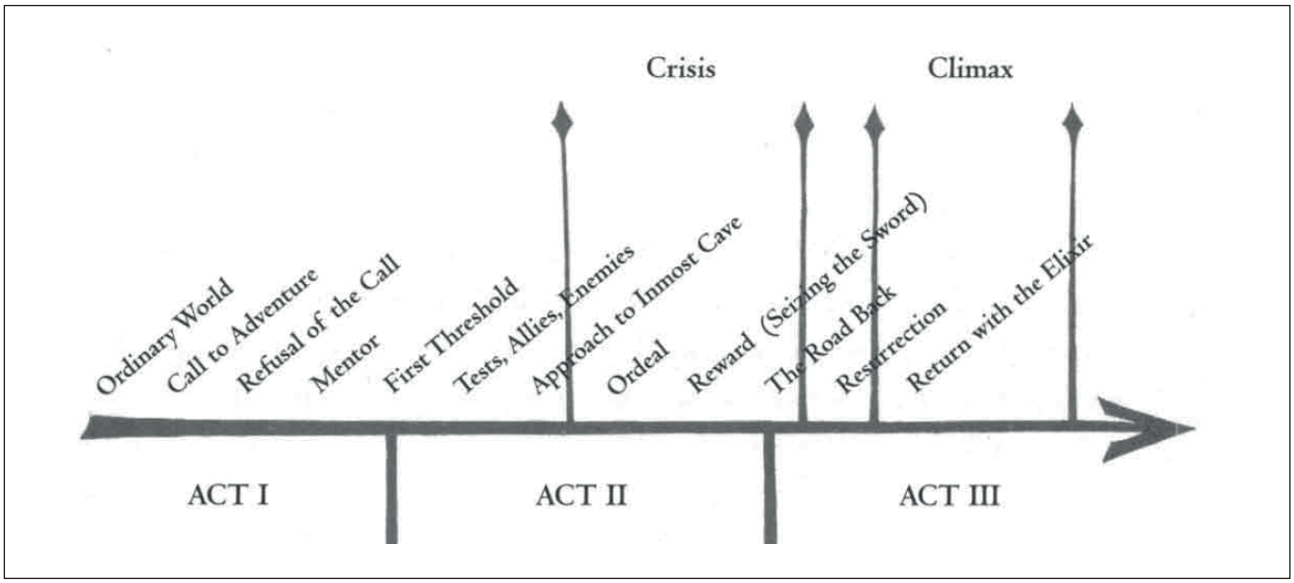


Table 1. The narrative structure of the "monomyth" (Vogler 2007: 8).

reworking and disrupting conventional mythopoetic and heroic narratives. The monomyth model therefore facilitates a close reading of the text, while remaining open to departures, revisions, and resistances that emerge from the novel's engagement with the historical realities of slavery, racism, and historical trauma. Its value lies in providing a conceptual vocabulary through which patterns of departure, transformation, ordeal, and return can be identified and critically investigated in Cora's heroic journey. The following sections examine how Whitehead both reproduces and transforms the principal recurring kernels of the monomyth.

Intertextual Allusions *in The Underground Railroad*

The Hero with a Thousand Faces was first published in 1949, in a cultural context far removed from today's, and the monomyth has been criticised for being overly simplified (Dundes 1984), Western-centric (Hambly 2021), anthropocentric (Akomolafe 2020), and for lacking true universality and promoting individualism and cultural reductivism (Atterbery 2014); feminist scholars deem it patriarchal and hypermasculine, and the embodiment of a warrior culture enforcing phallogocentric dominance with little or no relevance to the journeys of womanhood (Pearson & Pope 1981; Pratt 1982; Edwards 1984; Le Guin 1986; Pearson 1991; Nicholson 2011; Murdock 2020). According to its detractors, the formula is controversial and antiquated, and their considerations are mostly legitimate; nevertheless, abundant empirical evidence shows how, despite its long-identified problems, the monomyth is still pervasive, recognisable and resilient, and remains a narrative blueprint shared by many well-known stories[3]. Using Cora's journey as a case study, this article argues that, aware of

[3] A recent example of monomyth narrative is the vampire horror film *Sinners*, written and directed by Ryan Coogler, winner of four Oscars in 2026, including best original screenplay.

the monomyth's strengths and weaknesses, inventive writers critically reimagine it, while maintaining its multi-stage narrative progression basically intact: the literary framework within which Cora's story is inscribed is a refinement of the monomyth that simultaneously draws upon and fractures it.

The story's engagement with the hero's journey outline can be traced through suggestive textual affiliations: the most obvious intertextual reference is William Still's *The Underground Railroad*, a historical record of enslaved people who escaped to freedom through the underground railroad. Rather than being a single narrative, it is a collection of real testimonies, letters, and case records gathered by the author, who personally helped many fugitives. Whitehead adopts Still's fragmentary narrative structure and opens all the "State chapters" with original fugitive slave notices as epigraphs[4] (Whitehead 2021: 356): the insertion of these primary sources foregrounds Cora's escape from the "American nightmare" but can also be seen as a tribute to the seminal work of the man known in the popular imagination as "The Father of the Underground Railroad" (Still 1872).

Yet, it is by citing two authoritative monomyth narratives that Whitehead subtly uncovers his central narrative strategy: both Jonathan Swift's *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World. In Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships* – better known as *Gulliver's Travels* (Swift 2003), read in secret by Caesar at the Randall plantation (Whitehead 2021: 282) – and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (Cooper 2009) – found accidentally by Cora while she is hiding in North Carolina (Whitehead 2021: 203) – "are hero's journeys"[5] and their presence in the rich tapestry of Cora's journey can support the interpretative direction proposed in this article. In the closing paragraph of the "Caesar" chapter, Swift's text offers a particularly evocatory parallel with the monomythic pattern: "Gulliver […] *moved from peril to peril, each new island a new predicament to solve before he could return home*" (Whitehead 2021: 282, emphasis added). The homage to Cooper's monomyth is even more explicit: Cora's name and characterisation invite comparison with Cora Munro, one of the protagonists of *The Last of the Mohicans*, who challenges nineteenth-century stereotypes and is known for her mixed-race heritage, strong disposition and courage: the resemblance between the two Coras is self-evident.

Campbell presents the monomyth as a universal mythic pattern rooted in comparative mythology, while Vogler streamlines it into a practical twelve-stage model for modern storytelling (fiction and films); in both versions, the essential narrative movement is one of *departure, initiation*, and *return*, where external adventures mirror the protagonist's psychological and moral transformation. While the previous section of the article focused on the structural similarities between Cora's journey and the monomyth, the ones that follow explore its deviations from it. Rather than simply replicating or rejecting the model, the novel *expands* it: Cora's experience of enslavement and search for freedom is narrated by appropriating, transmuting and challenging the monomyth, by inscribing and destabilising its recurring kernels.

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[4] The only exception is the last "State chapter" (The North), which opens with a *fictional* notice for Cora.

[5] The monomyth narrative structure of *The Last of the Mohicans* is even more pronounced in the 1992 Hollywood adaptation, starring Daniel Day-Lewis and Madeleine Stowe.

Whitehead's Innovative Reimagining of the Monomyth

The novel is organised through repeated structural patterns and divided symmetrically into 12 chapters, with "Characters Chapters" (Ajarry, Ridgeway, Stevens, Ethel, Caesar and Mabel) alternating with "State Chapters" (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana, The North); the journey unfolds with racist America's landscape as the unifying background and the hero linking separate episodes: each chapter thus functions like a self-contained story with its own setting and conflicts, and distinct landscapes as narrative units[6]. The "Characters Chapters" do not advance Cora's external journey but deepen its meaning by turning her escape into something larger than an individual quest, and by framing it as part of a collective history of oppression, resistance, and survival. They offer insights into the motives, histories and genealogies of archetypical figures in Cora's heroic path and play a different role from the main plot "State chapters" that follow her physical journey. Instead of moving the hero forward geographically, they interrupt the momentum of escape and act like *zoom-outs* that widen the reader's imaginary landscape and broaden the "tests, allies, and enemies" phase. The slowed tempo is intentional since these chapters resemble moments of reflection that indirectly shape the hero's world. Symbolically and structurally, they are key to this disruption and prevent the story from becoming a linear heroic arc.

In the *departure* phase Whitehead simultaneously employs, unsettles, and reimagines the monomyth by presenting Cora's escape from the Randall plantation as both recognisably heroic and historically constrained. Like conventional heroes, Cora receives a call to adventure through an invitation from Caesar to flee (The Herald), initially resists because of fear and attachment to the known world[7] (Refusal of the Call), and eventually crosses the thresholds (the swamp and the first train station) to enter a new land: the train leaves for the "unknown world"[8]. However, Whitehead overturns the assumptions of the traditional monomyth by showing that Cora does not choose adventure in pursuit of self-fulfilment but is compelled to run away from a system of racial terror in which remaining means continued enslavement or death. The departure is therefore not a voluntary embrace of destiny but an act of survival, and the thresholds are not gateways into a magical realm, but something specularly akin to the infamous "Door of No Return", the narrow, ocean-facing exit in the House of Slaves (Maison des Esclaves) on Gorée Island (Île de Gorée), and a symbol of the transatlantic slave trade (Abaka 2012). As a matter of fact, after leaving Georgia, Cora steps into an equally perilous America where slavery's violence persists in muted forms. By grounding the archetypal structure in the historical realities of slavery, Whitehead transforms the heroic departure from an individual quest for glory into a collective

[6] The first station agent Cora and Caesar meet, Lumbly, tells them: "Every State is different […] Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country […] If you want to see what the nation is all about, [...] you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America", Whitehead (2021: 82-83).

[7] "THE first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said No" is the novel's arresting opening, Whitehead (2021: 3).

[8] In Vogler's words: "the wagon train gets rolling" (2007: 12).

struggle for freedom and human dignity, reimagining the monomyth as a narrative that exposes the limits of universal heroic models when confronted with the lived experience of racial oppression.

In the *initiation* phase, the monomyth is adopted and radically transformed by structuring Cora's travels through various States (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Indiana) as a series of trials and ordeals, and encounters with allies and enemies that outwardly resemble Campbell's and Vogler's heroic pattern, while exposing its limitations. Each time Cora leaves a State, she physically descends into the dark alleys of the underground railroad, where she waits for the next train[9]; as she traverses America, she engages all the habitual archetypical figures of the hero's journey: firstly, she is supported by mentors and helpers such as Caesar, Mr Fletcher, Lumbly, Sam, Martin and Ethel Wells, Royal and the people of the Valentine Farm; secondly, she confronts villains including the Randall brothers, Connelly, Blake, Boseman and, above all, her archenemy Ridgeway and his enigmatic aide-de-camp Homer, plus the slave-catching system, a broader antagonist comprising a network of slave catchers, laws, and people who enforce slavery and continually threaten her freedom; thirdly, she is challenged by shapeshifters (Dr Bertram, Dr Stevens, Mr Fields, Miss Handler, Miss Lucy) and repeatedly faces life-threatening tests that deepen her resilience and moral awareness.

Furthermore, Whitehead reinvents the traditional model by denying the expectation of linear progress, stable mentorship, or a single climactic ordeal leading to mastery. Mentorship is decentralised and guidance is fragmented across male and female helpers that appear along the way; plus, Cora escapes slavery and moves from State to State via a literalised railroad in a "litany of painful stories" (Thaler 2019: 608), and her journey is one thread in an interconnected system of stories shaped by slavery, a series of displacements across shifting social regimes, in which each state foregrounds both a narrative episode and an ideological experiment. The "State Chapters" have a fixed narrative structure (arrival in a new place; encounter with its rules and power structures; conflict or tension; departure), but while the pattern repeats, each step in the journey introduces new ideas, preventing monotony: the changing settings work as structural units, which allow the narrative to progress not just through time, but also through shifting environments. The States function as trials (forcing the hero to confront different facets of systemic oppression) and as shapeshifters (changing the rules of the game at each stop to test Cora's resilience and ability to navigate racist America). Each State is a self-contained exploration of a different society and a different "logic" of racial control, a case-study of slavery and racism which reframes real historical practices (medical experimentation, eugenics, forced labour systems, extermination). The parallel structure of these chapters, which relies on juxtaposition, placing different systems side by side, develops Cora's journey against the background of distinct but connected social experiments and makes the critique of America systematic, cumulative and comparative. It also suggests that systems of oppression adapt and justify themselves differently, rather than existing in a single fixed form. From State to State Cora moves "between hope and despair"

[9] According to Campbell, the unknown world is "a kingdom *underground* […] a place of strangely fluid and polymorphous beings, unimaginable torments, superhuman deeds", Campbell (2004: 52, emphasis added).

(Dischinger 2017: 96), but neither sentiment is definitive, and they constantly replace each other to drive the narrative forward: temporary hope (South Carolina, Indiana) is erased by acts of violence that bring Cora back to a condition of despair (North Carolina, Tennessee); yet, despair never develops into complete annihilation thanks to external interventions that offer Cora a new glimpse of hope; each time the hero's tenacity is tested and the journey continues[10]. Each apparent refuge reveals a new manifestation of systemic racism, making the journey cyclical rather than progressive and emphasising survival over triumph. Each State Cora visits after leaving Georgia is a micro-journey, in which the arrival coincides with a symbolic birth and the departure with a symbolic death. The birth-death-rebirth cycles have a palingenetic function in the story and are central in the hero's character-building: from each State Cora emerges renewed, more experienced, more self-conscious and more conscious of the atrocities American society is capable of. Whitehead uses Cora's story as a model for psychological exploration and socio-political critique to expose the flaws of American society in the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries, and her hero's journey is not a linear progression toward self-realisation but a series of repeated cycles of hope and destruction without a stable "reward" and safe return home. Whitehead rejects a neat ending, emphasises ongoing struggle over resolution and uses the journey to explore different systems of racial control, not just personal growth. The initiation thus becomes not a path to heroic empowerment or individual self-actualisation, but an ongoing confrontation with the shifting structures of racial oppression embedded in American history and institutions.

In the *return* phase Whitehead draws on the monomyth only to overturn its conventional resolution. While Campbell's and Vogler's hero returns to the ordinary world bearing a boon that restores social order and completes the cycle of transformation, Cora is denied such closure. Her escape does not culminate in reconciliation, mastery, or a secure homecoming; instead, the novel ends, in "The North", with Cora continuing westward into an uncertain future, suggesting that freedom is an ongoing process rather than a destination. Whitehead thus invalidates the expectation of a triumphant return by revealing that, for the formerly enslaved, there is no stable "ordinary world" to which one can return, because the nation itself remains structured by racial violence. At the same time, he reimagines the heroic return by redefining the "boon" not as a magical gift or completed quest, but as the hard-won possibility of agency, hope, and self-determination. In doing so, Whitehead transforms the monomyth from a closed narrative of departure, initiation, and return into an open-ended journey that foregrounds historical continuity, collective memory, and the unfinished struggle for freedom.

A Mythopoetic of Resistance and Liberation: Debunking the Myths of the "American Dream" and "Manifest Destiny"

Cora's journey is an "*archetypal* story of a hero completing his/her journey to freedom" (Stanković 2024: 394, emphasis added) that circumvents linear storytelling, exalts black female agency (Moore 2024), reshapes conventional archetypical roles, rejects "the comforting

[10] "What if every state *our hero* went through as he or she ran north was a different state of American possibility?" asks the author in an interview, Dischinger (2017: 83, emphasis added).

outcome *of the hero's journey*" (Li 2019: 20, emphasis added) and decentres American cultural imperialism with a mythopoetic that tears down two of its foundational myths, "Manifest Destiny" (Stephanson 1995; Fresonke 2003; Weinberg 2020) and the "American Dream" (Adams 1931; Cullen 2003; Jillson 2004).

Drawing particularly on Roland Barthes' understanding of myth as a form of ideological naturalisation, this article approaches the "American Dream" and "Manifest Destiny" as culturally powerful narratives that present historically constructed values as immanent or self-evident (Barthes 1972). Operating within this philosophical framework, Whitehead designs Cora's journey as an iconoclastic narrative strategy to deconstruct these sacred myths of white American history and culture. The "American Dream" – i.e. the belief that anyone, regardless of background, class, race, or birth circumstances, can achieve success, freedom, prosperity, and social mobility through hard work, determination, and talent – is linked to ideas such as equality of opportunity, home ownership, wealth, education, personal freedom, and a "better life". This myth hides the social systems that make success much easier for privileged groups than for oppressed ones like African-Americans; as W. E. B. Du Bois aptly put it:

> Here in America rose a nation which declared that all men should have freedom of opportunity, and join in an effort to promote justice for all men; it was a magnificent dream, a dream of universal suffrage, of humanity, of republican government. In its very dawning that dream was choked by the shadow of Negro slavery (Du Bois 1904).

Drawing from this cultural heritage, Whitehead demystifies the "American Dream" by revealing its exclusions, by showing that America's ideals of freedom, opportunity, and progress were historically built alongside racial violence and economic exploitation. Cora's journey serves this purpose and graphically shows that the "American Dream" was never equally available to all, because historical and structural barriers such as slavery, racism, sexism, poverty, inequality, and discrimination prevented oppressed individuals and groups from achieving it: for enslaved black people, America was not a land of opportunity, but a landscape of pursuit, surveillance, and survival.

Like the "American Dream", "Manifest Destiny" – i.e. the belief that the United States was naturally, morally, and even divinely destined to expand westward across North America, spreading its political system, capitalism, Christianity, and ideas of civilisation – is a false national story that celebrates freedom and progress for some, while ignoring the oppression and dispossession of others. Popularised in the era in which the novel is set to justify the colonisation of the continent by white settlers, it presents expansion as heroic, inevitable, and beneficial, while hiding or excusing the idea of racial superiority and the violence behind it, which led to the genocide of Native Americans, wars, land seizure, and the spread of slavery into new territories[11]. Cora's odyssey through various States uncovers the brutal realities produced

[11] Interestingly, the previously noted intertextual reference to James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* resurfaces obliquely in Whitehead's critique of "Manifest Destiny": while it does not celebrate "Manifest Destiny" (a concept popularised 20 years *after* its publication), the novel portrays Native American

by the practical applications of this myth: through it and Ridgeway's ideology, Whitehead exposes it as a justification for white domination rather than a noble national purpose and debunks it by revealing that America's supposed mission to spread freedom and civilisation is actually built on slavery, racial violence, and conquest. In Ridgeway's words:

> We come up with all sorts of fancy talk to hide things. Like in the newspapers nowadays, all the smart men talking about Manifest Destiny. Like it's a new idea […] It means taking what is yours, your property, whatever you deem it to be. And everyone else taking their assigned places to allow you to take it […] 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 (Whitehead 2021: 266).

Through Cora's hero's journey, Whitehead exposes how slavery and racism destroy nations, communities and families as much as individuals, and how memory and systemic violence constantly intrude upon the present, preventing any uncomplicated hope and salvation. *The Underground Railroad* is a politically charged novel which illustrates how racism is embedded within the fabric of American society and culture, rather than confined in the past to individual slave owners. Cora's is a gaze-shifting story that vividly depicts the enduring irrationality of a country in which the fate of the oppressed is determined not by justice, but by racial violence.

Conclusion

Using the monomyth as a narrative backbone, while disestablishing its optimistic substratum, Whitehead has written a story that pushes the boundaries of storytelling and has achieved both critical and commercial success. Rather than tracing the triumphant arc of an individual who masters trials and returns transformed, Cora's journey is a fragmented, perilous and enduring struggle for survival that resists closure. Although the novel is episodic, it is cohesive in purpose and maintains a strong unity that emerges out of Cora's ongoing quest for freedom. Whitehead presents the hero's journey as a never-ending escape from the dangers of an oppressive system: not as a successful adventure, but as an exhausting physical and psychological ordeal. In racist America, freedom is not the destination at the end of a journey, but a fragile, temporary condition constantly threatened by the pervasive reach of white violence and surveillance. As Cora escapes the "American Nightmare" and the tentacles of "Manifest Destiny", punishment and the continual oscillation between hope and danger characterise every step of the journey. Freedom-seekers, symbolised by Cora, learn how the supposed freedom journey is a precarious escape, dependent on the goodwill of others, and constantly threatened by the ubiquitous violence of racism. Even moments of apparent safety involve policing, confinement, danger and alertness, with trauma intruding

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disappearance as inevitable, and its association of white American expansion with the future reflects some of the ideological assumptions that would later underpin the myth.

upon any possibility of rest. By replacing mythic transformation with historical endurance, Whitehead reimagines the monomyth as a narrative in which the hero's growth lies in perseverance, resilience, and the refusal to surrender hope, rather than in achieving decisive victory or transcendent enlightenment. *The Underground Railroad* is therefore a freedom epic with strong mythic echoes, which aligns with Campbell's and Vogler's models, while intentionally blending and reimagining them. The myth-based structure allows for an innovative critique of racism and systemic oppression in the America of yesterday and today, making *The Underground Railroad* a classic of contemporary American literature. By acknowledging the adaptability of the monomyth model, and revealing what becomes visible about race, memory, subjectivity and power when a supposedly universal mythic paradigm encounters African American narratives that have historically been excluded from definitions of the universal human subject, this article aims to enrich scholarship on neo-slave narratives and contemporary African American fiction.

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