Beyond Black Girlhood: An Underground Railroad to Nowhere \\ Chamara Moore

Abstract:

How can Colson Whitehead's combining of the generic and the strange in his Prize winning speculative text *The Underground Railroad* be read as Afro-Pessimist? This paper seeks to illuminate the ways in which Whitehead's novel provides narratives of self-making adjacent to Coming of Age while reinventing the historically white genre of the Bildungsroman for an intersectional identity in Early America. Using Geta LeSeur's *The Black Bildungsroman* as a point of reference, I argue that because the protagonist Cora is a Black girl born and raised on a plantation, her experience cannot be constrained to a genre defined by parochial frames of reference and values derived from Eurocentric traditions. She comes of age prior to the bulk of the novel due to the strenuous ways in which she has been raised. In this way, "Girlhood" has never been a possibility for her, making the novel's ambiguous ending a clearer argument for an Afro-Pessimist future, rather than any milestone of maturation we see in Bildungsromane. *The Underground Railroad* is a case study that demonstrates how Black Speculative fiction authors move through and beyond the Bildungsroman genre by imbuing their Black female subjects like Cora with the agency of self-making, while using speculative elements such as transforming into a railroad to demonstrate the intractable social death of enslavement.

In the 1992 Documentary *Black Sci-Fi,* Octavia Butler describes the contrast between the freedom that speculative fiction allows and the constraints on genres more closely associated with canonicity: "Science fiction is a wonderful way to think about possibilities…There are all sorts of walls around other genres. Romances, mysteries, westerns. There are no real walls around science fiction. We can build them, but they're not there naturally." Building from this contrast, this essay explores the ways speculative fiction allows Black writers to inject narratives regarding allegories of freedom and liberation into more traditional genres like the *Bildungsroman* to blur and complicate their boundaries. Using Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* as an entry point, I will update Ramón Saldívar's claim that Whitehead's work demonstrates how "Speculative Realism has become a mode of combining and reshaping the modern and postmodern versions of the historical novel and the *Bildungsroman*" (Saldívar 2011, 5).

This essay builds on this point to suggest that the innovations Black speculative writers have brought to the genre move us further away from a realist narrative tradition centered on Eurocentric subjectivities, making space for Black female characters at the intersection of race and gender oppression. By reading what I call speculative Black girl-centric narratives like *The Underground Railroad* through the lens of Afro-Pessimism, this essay seeks to bring us closer to defining what it means to "come of age" as a figure historically barred from both the categories of "girlhood" and human. While scholars like Geta LeSeur have notably suggested "The Black Bildungsroman" as an alternative, I argue that we should move away from Eurocentric genre categories altogether. I'd instead like to complicate LeSeur's argument by illustrating the ways in which contemporary Black speculative narratives adjacent to our understanding of "Bildungsromane" are marked by moments of self-making that give their protagonists agentic

experience. Thinking beyond the "Bildungsroman" as a concept allows us to better understand its adjacent forms in the speculative. *The Underground Railroad* is an example of a text utilizing this speculative form to, play on safe staples of the white imaginary like slavery and utopic communes and subvert their meaning by adding weird elements like a literal subway in Early America and a Black girl that chooses to *become* the railroad that allows readers to imagine Black girls defining themselves and reclaiming their agency.

Black "Girlhood"

Intersectional scholars often discuss girlhood and womanhood interchangeably in the context of Blackness, because the Black female subject exists under the simultaneity of racist and sexist oppression no matter her age. Many Black Feminist scholars have focused their attention on the inescapability of marginalization within that double bind. In her memoir *Thick: And Other Essays*, Tressie McMillan Cottom writes, "Black girls and Black women are problems…not the same thing as causing problems. We are social issues to be solved, economic problems to be balanced, and emotional baggage to be overcome (Cottom 2019, 10). Cottom forces us to think about what it means to take up a racialized and gendered space that is ontologically considered a problem or a burden without the actual power to *cause* problems, specifically including both Black women *and* girls within that discussion to further illustrate her point. This move is mirrored within the field of Girlhood Studies, but this field specifies Black girlhood as a site of study *beyond* merely pain and suffering. In her seminal book *Black Girlhood Celebration: Toward a Hip-Hop Feminist Pedagogy,* Ruth Nicole Brown asserts that "Black girlhood Studies is about the representations, memories, and lived experiences of being and becoming in a body marked as youthful, Black, and female" (Brown 2009, 16). Since these

perceptions can be ever changing, she does not consider Black Girlhood as dependent on "age, physical maturity, or any essential category of identity (Brown 2009, 16). While Brown defines it in the context of joy, celebration and self-making, this lack of dependence on an "essential" category seems more due to the collapsing of age or maturation within the lived experience of Black girls. Defining Black girlhood and the narratives that center it requires a distillation of the ways in which the Black female body has been epistemologically considered *doubly* outside the human, beginning with the ways violence against her has not been historically considered a violent act.

While the rape and molestation of Black girls wasn't even defined as "rape" until our contemporary era, even now these instances are perpetually dismissed, rarely getting close to a discussion in the public eye until the recent wake of the 2018 Lifetime Series *Surviving R. Kelly.* In the series, clinical psychologist Dr. Candice Norcott constantly refers to the study conducted on Poverty and Inequality at the Georgetown University Law Center, citing the origins of its term "adultification." The full data and findings of the study were reported in the *Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood,* detailing how it expands on earlier research surrounding the adultification of Black boys. These results found that while Black boys are perceived as adults as early as 10, this starts as early as 5 for Black girls. Compared to white girls of the same age (5-14), the survey participants perceived that Black girls needed less nurturing, less protection and less comfort and support. They additionally assumed Black girls to be more independent, and to know more about sex and other adult topics. Thusly, adultification was coined to explain the "stark criminal justice and school discipline disparities between Black girls and their white counterparts" (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 2017, 4). In the study, Author Monique Morris explains how "the assignment of more adult-like characteristics to the

expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression" (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 2017, 6). This "truncated age continuum" is what makes "Black girls likened more so to adults than to children and treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women… This compression then strips Black girls of their childhood freedom and renders Black Girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood" (Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez 2017, 6).

Saidiya Hartman expands these sociological findings into a specific blend of archival, literary, and speculative in her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments,* in which she narrates erased personal stories of urban Black women and girls at the turn of the 20th Century. In the 1st chapter, titled *A Minor Figure,* Hartman speculates about the life of a young girl who appears posed naked on a sofa in an archival photograph from the 1890s with no description. While the girl can be no older than 10, it is the lack of a narrative surrounding her staged nakedness that "details the violence to which the black female body can be subjected" which for Hartman makes it "impossible for her to be a child" (Hartman 2019, 27). She then uses historical context to explain the way Black girls "ripened too soon," like the girl from the photograph, already had their bodies "marked by a history of sexual defilement" and "branded as a commodity" in the "prevailing set of social arrangements, in which [they were] formally free and vulnerable to the triple jeopardy of economic, racial, and sexual violence" (Hartman 2019, 29):

> There was no statutory rape law to penalize what occurred in the studio, and had such law existed, a poor black girl would have fallen outside its reach. When a rape or assault was reported to the police or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the girl, seduced or raped, might be sentenced to the training school or the reformatory to protect her or punish her for being too fast, too mature, too knowing…Innocence (that is, virginity) was the issue, not what age a girl was old enough for the taking. Previous immorality meant a man could do whatever he wanted. Colored girls were always

> presumed to be immoral…Black girls came before the law, but were not protected by it (Hartman 2019, 28-29).

Here Hartman brings up the critical difference between the assumed space Black girls occupy and that of other girls—Innocence. She reiterates that there is no age too old or young for Black girls to be preyed upon, since whether the legal protections exist for them or not, Black girlhood always exists on the outside of this. Understanding Black girlhood as Hartman does means coming to terms with the fact that "the entanglement of violence and sexuality, care and exploitation continues to define the meaning of being Black and female" (Hartman 2019, 30). This suggests that Black girlhood is an arbitrary and ever-changing category marked by its marginalization and resulting "adultification", meaning a notable *lack* of "Coming of Age." If it is defined by this barring from the privilege to come of age, then what does it mean to read Black girlhood through a narrative genre like the *Bildungsroman*? How do we map our understanding of a non-essential category like Black girlhood onto our understanding of a "Coming of Age" narrative? Can the Bildungsroman ever function *for* Black girls? Furthermore, how do speculative narratives move beyond the boundaries the Bildungsroman to make room for Black girl protagonists to find themselves?

Afro-Pessimism Links Black and Female

This central question of what it means to build narratives that center characters ontologically barred from subjecthood is preceded by the legacy of Afro-Pessimist Thought exemplified by scholars like Hartman, Frank Wilderson, and Hortense Spillers. *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* tells us that in the broadest sense, Afro-Pessimism is an understanding of Blackness predicated on the redefinition of the slave's being as object, commodity, and property. This understanding is built on the assumption that the slave is *socially* dead, meaning "they are

1) open to gratuitous violence, 2) natally alienated, their ties of birth not recognized and familial structures intentionally broken apart; and 3) generally dishonored or disgraced before any thought or action is considered" (8). This social death defines their ontology, meaning "the slave experiences their 'slaveness' ontologically, as a '*being for* the captor'" (Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction, 8). Afro-Pessimist thought argues that though Blackness is no longer considered "slave" it still fits within the ontological enslavement that informs and motivates "anti-Black violence" which cannot exist simultaneously with "recognition and inclusion in society" without "result[ing] in social *and real* death" (Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction, 10). This line of thinking deems that occupying the ontological space of the slave is a "loss of any self" regarding the slave as "the position of the unthought" outside of the subjectivity of thought and praxis (Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction, 165).

This "unthought" is something that overlaps explicitly in Black female embodiment in that Black girls are an afterthought in addition to holding a liminal epistemological space. Hartman explains this in her 2003 interview with Frank Wilderson titled "The Position of the Unthought", using the example of Harriet Jacobs. She explains that the "paradox of agency" for Jacobs is in the tension between herself as "an agent versus the objective conditions in which she finds herself" (187). This impossibility is dependent on "her position as a slave: her status as a thing and the negation of her will" (187). This negation is something centered in Afro-Pessimist methodology in the belief that since "Blackness is negated by the relations and structures of society…the only way out is to negate that negation" usually by removal from society altogether which is often death (10). Hartman posits that the way in which Jacobs is forced to "efface her very condition in order to make [her] story intelligible to [white audiences]" is an example of this negation, a sort of social death:

> This existence in the space of death, where negation is the captive's central possibility for action, whether we think of that as a radical refusal of the terms of the social order or these acts that are sometimes called suicide or self-destruction, but which are really an embrace of death (187).

Such negation appears by way of certain characters in Whitehead's work, but parts of Cora's narrative in *The Underground Railroad* seem to embody Harriet Jacobs' story and positionality directly. In the middle of novel Cora spends months in North Carolina, hiding in the attic of Ethel and Martin Wells. This seems to be a direct reference to Jacobs' life hiding away in her master's attic. There are even similar moments of tension between Cora and Mrs. Wells and Jacobs and Mrs. Flint[1] though ultimately Cora's story takes a new path and diverges from Jacobs' as the novel continues. This is a good example of how the speculative makes room for exploration through historical slippage linked by way of the Black female body and its centricity in the narrative.

This narrative weaving is parallel to Hartman's methodology of "critical fabulation" regarding Black female narratives and the violence of the archive. In her seminal essay "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman describes her method of researching the lives of black female slaves as "straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration" (Hartman 2008, 11). This "fabulation" of what may have occurred within the space absent from the archive is a form of speculative writing that animates these historical "objects", acknowledging their existence as "commodity" in the space of the archive

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[1] In *The Underground Railroad* when Cora bedbound with sickness while hiding in North Carolina there is a moment of sexual exploitation, coercion, and tension when Ethel "kisse[s] the girl" with "two kinds of feeling mixed up in those kisses" (303). This tension is similar to moment in Jacobs' narrative in which Mrs. Flint tries to sexually exploit her in order to determine if she's slept with her husband.

while still reckoning with "the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance" (Hartman 2008, 11-12). In this sense, Black speculative narratives like Whitehead's animate Black objects, while still emphasizing their objecthood and commodified existence forever tied to the overlap of their Blackness and femininity.

Hartman is not the only Afro-Pessimist to discuss the objecthood historically rooted in the Black female body in this way. Hortense Spillers argues that the assumed slave captive is always "a female body" because it "locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (Spillers 2003, 112). She argues that this commodification is two-fold when taking into account the reproductive potential of Black female bodies, sold for labor and breeding. She goes further to say that the Black female body specifically bridges the human and non-human:

> [The black American woman] became instead the principal point of passage between the human and non-human world. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference—visually, psychologically, ontologically—as the route by which the dominant modes decides the distinction between humanity and 'other' (207).

With this quote Spillers lays out the stakes for centering the Black female subject. If she has been historically used in scaffolding the difference between human and other, then she will have a further journey towards "subjectivity." Perhaps it is speculative fiction and fabulation that creatively imagine this journey Spillers describes.

Alexander Weheliye explains this gendered posthuman relationship further in *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* when he states "The sociogenic anchoring of racial difference in physiology and the banning of black subjects from the domain of the human occur in and through gender and sexuality" (Weheliye 2014, 42). Here he establishes the need to contextualize "girlhood" within the dehumanizing context of Blackness. He continues:

> Gendered Blackness—though excluded from culture, and frequently violently so—is a passage to the human in western modernity because, in giving flesh to the word of Man, the flesh comes to define the phenomenology of Man, which is always already lived as unadulterated physiology (43-44).

If Black femininity is defined outside of flesh, then Black speculative writing may be the genre best equipped for depicting this through narrative metaphor. Is that why so many speculative narratives translate their Black protagonists into different physical forms? Building on these strands of Afro-pessimist thought, what does it mean to have a speculative narrative like *The Underground Railroad* contextualized by the suffering of the Black female body without allowing this suffering to take centerstage? Where does the Bildungsroman fall short regarding this history of suffering and imposed commodification? The speculative has the potential to guide us in alternative directions that blur the firm genre boundaries historically associated with the Bildungsroman.

Resisting the Black Bildungsroman

The "Black Bildungsroman," as Geta LeSeur theorizes it, is defined by sorrow and suffering. She defines Black American *Bildungsromane* as "haunted by sorrow" and an "unrelenting awareness of the distinction between Black people and the traditional white ways of life" (LeSeur 1995, 17). LeSeur's coining of the "Black Bildungsroman" is essential in the conversation regarding alternatives to the Eurocentricity in the Bildungsroman genre, though her ideas about the novel remain centered in the realist tradition. In her book *Ten is the Age of Darkness: The Black Bildungsroman,* she contrasts Black Bildungsromane by West Indian authors with that of white authors, illuminating some nuances of Black racial experience under the light of the European Bildungsroman structure. She posits Goethe's 1795 work, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, as a model of the form, defining the *Bildungsroman* as "the novel of

development, the novel of education (the literal translation of Bildungsroman), an 'apprenticeship' novel, a novel of childhood and adolescence, and the novel of initiation" (LeSeur 1995, 3). Defining the genre in this way keeps it aligned with particular structures of power that Black people have been historically barred from. Even the *bildung* part of the genre's German title, suggests a linkage between "knowledge" and institutional access like that of tutors, apprenticeship, and schooling rather than the lived experience and/or inherited knowledge that becomes central for survival under systemic oppression. In this way, LeSeur's definition of the "coming of age" genre remains limited, particularly when paired with her much wider critical race analysis of the protagonists of these Black novels.

LeSeur's introduction notes that "most protagonists of the Bildungsroman fall between the ages of 9&13 with 10 being a significant marker," which I would argue is due to the dominance of Black male characters in her texts of choice, as informed by the study I've already mentioned[2] (LeSeur 1995, xii). Nonetheless, she argues that the Black Bildungsroman as she defines it has few distinct age markers (LeSeur 1995, 13). She defines this genre of Black writing by the importance of its separation, because "The Black experience in the United States or the West Indies cannot be limited or defined by parochial frames of reference and value that are derived from White and European traditions from which Black people have been largely excluded" (LeSeur 1995, 2). She concludes that contemporary Black writers have turned their attention inward to:

> identify the traditions of their race by defining people individually, thus capturing a collective experience that is unique in terms of its circumstances of history and geography. They do not seek an entry into the mainstream of European or American writing, but wish to explore the indigenous currents of those experiences to communicate,

[2] The study from the Georgetown University Law Center noted that Boys were perceived as adults as early as 10, while girls were adultifed much earlier at the age of 5.

> often to educate, interpret, and reveal the varied experiences of four hundred years of suffering. (LeSeur 1995, 2)

Here we see LeSeur broaden her earlier definition of knowledge and education, making more space for narrative transformation, but this transformation still seems limited to the expectations of the Bildungsroman genre, not specifying the narrative innovation required to transform the narratives of Black girls specifically. In her chapter titled "Womanish Girls" she examines Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, and Ntozake Shange's two novels, *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* and *Betsey Brown*, as well as Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*. She makes little differentiation between Black male and female coming of age narratives, agreeing with Paule Marshall that Black girls "have a fear of growing up, and of other people, and of life, and ultimately retreat into their own worlds, predicating their success as women on looks and beauty rather than on intellect" (LeSeur 1995, 5). This "fear" and "retreat" that she describes seems treats the historical relationship between Black girls and violence too lightly, seemingly glossing over it entirely. She minimizes the threat of Anti-Blackness and its frequent partnership with sexual violence in ways that almost mirror white sentiment.

Her dismissal of supposed "weak" aspects of Black writing are what make her layout of the Black Bildungsroman too walled-in[3] to explore narrative nuance of Black American womanhood, which is defined by both an untraceable history and the constant threat of violence. Narratives like those of Morrison, Shange, and Brooks are strong, not just because they center Black women like LeSeur argues, but because they additionally nuance Black female subjects in narrative ways that demonstrate an awareness of the specific obstacles facing intersectional identity in America. A Black Coming of Age narrative without awareness of the obstacles facing

[3] "Walled" in this sense, referring to the "walls" Octavia Butler mentioned speculative fiction being free of at the start of this essay.

Black Americans and the specific ways in which Black people persist under continental constructions of whiteness is concerning. LeSeur's traditional discussion does not include any speculative fiction, which limits the possibility of both the speculative and bildgunsroman genres, presuming little overlap. This adherence to the Eurocentric ideals of canonicity and textual value, make her "Black Bildungsroman" arguably too limited for the additional narrative possibilities that Black Girlhood offers.

Black Speculative fiction removes these limitations to expertly mingle the probable with the impossible in ways that distance them from the "haunt of sorrow" central to LeSeur's definition. Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead both use images salient for audiences of any background that subvert their trauma-rooted meaning in the context of Black life (like blue eyes and underground railroads). I want to focus on Colson Whitehead's work as an example of this, mostly because of his roots in the speculative, but also because of the specific ways in which he plays on these historical concepts within the white imaginary for subversion. Many of the speculative elements in his novel create new meaning for conceptual staples of the white Bildungsroman genre while seemingly playing on the neo-slave narrative tradition. This proximity to the white imaginary is arguably what has brought Whitehead such wide success, since his narratives seem more legible to white audiences all the while subverting their meaning. Speculative narratives rooted in frequently taught Black histories like slavery are often more popular in because of their presumed legibility. They are more easily read as being in conversation with the long history of the African American novel than more futuristically oriented speculative narratives the likes of Nnedi Okorafor's speculative bildungsroman trilogy *Binti*. This would explain why speculative novels like *The Underground Railroad* have had wide enough appeal to win a Pulitzer Prize, while Whitehead's other speculative works like *The*

Intuitionist are discussed differently. Scholars have similarly said that Octavia Butler's *Kindred* was more accessible for students because "contemporary Americans both white and African American…all want to imagine we would be the defiant and brave African American slave or Underground Railroad worker" (Long 2002, 463). This is why I'd like to unpack the subversive elements of Whitehead's text in particular.

Whitehead's Afro-Pessimist Novel

The Underground Railroad is a 2016 novel about a runaway slave named Cora who uses a complex underground railway system built by other escaped slaves to flee her Georgia plantation and travel state to state escaping capture from Ridgeway, an infamous slave-catcher, while painting a new American geography and thus a new image of freedom. While the speculative elements of Whitehead's texts are often read with comedic undertone, or even "speculative satire[4]" as coined by Matthew Dischinger, many of these elements in *The Underground Railroad* carry the weight of an Afro-Pessimistic leaning. Creating the Underground Railroad as a literal railway in a world in which slaves build railroads and skyscrapers in cities in the antebellum south, makes freedom *seem* even more possible, but it doesn't take long for a reader to see the challenge of Blackness in the novel's America. While the slaves are not navigating a network of passageways and safe houses to reach the North, in the novel's reality the actual railroad is notably unreliable. The trains pass at unpredictable times and go unpredictable places with "its secret trunk lines and mysterious routes" (Whitehead 2018, 88).

[4] Dischinger's essay *in The Global South*, "States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad"* defines "speculative satire*"* as "a term that names the practice of using speculative premises to realign through satire our understanding of national and regional histories (2017, 84).

The Railroad stop that Cora encounters in Indiana is not even "made for a locomotive" and doesn't "connect to the rest of the line" (395). Cora discovers that the "station was not the start of the line but its terminus. Construction hadn't started beneath the house but at the other end of the black hole. As if in the world there were no places to escape to, only places to flee" (396). Here it becomes evident that the central speculative element of the novel that establishes the technological advancement of this version of America also establishes an underlying argument of the novel; there is no physical freedom. The railroad of freedom leads nowhere at all, the black people in the novel are ontologically dead and only materials barred from adolescent freedom.

In addition to the railroad metaphor, the novel uses its Black female characters to illustrate this underlying point. While Cora is the text's protagonist, Whitehead actually introduces us to the narrative with a summative understanding of how Cora's grandmother Ajarry was brought to the US. Similar to how Afro-Pessimism discusses *the hold* as the inception of social death and the ontological negation associated with the racialization of the Black body, Whitehead centers the hold in both the beginning of Ajarry's story, her adultification, and the novel itself. Only a few pages into the novel we learn that Ajarry's captors "did not immediately force their urges upon her" because of her "tender age" but ultimately "some of the more seasoned mates dragged her from the hold six weeks into the passage" (11). Here we can read Ajarry alongside the Afro-Pessimist female figure of the Black Venus, as named by Saidiya Hartman. In her essay "Venus in Two Acts," Hartman describes the Black Venus as "an emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic world" that "makes plain the convergence of terror and pleasure in the libidinal economy of slavery" (Hartman 2008, 1). She continues:

> Variously named Harriot, Phibba, Sara, Joanna, Rachel, Linda, and Sally, she is found everywhere in the Atlantic world. The barracoon, the hollow of the slave ship, the pest-

> house, the brothel, the cage, the surgeon's laboratory, the prison, the cane-field, the kitchen, the master's bedroom—turn out to be exactly the same place and in all of them she is called Venus (Hartman 2008, 1)

Ajarry is named for us, but takes up the same meaning and space as Hartman's Venus, starting with the hollow of the slave ship and eventually moving through some of the other spaces Hartman listed. In addition to being adultified into slavery, Ajarry is forced into sexual maturity in the Middle Passage, ontologically transformed before even reaching America's shores. The novel also offers much description of her changing price as she was "sold and swapped and resold over the next few years" deemed another "asset liquidated by order of the magistrate" (Whitehead 2018, 14). In this way, Whitehead establishes Ajarry's Black womanhood as objecthood at the very start of the novel, emphasizing her position as an "asset" to the state (14). She maintains this object-oriented relationship with her own body, learning quickly "that the white man's scientists peered beneath things to understand how they worked" so that she later "ma[kes] a science of her own black body and accumulated observations" (15). The narrative suggests that her only understanding of her own value is as a "thing" since "each thing had value and as the value changed, everything else changes also" (15). Ajarry is the first Black female character we get to know in the novel, more easily read as an object, while the narrator follows an entire journey for the protagonist Cora. This is one of many ways the novel doesn't fit firmly within the Bildungsroman.

Our traditional understanding of the Bildungsroman assumes this text as a classic Coming of Age narrative since Cora is 16 (though she's unsure of her exact birthdate) and gains sexual maturity and autonomy by the end of the novel. She technically "comes of age" prior to the start of the novel, as we are told "her womanhood had come into flower" and that she was dragged behind the smokehouse and raped by four white men after her "chest started to sprout" (Whitehead 2018, 21). Here Whitehead shows us how her story is immediately complicated by

her embodiment of Black girlhood, her assumed sexual maturity and "adultification." The only way she keeps track of her own development is by tracking the benchmarks of her own trauma:

> Sixteen or Seventeen. That's where Cora put her age. One year since Connelly ordered her to take a husband. Two years since Pot and his friends had seasoned her. They had not repeated their violation, and no worthy man paid her notice after that day, given the cabin she called home and the stories of her lunacy. Six years since her mother left (25).

We learn that Cora is so mature in her body that she is always aware of it, an awareness that most Bildungsroman protagonists don't gain until the narrative progresses. Cora has already made this progression, always aware of her body's proximity to the dangers associated with men. When the slaves have a birthday party for Jockey she refuses to dance because she is wary of how "sometimes when the music tugged, you might suddenly be next to a man and you didn't know what he might do. All the bodies in motion, given license" (28). Her Blackness and her girlhood is predicated upon her knowledge of how best to police her body's movement in ways that protect her from unwanted advances, from men who give themselves license to her body and the space it occupies even with the good intention and "nice thought" (28).

Even after Cora is supposedly free when she and Caesar escape to South Carolina, the white railroad station agent embraces them to say goodbye and "Cora couldn't help but shrink away. Two white men in two days had their hands around her. Was this the condition of her freedom?" (66). The inquiry baked into this question is what is expected of her body in exchange for this "freedom"? Is it presumed to be touched by strange men with the power and privilege to get away with the violence against it? Even these well-intentioned abolitionists took "license to her body" with embraces she hadn't asked for, something we already know she fears. This awareness of her own body and skepticism toward people with "nice" intentions at the start of the novel establishes Cora's adultification. There is no transition from childhood to adolescence because the factors she has to be aware of for her own survival are adult in nature. These factors,

most notably the "violence that structures black subjectivity itself,"[5] overlap with those governing Black life altogether in ways that Afro-Pessimists claim affirm Blackness. This negation as affirmation is where the "pessimist" part of the theory is incorporated, but it is something that is so integral to Cora's understanding of herself that the novel doesn't cast it as negative or otherworldly. It instead builds off of that objecthood established with Cora's grandmother earlier in the narrative.

Imbuing this into the narrative seems to be the crux of what it means to create something narratively beyond the Bildungsroman if in fact there's no such thing as a "coming of age narrative" as we understand it for Black girls. Whitehead leans into this Afro-Pessimistic lens of Black bodies incapable of existing as "subjects" in Eurocentric society, by removing his characters from it altogether either by way of physical death, or an alteration of physical being. This changing of physicality makes these Black female characters something other than "embodied" which in turn makes them free of the white ideological limits of the physical world—outside of the *Bildungsroman* and out of reach of a Eurocentric "coming of age" framework.

At every turn, Whitehead's novel only offers us the inescapability of social death rather than any elements of LeSeur's definition of the Black Bildungsroman or any sign post of transition from childhood to adolescence. This is predicated on Cora being marked as both Black and female, and additionally a "slave," all contributing to the threat of danger and capture even when she's supposedly free. Fanon tells us "the position of the slave" leaves existence by the wayside (110), while Hortense Spillers tells us "the quintessential [African] "slave"" as object

[5]R. L., *Wanderings of the Slave: Black Life and Social Death* (United States: Rifams Distro, 2013).

"is *not* male, but a female" (215). In this narrative, Blackness is *never* associated with true freedom because even when Blacks are born free men (outside of slavery), they inevitably face death, as Royal's character does in the massacre of Valentine's farm. Whitehead more often connects this ontological death to Black female embodiment with Ajarry, Cora, and eventually with the example of her mother Mabel. In the second to last chapter of the book we finally learn what's become of Cora's mother, which Whitehead frames narratively with the beginning of the chapter: "The first and last things she gave to her daughter were apologies. Cora slept in her stomach, the size of a fist, when Mabel apologized for what she was bringing her into" (291). This is then followed up at the end of the chapter:

> The snake found her not long into her return…She could have made it farther—working Randall land had made her strong, strong in body if nothing else—but she stumbled onto a bed of soft moss and it felt right. She said, Here, and the swamp swallowed her up (294-5).

Here Whitehead plays on our assumption that Mabel was free the entire novel, only to reveal to us at the end that her freedom was found only in death. This reifies the social death associated with Black womanhood while translating the Afro-Pessimist belief that "the attempts at recognition and inclusion in society will only ever result in further social *and real* death" into narrative form (*Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction*, 10). Mabel's only real escape was from the living world, a society structured by anti-Blackness and misogyny that she feared to bring her own child into.

Whitehead's placement of Mabel's death at the end of the novel also adds to the legacy of defining Black girl fictional narratives outside of the Western linearity of time. There is much alluded to in the novel that doesn't happen for us in the narrative until later, if at all. Whitehead thus builds on the history of re-memory that we associate with Black girl narratives like Toni Morrison's *Beloved* or Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*. Emphasizing that cyclical nature of

time also leans into this Afro-Pessimist tradition that doesn't define death as a single specific moment because the Black subject is always already dead.

Ultimately, the novel's ambiguous ending exemplifies how speculative fiction can allow us to get closer to defining a narrative of Black girlhood, which Whitehead tells us is really Black "objecthood." At the end of the novel, Cora is distraught and panicked, escaping from Ridgeway in a railcar on the underground railroad; but Whitehead uses language that melds Cora with the Railroad:

> She pumped and pumped and rolled out of the light. Into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere. She discovered a rhythm, pumping her arms, throwing all of herself into the movement. Into northness. Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it, becoming it? (Whitehead 2018, 303)

It's after this that she dreams of having sex with Royal (who's dead), the only time we hear of *her* sexual agency. So Whitehead seems to suggest that Coming of Age for a Black girl, coming into her own sexual agency and discovering herself and her own freedom means embracing her objecthood. This means the only fictional narrative of maturation from Black Girlhood into Black Womanhood shows us Black women moving beyond human subjectivity.

In his book, *In the Break*, Fred Moten pressures the assumption of the equivalence between personhood and subjectivity, suggesting Blackness as an object, polarized with "subject" as an entity defined by possession of itself and its objects (Moten 2003, 131). In this sense, Cora doesn't have access to the subjectivity of Girlhood, she has only objecthood from the beginning of the narrative on her Georgia plantation, to the end where she becomes the railroad. The only transition that happens for her is what Hortense Spillers charts as transitioning from "a being into becoming being *for* captor…giving birth to the commodity and to the Human, yet" having no subjectivity to show for it, which she argues specifically for the Black female body (Spillers 2003, 95). This centers the Black female subject in the Posthuman as a way for us to

better understand the boundaries of Black girlhood, more specifically its lack of a bounded nature. Marrying this specific thread of "unthought" with these other ideas associated with Black Girlhood demonstrates what it means to narratively center a positionality that has been barred from girlhood.

The Self-making Alternative to the *Bildungsroman*

While Afro-Pessimism defined Blackness as a *lack* of agency, speculative narratives like Whitehead's redefine their Black characters as outside of subjectivity to allow them to reclaim agentic expression. They claim their agency by leaning into the objecthood and away from constructions like childhood and girlhood that are centered on subjectivity. Tressie McMillan Cottom says in *Thick* that a Black girl "does not need the protection of childhood, for she has never been a child" (Cottom 2019, 187). If Black girls don't exist within such a paradigm, then it makes sense that the speculative creates space for new paradigms that stretch beyond the Bildungsroman, moving beyond previously limited constructions of childhood, girlhood, and even home. Cora creates a new home *on* and *as* the Railroad, and the speculative nature of Whitehead's text allows us to imagine beyond that, whereas through memoir Cottom tells us "for Black girls, home is both refuge and where your most intimate betrayals happen…home is where they love you until you're a ho" (Cottom 2019, 194). If being Black and a girl means being a problem, an object, and a ho, then Cora's narrative is only the beginning of imagining beyond that condition.

Black women and girls have long centered their identities on self-making as an alternative to home as a grounding space and concept. Actress Viola Davis has been vocal about the pain and trauma she associates with the home through her work with the MeToo movement,

but she has also become famous for being a champion of individual self-making. When asked to give young female viewers one piece of advice on the 2015 Oscars red carpet, Viola said, "Do not live someone else's life, and someone else's idea of what womanhood is. Womanhood is you, womanhood is everything that's inside of you." Here, as in many of her acceptance speeches, she defines womanhood as something made, something defined from within with an emphasis on one's agency. It is through this agency that Black girls as "objects" may act as subjects though they do not themselves possess subjectivity.

Speculative writers have used tales of self-making to reclaim this agency and help us imagine futures for Black girls that have never been allowed access more than commodity or objecthood. It is this self-making that allows Black girls to progress in ways that mirror "coming of age" for historically white characters. In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora's self-making allows her access to freedom. When she uses the railway to escape Ridgeway, she *decides* to pick up the pick-ax and dig the tunnel herself, to use her body as a tool to physically free herself. These events in the final chapter are preceded by a final runaway ad, but the text this time reads:

> RAN AWAY from her legal but not rightful master fifteen months past, a slave girl called CORA…She has stopped running. Reward remains unclaimed. SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY(Whitehead 2018, 275).

This announcement that Cora has stopped running functions to emphasize the fact that it was her choice. She chose to defend herself and kill Ridgeway just like her choice to become the railway. The monetized reward is unclaimed and thus she has freed herself from the confines of commodification. She is literally no longer property. This choice is an agentic act predicated only by her decision to do so, rather than being asked by Caesar or Royal or anyone else in her life. It is an act that is primarily for herself, a brief act of *making* herself into a subject with the capacity to be free.

While Whitehead's use of the speculative in this way has allowed him awards and wide approval such as inclusion in Oprah's book club, it's important to note that other writers, particularly within the long legacy of Black women in speculative fiction have made similar arguments outside of the neo-slave narrative genre. While Cora is an agent of self-making, so is Lilith from Octavia Butler's *Dawn,* Syenite from N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season,* and Binti from Nnedi Okorafor's novel of the same name. In *Dawn,* Lilith gains agency by both choosing to lead a team of humans to resettle the ravaged earth and choosing to give birth to a human-oankali (alien) hybrid child. In Okorafor's novel, the Himba girl, Binti, becomes part Meduse (the alien conquerors that kidnapped her and killed her classmates) and chooses to become a peace ambassador between the humans and Meduse order to end the war. This allows her to make herself into something more than human, doing so to reclaim the agency lost in her capture. By the end of the novel, Binti has tentacles for hair, her flesh part human and part Meduse, which allows her to communicate with both races in her Ambassadorial role. Arguably the most complex of the three texts, N.K. Jemisin's Hugo award winning novel *The Fifth Season* expertly weaves together three different narratives of self-making to subvert the "coming of age" structure and make room for both Black women and girls in these narratives. The five hundred-page novel is split into three sections with Black women of different ages, the young Damaya, middle aged Syenite, and older woman Essun, all processing their traumas of abuse and enslavement in different ways. At the end of the novel we learn that all three are the same woman at different times in her life. In this way Jemisin shrewdly blurs the temporality we associate with Black girlhood in that each character is always *all* of the characters just like Black girls are always already women, already grown. These examples of self-making are modes of resistance because these characters do not ask for permission, but instead resist the permission

that their racialized and gendered bodies assume. This is arguably just a speculative and genre-bending version of the way Valerie Smith has described Black protagonists "affirming and legitimizing their psychological autonomy in nineteenth-century slave narratives" and contemporary Black historical novels (Smith 1987, 2). In this way, contemporary Black speculative narratives merely update this self-making and push it further.

Tressie McMillan Cottom says, "Black Girlhood ends whenever a man says it ends. Two Sides to every story. Almost ready. She a ho…Puberty becomes permission," (Cottom 2019, 184). This brings us back to the initial idea that Black girls are not allowed to be girls, but instead women—"hoes," which as a colloquialism sufficiently represents their objecthood. Speculative fiction uses that objecthood for liberation, shifting the permission from other subject positions to the Black women themselves. This freedom the speculative offers allows these writers like Whitehead and Jemisin to sketch narratives of self-making around women previously relegated as objects in the *Bildungsroman*. Speculative narratives of self-making allow us to envision stories of Black futures for girls that weren't supposed to have access to one, bringing critical fabulation to the world of the speculative and fantastical.

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