

Thresholds of Freedom: Exploring Liminal Identity and Displacement in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad*, offers a powerful and poignant reimagining of the historic network that enabled enslaved individuals to escape to freedom. The Underground Railroad's passengers navigated the precarious threshold between slavery and freedom, and occupied an unwarranted space, seeking to reconstruct their lives and identities amidst the uncertainty and disorientation of displacement. The novel explores themes such as escape, resistance, and the quest for freedom and skilfully evokes emotional unreliability in the reader, reciprocating the turmoil experienced by the slaves, particularly Cora, the novel's protagonist, whose life on the plantation was a perpetual juggling act between hope and despair. This research paper examines how the striving for freedom and liberation from enslavement contributes to the liminal experience of Cora. This study reveals that the novel's liminal experience of enslaved individuals is greatly influenced by their relentless pursuit of freedom. Their circumstances' inherent temporariness and instability push them into a prolonged state of liminality. The ongoing quest for freedom, liberty, and autonomy creates a sense of uncertainty among the enslaved, leaving them suspended in a transitional state.

Keywords: liminality, underground railroad, journey, uncertainty

Set in the 19th century, *The Underground Railroad* revisits the real-life Underground Railroad, a network of secret stations and tracks used by enslaved African Americans to escape to freedom. Cora, the protagonist, is an African American slave on a plantation in Georgia; her mother, Mabel, escaped when Cora was a child. Cora's devastating experiences on the plantation fuel her desire to flee. She plans to escape with a fellow slave named Caesar. Together, they utilise the Underground Railroad to travel to the North. The novel, through its episodic chapters, narrates Cora's escape from the Randall plantation, her journey along the Underground Railroad, and her relentless pursuit of freedom.

In the United States, the Underground Railroad was a network that operated before the Civil War, spanning from 1861 to 1865, primarily in the Northern states. It was a dozen routes constructed to aid the slaves who had escaped from the South to transport them to the North or Canada. Shorter escape routes from the South led fugitive slaves from Florida to Cuba and from Texas to Mexico. The Fugitive Slave Act was brought into action by the 31st

United States Congress on 18th September 1850. This act made it mandatory that all the captured escaped slaves had to be returned to their enslavers. It also required citizens and officials in free states to assist in handing over the slaves to their masters. This law escalated the national divide over slavery and was a prominent factor leading to the American Civil War. Taking a stand against the Fugitive Slave Acts, the Northerners disguised themselves and helped the fugitives. Regardless of its name, it was neither a railroad nor an underground. The network adopted railway-inspired terminology to describe its secret operations. Lines referred to escape routes, stations were safe houses, conductors were the guides who helped slaves, and the slaves themselves were discreetly referred to as packages or freight. This network included fourteen Northern states and extended up to Canada, which was a home that protected the refugees from the reach of the slave hunters. (Foner)

The Fugitive Slave Act posed a substantial menace to enslaved individuals seeking freedom, creating an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear. This law, which penalised those who aided escaping slaves, was aggravated by the era's social instability, delineated by shifting laws and policies, intensifying tensions between pro-slavery and abolitionist groups, growing national divisions, and a zone of conformance and surveillance. As a result, enslaved people navigating the complex network of social norms and abolitionist routes faced heightened uncertainty, with even tedious actions potentially punishable by law, making it increasingly difficult for them to escape and find freedom.

A few of the prominent figures who helped to transport the fugitives include Harriet Tubman, Levi Coffin, President of the Underground Railroad, William Still, Father of the Underground Railroad, Thomas Garrett, who assisted over two thousand seven hundred slaves in their escape, and Reverend Leonard Grimes, a Baptist minister. Tubman often disguised herself as an old man and mingled with the local population to guide the fugitives. She used a buggy and a horse to carry runaways, hiding them inside as she drove. Northerners devised creative hiding places for the escaped slaves; some were concealed in coffins and cargo boxes. Others were smuggled onto ships bound for Northern ports or international destinations, providing additional routes to freedom through the Underground Railroad. Few Northerners offered direct support by providing shelter, food, and guidance to the fugitives. Ultimately, the Underground Railroad played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, strengthening Northern opposition to slavery, and deepening Southern fears that the institution would always face resistance.

The Railroad also used signals and coded messages to communicate meeting places and safe routes. Whitehead's innovative twist transforms the historical Underground Railroad into a literal underground rail system, poignantly capturing the treacherous path to freedom and the entrenched systemic oppression that has defined America. This narrative serves as a powerful allegory for the experiences of refugees and displaced individuals, who often find themselves in liminal states, suspended between homelands, identities, and futures.

Other notable novels speak of the historical Underground Railroad. In *The Slave Dancer*, by Paula Fox, the protagonist, a young boy named Jessie Bollier, is kidnapped and obligated to work on a slave ship, and gets entangled in the terrors of the transatlantic slave

trade. After surviving a shipwreck, Jessie and a young African boy named Ras are rescued by Daniel, an escaped slave. Daniel, acknowledging the desperate need for freedom, connects Ras with members of the Underground Railroad to help him escape to the North. In Jerdine Nolen's novel *Eliza's Freedom Road: An Underground Railroad Diary*, the Underground Railroad is a pivotal element that steers the narrative and moulds the protagonist's journey. The novel is set in 1854 in Alexandria, Virginia, and portrays the life of Eliza, a twelve-year-old slave girl. The Underground Railroad in the novel acts as a lifeline for Eliza, and as she documents her journey in her diary, she recounts the distressing experiences and the hope that the Underground Railroad represents. In Christopher Paul Curtis's novel *Elijah of Buxton*, the Underground Railroad and the theme of refugees are central to the narrative, providing a historical context and maximising the resilience and struggles of the African-American slaves seeking freedom. They have escaped from the subservient conditions of slavery in the United States in search of safety and freedom in Canada.

Liminality is a Latin term that means threshold. Liminal space pertains to the transitional realm where cultural activity takes place and gives rise to meaning, as inspected by various cultural theorists, anthropologists, and psychologists. The concept was first acquainted with anthropology in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep, a French ethnographer and folklorist, in *Les Rites de Passage (The Rites of Passage)*. Van Gennep defined the rites of passage as a three-phase process: separation, transition, the liminal stage, and incorporation. The terms "liminal" and "liminality" gained broader recognition in the latter half of the twentieth century through the works of Victor Turner. This substructure encompasses three key stages: the pre-liminal phase, characterised by separation; the liminal phase, representing transition; and the post-liminal phase, which involves reintegration into society. (Turner 94). Hence, Liminality refers to a transitional state of uncertainty and displacement, characterised by a disorienting suspension between defined states, identities, or social structures, in which individuals or groups experience ambiguity, confusion, and dislocation. They are no longer part of their previous context but have not yet fully integrated into a new one. Escaped slaves often find themselves in a state of liminality, caught between their past and present, their homeland and host country. These slaves find themselves in a transitional state, suspended between their past lives and an uncertain future. This liminal space can be characterised by dislocation, disorientation, and disconnection from one's earlier identity, culture, and community.

Turner's concept of liminality is a state where individuals are suspended between two defined states, social positions or identities. In the liminal stage, a person's identity, correspondence to their family, society and surroundings, along with their perception of time, space, and existence, become uncertain and fluid. "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial." (Turner 95) Primarily, the term liminality represents an intermediate state characterised by change and ambiguity, where the guiding postulates of a situation are temporarily suspended or disrupted. During this phase, the social structures are often momentarily set aside, and the participants may experience a sense of anonymity, humility and submission. Exploring Van Gennep's ideas, Victor Turner accentuates the intermediate

nature of liminality, de-emphasising its potential to promote cultural transformation and social change. Liminality is demonstrated in various customs, like initiation ceremonies and even in activities like starting a new job or getting a transfer. Understanding Liminality offers valuable insight into cultural shifts, social change and personal experiences of uncertainty and transition.

According to Thomassen, Liminality is a state of ambiguity, suspension and disorientation that is related to modern societies in which individuals discover themselves as they experience uncertain, complex and dynamic environments. “Liminality is a state of being that is characterised by a suspension of norms, rules, and conventions, and by a heightened sense of ambiguity, uncertainty, and disorientation.” (Thomassen 13) The concept of Liminality can be vividly witnessed in Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad*, as the theory gives a grand framework to perceive the situation of uncertainty and transitional states crossed over by the enslaved characters in the novel.

“The individual who is in the process of transition is, so to speak, in a neutral state, neither in the old nor in the new, but rather in a sort of limbo.” (Van Gennep, Arnold 18). The quote describes an individual’s state of transition where they no longer belong to their previous life, yet are not wholly into their new life. Thus, they will be in a neutral state, suspended between two different identities. The characteristics of this state are uncertainty, ambiguity, and disorientation. It’s a space disconnected from the past and not in contact with the future. The slaves in the novel prevail in a state of perplexity, which is an authentic mark of Liminality. This state of disorientation is the consequence of being constrained by their families, homes, and communities, navigating towards confusion and loss of possessions.

The historical Underground Railroad constituted a transitional space where slaves planned the route to freedom. This path is comprised of ambiguity, risk and uncertainty. The railroad serves as a liminal space, suspending enslaved individuals in a state of ambiguity and uncertainty regarding their future, fate, and destiny. This state is the result of the uncertainty of the railroad, the risk of being captured by the slave catchers and the inconstancy of the abolitionists who aided them to escape. Cora’s experiences are pronounced by this obscurity, as she strives hard to believe in those who professed to help her. Cora’s journey is distinguished by the bafflement as she traverses the perilous way to freedom. The novel captures the profound psychological and emotional toll of living in a state of liminality. Cora endures immense trauma and dislocation as she traverses spaces that are neither home nor truly safe, grapples with the loss of their past life and the instability of their future. This constant movement and lack of belonging create a deep sense of alienation and instability. The underground railroad itself serves as a powerful metaphor for these liminal spaces.

Just as the railroad is an unseen, transitional network enabling movement between states, refugees often inhabit hidden, transient spaces that offer temporary refuge but no permanence. These spaces, much like the railroad, symbolise both a pathway to hope and the uncertainty of an undefined destination. Through this lens, the novel humanises the struggles of those navigating dislocation and survival, emphasising their resilience amidst profound adversity. Cora is detached from her past, present and future and exists in a

temporal state of dislocation. Cora's reminiscence of her mother and her life on the plantation is shattered and unconnected, reflecting her separation from her past. The state of Liminality of the slaves in the novel is distinguished by an adjournment between two defined identities. Cora's experiences are pronounced by this state of vagueness as she fights to reconcile her wish for freedom from the devastating realities of her situation.

"Every day was a new terror, a new humiliation". (Whitehead 51) The brutality of slavery makes every day uncertain, with the sustained threat of violence, separation, and an undetermined future hanging precariously in the balance. The plantation was a space of endless terror and possibility. This uncertainty is a distinctive feature of life under slavery, where even the most ordinary actions can have devastating consequences, and Cora's existence is distinct by hairbreadth escapes, close calls, and hushed rumours that accentuate the ever-present terror and unpredictability of her future. "Cora's life was a series of narrow escapes, of close calls, of whispered rumours". (Whitehead 71)

The Underground Railroad, which Cora uses to escape to freedom, functions as a liminal space because life above ground was filled with violence and slavery. In contrast, the escape through the railway was a life of uncertainty. As Cora moves through the tunnels, she redefines her identity, shifting from confusion and ambiguity about freedom and self-discovery. In South Carolina, Cora's journey is shadowed by the illusion of freedom as she hides under a new identity, changing her name to Bessie. Although she had escaped from the plantation, she remained under constant surveillance. Cora has left one form of restraint behind, but was never free from the systemic racism that permeated the air she breathed. Cora was caught between slavery and freedom, becoming a phantom within the administrative system, where she was observed and pulled out of the zone of autonomy, with freedom appearing only as a mirage. This highlights the inescapable nature of repression, illustrating that escaping one form of control does not truly mean liberation.

In North Carolina, Cora existed in a state of complete liminality while hiding in Martin and Ethel's attic. She was confined for months, experiencing a psychological halt, removed from social life. Cora was alive but felt like a ghost inside her own body, visible, yet invisible, buried within a breathing shell. This liminal state removed her concepts of time, social structures, and law, echoing the condition of other slaves who had concealed themselves like Cora. Her existence was mere survival, and her identity was fragmented by solitude, constantly haunted by the thought and threat of being discovered and returned to slavery. At the Valentine farm, Cora experienced temporary relief, since Black people in Indiana owned it. The farm aimed to free Black individuals and offer sanctuary to escaped slaves. It became an enclave for intellectual development and education, where Cora felt a sense of belonging. She utilised the community library and spent hours reading, which prompted her to reflect on her identity and personal growth. She considered the resilience of Black people and developed a powerful inner voice. Royal, a Black man born free in Ohio, was one of the abolitionists, rescued Cora and took her to the Valentine Farm.

"You are not on Randall anymore," Royal said. "You're free." She kept a hold of her temper...I'm still property, even in Indiana." (Whitehead 325) However, this fragile sanctuary

turned into a threat when Ridgeway, a slave catcher, tracked Cora's location along with a gang of white men. Ridgeway burned the Valentine farm and murdered its residents, including Royal. Cora escaped once more into the Underground, where Ridgeway captured her. During the struggle, Cora wounded him and slipped into the tunnel. She then embarked on a lonely journey into an uncertain and incomplete future.

Cora finds herself in a transitional space, caught between the dream of Black autonomy and the threatening White repercussions. When she begins her final descent into the Underground, she enters a tunnel where she neither belongs nor recognises the destination. Her liminal state persists as she continues northwards, hoping for the freedom she longs for, in an uncertain future.

Cora's journey is based on the characteristics of Liminality as she traverses the dangerous path towards freedom. Colson Whitehead states that the Railroad could be viewed as a wonder but never as a miracle. Cora's journey was risky, where each step was seasoned by the thought of betrayal and capture. Cora's fear of betrayal is perceivable, as she says, that she has learned to trust no one, not even herself. This fear is rationalised and is powered by the thought of the slave catchers. The stealthy nature of the Railroad enhanced uncertainty on each step for Cora. The Railroad is described as a vast web of connections, with some visible and others hidden.

Cora's journey is marked by uncertainty as she must trust in strangers to steer her through the treacherous path. "Some were kind, others cruel, and all were unpredictable" (Whitehead 167). The unpredictable hope from abolitionists and station masters only added to her unease. The Railroad is the biggest symbol of uncertainty, with its unpredictable routes and secretive nature. "The routes changed, the safe houses changed, but the intent remained the same". (Whitehead 155) An undynamic flux gives life to an atmosphere of Liminality and uncertainty, where Cora has to adapt to a new ambience and trust in unknown persons. The inconsistent support from abolitionists and station masters contributed to this uncertainty, as Cora observed that only a few stations were well-funded, and the others were barely scraping by. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 heightened the dangers for both enslaved individuals and those who assisted them. Whitehead describes the law as a living thing that breathed its rage upon them, illustrating the pervasive fear it created. This legislation fostered an environment of insecurity, where even the most dedicated abolitionists faced severe consequences for their efforts.

The concept of liminality offers a broad framework for understanding the profound uncertainty and transitional states experienced by slaves in Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad*. The novel captures the essence of liminality through its portrayal of Cora's journey on the Underground Railroad, the reserved nature and flexible support of the Railroad itself, the legal and social threats posed by the Fugitive Slave Act and social instability, and the emotional and characteristic uncertainty faced by enslaved people on the plantation. These findings have significant implications for understanding the experiences of enslaved individuals and the impact of slavery on their lives. They highlight the importance of considering the temporal and spatial dimensions of liminality within the

context of slavery and emancipation. Therefore, the extended liminality is a defining aspect of their lives, shaped by their persistent pursuit of freedom.

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