***The Underground Railroad* Lesson Plan 4**
The Power of Community
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Overview:
This lesson is designed to guide students through the novel's conclusion and its exploration of freedom, motherhood, and the creation of a self-sustaining Black community at Valentine Farm. Furthermore, the lesson also examines how Whitehead engages with and subverts traditional slave narrative conventions through the parallel stories of Mabel's attempted escape and Cora's final journey.

The lesson covers content from chapters nine through twelve (i.e., "Caesar," "Indiana," "Mabel," and "The North"). For this reason, it is best suited for the final day of discussion, when students are prepared to synthesize key themes from the novel as a whole.

Objectives:
By the end of class, students will be able to:
1. Analyze how Whitehead's narrative structure, particularly the delayed revelations about Caesar and Mabel, shapes readers' understanding of agency and freedom.
2. Evaluate the Valentine farm sequence as an example of a self-sustaining Black community.
3. Compare and contrast different characters' definitions of freedom throughout the novel, using textual evidence to support analysis.

Class Structure:
15 minutes: Review activity
- Open class by inviting students to recap what happened in the final 4 chapters of *The Underground Railroad*. Track their answers on the board with a brief outline.
- Ask students if the ending felt satisfying, and ask what, if anything, they found dissatisfying.

15 minutes: Lecture on Historical Context
- Present student with historical context for the Valentine Farm in the "Indiana" chapter
    - The Valentine Farm in "Indiana" represents one of the novel's most hopeful visions; it can be argued that this is the closest Cora gets to freedom in the novel. The farm is a space of Black intellectualism, political debate, safety, and collective care.
        - The debate between Mingo and Lander reflects competing visions of Black life post-slavery: gradualist integration vs. radical self-determination.
        - Whitehead draws from real historical communities to ground this debate in a continuum of real Black political thought.
- **Historical Black Communities:** Several autonomous Black communities emerged during the 19th century, providing vital spaces of refuge, education, and resistance in the face of racial oppression. Provide students with a few examples of such communities.

- **Elgin Settlement in Canada** (1849): Founded by Rev. William King, who emancipated 15 previously enslaved individuals, the Elgin Settlement (originally called Buxton) was established as a safe haven for freedom seekers in what is now Ontario. King acquired 9,000 acres of swampy, forested land and, guided by the belief that Black people should have the opportunity to live independently and with dignity, he helped shape a thriving, self-governed community. (Canada Parks).
    - From its founding, the Elgin Settlement emphasized self-sufficiency and self-sustainability as core principles. To support these values—and to protect Black settlers from the interference and exploitation of white outsiders—the community adopted specific rules and regulations. One of the most significant: land within the settlement could only be purchased by Black individuals. This policy ensured that the community remained under Black ownership and control (Canada Encyclopedia).
    - As more refugees from the U.S. arrived, they bought and cleared 50-acre homesteads, built homes, and established churches, schools, and local industries (Canada Parks).
    - By 1859, the settlement had grown to over 1,000 residents. Because Canada had abolished slavery in 1834, it became a crucial destination for those escaping enslavement in the U.S. (Canada Parks).
- **Oberlin Village in North Carolina** (1858): A small, mostly Black, settlement near Raleigh, NC, that was known for its emphasis on education (American Battlefield Trust).
    - The settlement was founded by Jesse Pittiford, a free Black tenant farmer, who purchased the 16 acre plot near Raleigh, NC. This settlement started modestly, with Pittiford and his family in one house, Pittiford's adult son, a railroad foreman, in another house on the property, and Benjamin Morgan, a free Black stonemason across the road. (American Battlefield Trust).
    - During the Reconstruction era, 1868-1876, the settlement grew considerably as Black families purchased land and built homes around Pittiford's property. This effort was aided by the Raleigh Cooperative Land and Building Association, led by Black legislator and developer James Henry Harris. The settlement was named Oberlin in the early 1870s after Harris's alma mater, Oberlin College.
    - By the mid 1870s, the community had built a Methodist chapel and the Oberlin Graded School.
    - By 1880, Oberlin Village was a thriving community of mostly artisans and service workers. The village was home to around 130 Black families.
    - Oberlin Village was annexed into Raleigh in 1920, and was gradually redeveloped into the city, although there are on-going efforts to preserve the area as a historical site (American Battlefield Trust).

- **Literary Connections:** The philosophical debates between Mingo and Lander at the Valentine farm echo real historical conversations among Black intellectuals and activists.
    - Olaudah Equiano (1745-1797)

        - A formerly enslaved African, Equiano became a prominent abolitionist whose autobiography exposed the brutal realities of slavery and championed literacy as a vital path to liberation.
        - He spoke powerfully about the transformative magic of books:
            - "...I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought [others] did. I have often taken up a book and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent" (Equiano)
        - This longing for knowledge and self-expression is echoed in the novel, when Cora similarly views books as magical objects that somehow 'speak' to the literate:
            - "They ran their fingers over the books as if the things were goofered, hopping with magic" (Whitehead 244)
    - W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963)
        - A scholar, activist, and co-founder of the NAACP, Du Bois advocated for civil rights and higher education as tools of empowerment. He advanced the idea of the "Talented Tenth"—a leadership class of educated Black Americans who would uplift the race:
            - "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men" (TeachingAmericanHistory)
        - Du Bois emphasized the value of a classical, rigorous education grounded in critical thought and moral leadership:
            - "Men we shall have only as we make manhood the object of the work of the schools—intelligence, broad sympathy, knowledge of the world that was and is, and of the relation of men to it—this is the curriculum of that Higher Education which must underlie true life" (TeachingAmericanHistory)
    - In the novel, Mingo's emphasis on self-improvement and integration mirrors the philosophy of figures like Frederick Douglass. In contrast, Lander embodies a vision more aligned with Du Bois—one that centers Black excellence, autonomous development, and education as tools for collective liberation.
    - However, the violent raid on Valentine Farm underscores a stark reality: no Black space in America was truly safe.
    - Cora's continuing journey north speaks to the unfinished—and ongoing—struggle for freedom, safety, and self-determination.

35 minutes: Class Discussion

- Valentine Farm and Community
    - What did you make of the Valentine farm as a community? Did it seem sustainable or feasible to you, or were certain aspects too idealistic?
    - How does John Valentine's background as a free-born Black man and successful businessman shape his approach to the farm?
    - How does the Valentine farm library connect to the motif of knowledge and reading established earlier in the novel?

    - Cora states, “Even if the adults were free of the shackles that had held them fast, bondage had stolen too much time. Only the children could take full advantage of their dreaming. If white men let them” (251). Does this statement seem true within the text? What kind of vision of freedom does Cora imagine for her generation and the next? Does this statement still feel relevant in contemporary society?
- Motherhood, Family, and Revelation
    - Were you surprised by Mabel’s chapter? How does learning that Mabel was returning for Cora when she died change your understanding of their relationship?
        - How does this misunderstanding shape Cora and the novel? What do you think would happen if Cora *could* find out what happened to Mabel?
    - How do the three generations of women (Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora) represent different responses to enslavement and different understandings of freedom?
        - How does the novel connect knowledge/reading with freedom? Where do you see this connection appear in the novel? (See Cora’s reflection on learning to read, pp. 97-99, and her reaction to the Valentine library, p. 279).
- Conclusions and Reflections
    - We last see an injured (and perhaps dying) Ridgeway lecturing Homer on the “American imperative.” What do you think this means for Ridgeway?
        - What effect does including and returning to this idea of an imperative add to the book?
    - What do you think happens to Cora after the book ends? Where do you imagine her story taking her?
    - How has the Underground Railroad—as a literal, physical space—transformed throughout the novel? What does it represent at the end of Cora’s journey?

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