***The Underground Railroad* Lesson Plan 3**
Responses to Racist Systems
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Overview:
This lesson is designed to examine how Whitehead portrays individuals' participation in or responses to racist systems through their choices and actions, while introducing important historical context. Students will analyze how the "North Carolina" chapter presents different reactions to racial violence and oppression—contrasting Martin and Ethel's conflicted efforts to protect Cora with the community's active role in the Friday Festivals. The lesson also explores the complex dynamics in "Tennessee," particularly the relationship between Ridgeway, Homer, and their pursuit of Cora.

The lesson covers content from chapters five through eight (i.e., "North Carolina," "Ethel," and "Tennessee"). For this reason, it is best suited for the third day of discussion, when students have developed a foundational understanding of the novel's central themes and can critically engage with its depiction of systemic oppression.

Objectives:
By the end of class, students will be able to:
1. Locate historical and literary precedents for the "North Carolina" chapter in nineteenth-century slave narratives.
2. Discuss how the novel subverts traditional "white savior" narratives through its portrayal of characters such as Dr. Stevens and Ethel.
3. Analyze the connections and differences between the common notion of the "American dream" and Ridgeway's concept of the "American imperative."

Class Structure:
10 minutes: Opening Discussion
- Start the lesson by going over the previous chapters and themes that were discussed on the previous days.
- Opening questions:
    - How do different characters participate in, benefit from, or resist racist systems in these chapters?
    - How does Whitehead use different states to represent varying manifestations of American racism?

20 minutes: Lecture on Historical Context (i.e., connecting the novel to real-life events)
- While Whitehead's novel uses magical realism with a literal underground railroad, the historical contexts he draws from are very real. The novel deliberately blends historical periods as a narrative technique to show continuities in American racism across time.
- This "temporal compression" allows readers to see connections between 19th-century slavery, early 20th-century eugenics, as well as other occurrences that happened in American history.
    - For example, "While Whitehead used 1850 as a 'sort of mental cutoff for technology and slang,' as discussed in an interview with NPR, he was less

concerned with [the] chronology [of the events he was writing about] than conveying a sense of the lived experience of Black Americans" (Solly)
    - Whitehead even explained that "The book is rebooting every time the person goes to a different state…[which] allowed [him] to bring in things that didn't happen in 1850—[such as] skyscrapers, aspects of the eugenics movement, [and] forced sterilization" (Solly).
- One historical precedent for the "North Carolina" chapter can be found in The American Colonization Society (ACS)
    - The American Colonization Society was formed in 1816 by a group of white Americans—including slaveholders and some abolitionists—who promoted the manumission of enslaved Black people and the relocation and settlement of free Blacks in western Africa, specifically in the colony of Liberia (Burin). While this was framed as a solution to slavery, it was also rooted in racist beliefs that saw Black Americans as outsiders who did not belong in the United States.
    - The ACS was founded by figures such as Robert Finley, a Presbyterian minister; Francis Scott Key, an American lawyer and author of the U.S. national anthem; and Henry Clay, a prominent American statesman and U.S. congressman (Britannica). Although many members claimed humanitarian motives, they were often more concerned with removing free Black people from American society as they feared that their presence would challenge or even destabilize the institution of slavery (Burin).
    - In 1822, the ACS helped establish Liberia as a colony for formerly enslaved Black men and women, and, as Eric Burin discusses, "between 1820 and 1860, approximately 560 slaveholders sent, collectively, about 6,000 bondspersons to the ACS's colony."
    - Historian Andrew Zimmerman describes this as an example of how freedom and domination often existed side by side. Even though these individuals were technically free, they were still part of a larger system shaped by colonialism and the ongoing legacy of slavery, which continued in new global forms later in the 19th century (Dischinger 92).
    - In the novel, North Carolina's policy of eliminating Black people entirely parallels this ideology of removal. Parts of the "North Carolina" chapter explicitly reflect the ideals of the ACS (Dischinger 92).
        - For example, "The other states of the cotton empire absorbed the stock; Florida and Louisiana, in their explosive growth, were particularly famished for colored hands, especially the seasoned variety" (Whitehead 168).
            - This line speaks to how Black people were treated as commodities—moved, traded, or discarded based on economic demand—echoing the broader forces of control, displacement, and dehumanization that the ACS both masked and contributed to.
- Another historical precedent can be found in Fugitive Slave Act of 1850
    - Returning to what we discussed last week, following increased pressure from Southern politicians, Congress passed a revised Fugitive Slave Act in 1850 (the first version had been passed in 1793). This new law was part of Henry Clay's

Compromise of 1850—a group of bills aimed at easing tensions between the North and the South and delaying Southern secession (National Park Service).
    - The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 mandated that all citizens, even those in free states, help capture runaway enslaved people. It also denied those accused of being fugitives the right to a jury trial (National Park Service). However, not everyone agreed with this law.
        - For example, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner condemned the law as "a flagrant violation of the Constitution, and of the most cherished of human rights—shocking to Christian sentiments, insulting to humanity, and impudent in all its pretensions" (National Park Service).
        - One flyer (included at the end of the lesson plan), distributed in Boston in 1851, shows how deeply the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 impacted free Black communities. It warns people to avoid city officials, who were now legally empowered to act as kidnappers and slave catchers. It captures the fear, urgency, and resistance of the time—and reminds us that even in Northern states, Black Americans were not safe from the reach of slavery.
    - In the novel, Ridgeway embodies the ideological justifications used to uphold laws such as this. His belief in American expansion, conquest, and domination reflects the twisted moral logic behind slavery and its enforcement.
        - As Ridgeway declares:
            - "Here was the true Great Spirit, the divine thread connecting all human endeavor--if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent. The American imperative" (Whitehead 82).
            - This quote captures how the Fugitive Slave Act didn't just enforce slavery—it reinforced a broader belief system: that power, possession, and control were central to American identity.
- This chapter also contains allusions to 19th-century American literature. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) provides a real historical parallel to Cora's experience.
    - Jacobs spent seven years hidden in an attic crawlspace to avoid her enslaver—a powerful echo of the space where Cora hides in Martin's attic. Like Cora and Martin, Jacobs lived in a state of confined freedom—something she calls "a loophole of retreat" (Jacobs).
        - Similar to how Cora was able to watch the going on outside, yet unable to leave the small space, at night, the family would bring Jacobs food and keep her company, but she was completely alone during the day.
        - Jacobs would crawl around for exercise; one day, she used a nail and bore tiny holes in the wall to let in air. Through them, she is able to see her children playing in the yard and strangers passing on the street—freedom close enough to glimpse, but never touch.
    - Both narratives show how "escape" often meant trading one form of imprisonment for another, underscoring the psychological and physical toll of survival under slavery.

35 minutes: Class discussion

- Moving on to the discussion, consider how the novel both draws from and reimagines these historical realities/events.
- Narrative and History
    - What is Whitehead saying about American history by blending different time periods in his portrayal of each state?
        - How does "North Carolina" differ from what we've already seen in the "South Carolina" and "Georgia" chapters?
    - What does the novel suggest about the relationship between science, progress, and racism?
- Character Responses
    - How do different characters respond to living within these oppressive systems?
    - What characters stood out the most to you in "North Carolina?"
        - How would you characterize Martin? What drives him to help Cora?
    - "How does Ethel's backstory, her relationship with slavery and Cora's use of her home affect you?" (Oprah's Book Club)
    - How do these chapters challenge or complicate the notion of allyship?
    - What drives characters like Ridgeway, Homer, and Bozeman? What relationships surprise you? What do you make of Homer and Ridgeway's relationship? What about Ridgeway's obsession with Cora?
- Reader Responses
    - In many ways, the "North Carolina" chapter is the hardest to read. How did you react to it?
    - "How does the state-by-state structure impact your reading process? Does it remind you of any other works of literature?" (Oprah's Book Club)

Sources:

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CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE

OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the

Watchmen and Police Officers of Boston,

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

KIDNAPPERS

AND

Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the *Welfare of the Fugitives* among you, *Shun* them in every possible manner, as so many *HOUNDS* on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for KIDNAPPERS, and have TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.