***The Underground Railroad* Lesson Plan 2**

Scientific & Medical Racism

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Overview:

This lesson is designed to explore the themes of medical exploitation and racial ideology in Whitehead's novel, focusing on how both individuals and institutions utilize medicine and pseudoscientific beliefs to assert control over the health and choices of Black people in America. Through the parallel narratives of Dr. Stevens' medical practices and North Carolina's eugenics program, as portrayed in the novel, students will analyze how scientific racism and the myth of racial purity have historically been used to justify oppression

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Identify and analyze Whitehead's use of medical imagery as both a literal plot device and an extended metaphor for systemic racism.
2. Analyze the historical parallels between the novel's portrayal of scientific racism and actual medical exploitation in American history.

Class Structure:

15 minutes: This section of the novel is inspired by several historical events that occurred after the 1850s. Start class by providing information on some of these events, and then move into discussion about how these events were included in the novel and to what effect.

- The Tuskegee Syphilis Study (1932-1972)
    - The "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male" was started as a way of recording the natural progression of syphilis, and there were no proven treatments for the disease when the study began in 1932.
    - Researchers told the participants that they were being treated for "bad blood," a term used locally to describe several ailments, including but not limited to anemia, fatigue, and syphilis. Researchers did not tell the men participating in the study the true purpose or name of the study. (Tuskegee University Bioethics Center)
    - **Participants**: 600 men were enrolled in the study. Of these, 399 already had syphilis and were part of the experimental group, and 201 did not have syphilis and were part of the control group. Most of the men were poor and illiterate sharecroppers from Tuskegee and Macon County, Alabama. (Tuskegee University Bioethics Center)
    - **Incentive**: "The men were offered what most Black rural southerners could only dream of in terms of medical care and survivors insurance. They were enticed and enrolled in the study with incentives including: medical exams, rides to and from

the clinics, meals on examination days, free treatment for minor ailments and guarantees that provisions would be made after their deaths in terms of burial stipends paid to their survivors." (Tuskegee University Bioethics Center)
    - **Treatment Withheld**: While there were no proven treatments for syphilis when the study began, that changed in 1947 when penicillin was proven to be an effective treatment for the disease. After penicillin became the standard treatment for syphilis, the researchers in the Tuskegee Syphilis Study continued to observe participants without offering penicillin, allowing the disease to progress untreated.
    - On July 25, 1972 Jean Heller of the Associated Press broke the story that there had been a 40-year nontherapeutic experiment called "a study" on the effects of untreated syphilis on Black men in the rural south. (Tuskegee University Bioethics Center)
    - "This set into motion international public outcry and a series of actions initiated by U.S. federal agencies. The Assistant Secretary for Health and Scientific Affairs appointed an Ad Hoc Advisory Panel, comprised of nine members from the fields of health administration, medicine, law, religion, education, etc. to review the study. While the panel concluded that the men participated in the study freely, agreeing to the examinations and treatments, there was evidence that scientific research protocol routinely applied to human subjects was either ignored or deeply flawed to ensure the safety and well-being of the men involved. Specifically, the men were never told about or offered the research procedure called informed consent. Researchers had not informed the men of the actual name of the study, i.e. "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male," its purpose, and potential consequences of the treatment or non-treatment that they would receive during the study. The men never knew of the debilitating and life threatening consequences of the treatments they were to receive, the impact on their wives, girlfriends, and children they may have conceived once involved in the research. The panel also concluded that there were no choices given to the participants to quit the study when penicillin became available as a treatment and cure for syphilis." (Tuskegee University Bioethics Center)
    - This history inspires the novel's inclusion of a syphilis study in "South Carolina" (pp. 114-115)
- American Eugenics Movement
    - The South Carolina section also has ties to the American Eugenics Movement, which promoted the idea that humans can be improved through selective breeding of population
        - Provide students with a working definition of Eugenics: "Eugenics is the scientifically erroneous and immoral theory of 'racial improvement' and 'planned breeding,' which gained popularity during the early 20th century. Eugenicists worldwide believed that they could perfect human beings and

eliminate so-called social ills through genetics and heredity. They believed the use of methods such as involuntary sterilization, segregation and social exclusion would rid society of individuals deemed by them to be unfit." (National Human Genome Research Institute)

- Eugenics appear in *The Underground Railroad* most notably in the form of forced sterilization programs, which were widespread in the United States during the 20th century.
    - Forced sterilization by the state governments in the US began in 1907, when Indiana passed a law that required the sterilization of "confirmed criminals, idiots, imbeciles and rapists." The first sterilization programs mostly targeted men viewed as "criminalistic, including those whose "defect" was supposedly excessive masturbation or homosexuality" (Villarosa).
    - The scope of these programs grew quickly. In the first 4 decades of the 20th century. 32 states passed eugenics laws that allowed the government to forcibly sterilize "the 'insane,' the 'feebleminded,' the 'dependent' and the 'diseased' — all of whom were deemed incapable of making their own decisions about reproduction" (Villarosa).
    - "By the 1930s, women became a majority of the victims, sterilized in mental hospitals and prisons and under court orders. This shifting gender pattern resulted from a rising concern about the fitness to parent, with a focus on mothering, as well as the development of a safer, standardized tubal-ligation procedure for sterilizing women." (Villarosa)
    - A 1973 lawsuit on behalf of two sisters in Alabama who were taken from their home and surgically sterilized, without their consent or the consent of their parents revealed that more than 100,000 women were sterilized under U.S. government programs during the 20th century. Most of these women were Black, Latina, or Indigenous. (Villarosa)
    - Most of these laws have since been repealed, though Washington state still has a version of sterilization laws technically on the books. "Indiana, Virginia and North Carolina have created historical markers to commemorate those who were sterilized through government-sanctioned programs. Eight states have issued official apologies" (Villarosa)
- This history is explored on pages 115-116 of *The Underground Railroad.*

20 minutes: Small group discussion

- Place students into groups of 3-5. Ask them to complete the following tasks:
    - Identify 1 moment in the our readings for today that show characters using science or medicine for or questionable or unethical purposes
    - Write a brief summary of the scene.
    - Answer the following questions:
        - What is the goal of the scientific or medical act you've identified?
        - Who is carrying out the experiment, procedure, or test?
        - What are their stated and unstated purposes for doing so?
        - Who is the recipient of the experiment, procedure, or test? Is the recipient asked to/capable of giving full, informed consent?
        - What are the effects of the experiment, procedure, or test?
        - Why do you think Whitehead includes this moment in the novel?

25 minutes: Discussion

- After students have had a chance to complete the group activity, bring the class back together to discuss their results.
- If needed, prompt discussion with the following questions:
    - In South Carolina, institutions like doctors' offices and museums that claimed to help Black characters were corrupt and unethical. How do Cora's challenges in South Carolina reflect problems that still exist today?
        - Pp. 111-113 describes the museum's three scenes ("Scenes from Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship, and Typical Day on the Plantation"). How does the museum's depiction of the transatlantic slave trade obscure or influence how the museum visitors understand slavery? How does Cora respond to the museum's depictions of slavery? [Can reference pp. 118-119 for more information.]
        - How does this influence the way Cora views the town's white residents? [Example: Cora gives museum visitors the evil eye on pp. 129-130.]
    - How does Cora connect medical experimentation and sterilization to slavery and racism as a whole?
        - Pp. 119-120: "Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood. With the surgeries that Dr. Stevens described, Cora thought, the whites had begun stealing futures in earnest. Cut you open and rip them out, dripping. Because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies—steal their future. Torture them as much as you can when they are on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better."
    - Stevens works as a grave robber to fund his medical schooling. Why do you think this chapter is included? What does Steven's work as a body snatcher and a

medical doctor tell us about how 19th-century Americans viewed and treated bodies and people? About the tension between ethics and progress?

Additional discussion questions, if time allows:

- Keeping in mind that the Underground Railroad is portrayed as a literal subway system, how does the portrayal of the railroad change between the stations thus far?
- How do racism and slavery as a whole function differently in the different chapters so far?
- What motivates Arnold Ridgeway to be a slave catcher? What sort of outlook does he have on the world?
- How do you respond to reading the chapter from Ridgeway's perspective?
- In South Carolina, Cora and Caesar attend a dance together, experiencing a (temporary) moment of freedom. How does this scene contrast with other dances in the novel, e.g. the forced performances on the Randall plantation or the community gatherings Cora observes?
- How did you react to reading the South Carolina section? Were you surprised when South Carolina initially seemed so much more progressive than the rest of the South?
    - What plot developments surprised you, and which did you expect?
    - What do you make of the ending of the South Carolina chapter? Did you expect it to end the way it did, or were you hopeful that this could work out better for Cora and Caesar?
- In South Carolina, Cora changes her identity and lives as 'Bessie,' an enslaved woman technically owned by the federal government. How does changing her identity affect Cora and the relationships she's able to form there?
    - What do you make of the ending of the South Carolina chapter? Did you expect it to end the way it did, or were you hopeful that this could work out better for Cora and Caesar?
- In fact, both the Ridgeway and the Stevens chapters provide breaks in Cora's story. Why do you think Whitehead includes these short chapters from their perspectives? What do we learn or gain from these chapters?

Sources:

National Human Genome Research Institute. "Eugenics and Scientific Racism Fact Sheet." www.genome.gov/about-genomics/fact-sheets/Eugenics-and-Scientific-Racism

Tuskegee University Bioethics Center. "About the USPHS Syphilis Study."www.tuskegee.edu/about-us/centers-of-excellence/bioethics-center/about-the-usphs-syphilis-study

Villarosa, Linda. “The Long Shadow of Eugenics in America.” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 8 June 2022, p. 30.

Ophra’s Book Club. “*The Underground Railroad* Discussion Questions.” Ophra.com. www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/the-underground-railroad-reading-group-guide_2

Whitehead, Colson. *The Underground Railroad*. Vintage Books, 2016.