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# The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead: Physical and Linguistic Violence

“Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that didn’t stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood. ” These words of Colson Whitehead in his novel “The Underground Railroad” perfectly describe the cruelty, black people faced not only in the cotton plantations in the south of America where the racial violence took its extreme practice, but also in the other parts of America where the systematic exploitation of black people forced them to stay inferior against the white slave owners. Whitehead depicts the history of antebellum America through Cora’s journey; who is a young woman born into slavery; from the South to the free states in the North and we, as the reader, witness the brutality that enslaved black people were exposed to in this modern epic. In this paper, I will discuss the physical and linguistic violence that they encountered during this period and the loss they faced as a result of these violent events.

First of all, physical violence, which also covers sexual violence, is the most explicit brutality that takes place in Whitehead’s novel. Knowing that this book is about the violation of black people, mostly by white slave owners, one could think that all the sadistic events are performed by whites, but going through the pages, it’s understood that black people also engage in violence toward one another. In fact, early in the novel, Cora is raped by four male slaves in the Randal plantation as soon as she comes out of age. The fact that Cora’s mother, Mabel had escaped the plantation and left Cora a stray at the age of eleven encourages this slave, called Blake, to take over, the only thing she owned which was a little garden that she inherited from her mother and grandmother. Although it looks unimportant, this little space symbolizes hope and connection to her ancestors and thus the ability to seek a life of freedom. So when she stands up to Blake to protect her garden, she ends up with being raped by the very people that she was supposed to call her “own”.

Moreover, she receives no help during this violation as Whitehead puts: “If anyone heard or saw, they did not intervene. ” The violation of the black people by the white slave owners, on the other hand, is a lot more brutal compared to the violation black people expose to one another. Big Anthony’s punishment, for example, is one of the most sadistic events in the novel. After he’s caught attempting to run away, he’s punished for three days in front of all the other slaves in the plantation as well as some white guests who arrived there to simply entertain themselves by watching this sadistic event: “Big Anthony was whipped for the duration of their meal and they ate slow. ” This moment shows that the torture of the black people was a source of pleasure for white slave owners apart from a way to maintain white domination.

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Another point to make on Big Anthony's punishment is the fact that this event was a demonstration as to why so many enslaved people did not think about running away. By watching a punishment like this on its extreme severity where at the end they all witness him being burned alive, they lose their freedom before even attempting to gain it. Similarly, when Cora arrives at North Caroline, Martin, the station agent, shows her the road which is called the "Freedom Trail" where: "The corpses hung from trees as rotting ornaments." The aim is to warn anyone who dreams to escape to their freedom. So alongside with loss of freedom, loss of dignity is another consequence of physical violence that black people face since they believe they have no worth as human beings. Another type of violence black people was exposed to is the linguistic violence, although it's not as explicitly portrayed as the physical one. This kind of violence first appears at the part where Cora's grandmother Ajarry was sold in Oudiah: "The captain staggered his purchases, rather than find himself with cargo of singular culture and disposition. Who knew what brand of mutiny his captives might cook up if they shared a common tongue".

The aim here, by buying slaves from different parts, is to keep them mute so that the African slaves would forget their history and culture, but also their languages which in many ways is harder than losing history. They also aimed at reducing resistance by dividing the African community. Whitehead returns the reader to the trauma of linguistic loss when he narrates the part where Cora lives under very different conditions in South Carolina as a freed slave. She's in a class, trying to understand a slave's African tongue and remembers that her mother had told her about those African languages which must be cherished:" The words from across the ocean were beaten out of them over time. All the words except for the ones locked away by those who still remembered who they had been before. "They keep'em hid like precious gold", Mabel said. " Even though Mabel tried to impose and teach Cora the importance of keeping their language in the past, Cora chooses to ignore her mother on this matter: "These were not her mother's and grandmother's times. " Here we can say that the linguistic violence exposed by white people causes a loss of sense of self as one who doesn't remember his/her mother tongue eventually loses his/her identity. Linguistic violence also shows itself as a way of integration as to how former slaves adopt themselves in the society they live in as freed slaves. How the Northern society will integrate Africans into their society becomes important and this is where the violence comes in. For example; when Miss Lucy, a white proctor of the dormitory Cora; disguised as Bessie; stays in, corrects Cora on her speech: "Dormitory, Bessie. Not quarter", "Going to, not gonna", Cora in return is convinced by the good intentions of Miss Lucy and does not question the fact that this integration erases aspects of her identity.

In conclusion, the novel depicts the need of white people turning black people into the source of income and in order to do that they don't hesitate to practice the highest level of physical violence on the enslaved black people. They simply want to take their freedom away by constantly humiliating and torturing them. The linguistic violence on the other hand purposefully

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makes them forget who they were and leaves them with the loss of identity.

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