

# Delusion and reality in the underground railroad



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The realms of delusion and reality are typically intrinsically separated, existing as opposites in the spectrum between myth and actuality. In *The Underground Railroad* however, Colson Whitehead merges fantastical and mythical elements with realism, and this interaction forms the basis of the plot of the novel. In *The Underground Railroad*, the relationship between delusion and reality provides a justification for the actions of the characters, as Cora's escape, the notion of American equality, and the institution of slavery all rest on faulty foundation myths that nonetheless produce concrete consequences.

In the novel, the myth that fundamentally informs Cora's character is the myth that her mother successfully escaped the Randall Plantation. When Caesar approaches Cora about his plan to leave, he states " But I'm going soon, and I want you. For good luck" (27). Caesar asks Cora to come because he believes her mother is the only slave to have gained freedom from their plantation. Cora's answer is also informed by this belief, and when she says yes, Whitehead notes that " This was her mother talking" (8). In this way, it is established that Cora possesses the courage to set out with Caesar because she believes that her mother did so years before. This reasoning, however, is based on a fictitious foundation, as the reader later learns that in actuality Cora's mother Maybel did not escape, and died from a snakebite as she attempted to return to the Randall Plantation and her daughter. The myth that Maybel escaped fuels Cora's own belief that she can also gain her freedom, as well as Ridgeway's fixation with her. In considering his failure in recapturing Maybel, the slave catcher Ridgeway reflects that " He failed, and Maybel's disappearance nagged him longer than it should have, buzzing in

the stronghold of his mind” (84). The myth of Maybel, though it is based on the lie that she survived, fuels Cora’s own experience on the Underground Railroad and Ridgeway’s obsession with capturing her, forming the foundation for the chase at the center of the novel.

In the same way that a false foundation myth provides the basis of Cora and Ridgeway’s actions, Whitehead establishes that a similar delusion lies at the core of the American system of government. In the novel, white characters are committed to a false narrative that upholds their own supremacy.

Michael, a slave that can recite the Declaration of Independence, serves as an illustration of this myth. In describing Michael’s trick and his former master’s efforts to train him, Whitehead notes that “ The Declaration of Independence was their masterpiece. ‘ A history of repeated injuries and usurpations’” (32). The slave Michael can recite the Declaration of Independence, and acts as an ironic rebuttal of its core principles. Michael is a slave, and a white man can compel him to perform this party trick. Michael and other slaves do not fall under the declaration’s definition of “ people,” and for them the document at the foundation of American history and democracy is less a declaration of independence, and more of a declaration of continued injustices, or “ repeated injuries and usurpations”. Cora notices this inconsistency and notes in Martin and Ethel’s attic that she “ wasn’t sure the document described anything real at all. America was a ghost in the darkness, like her” (184). In reflecting upon Michael’s recitations of the Declaration of Independence, Cora realizes that the document’s core principle is a lie, a lie that acts as the basis of American’s governing philosophy.

As an actress in the Museum of Natural Wonders during her time in South Carolina, Cora participates in the propagation of the delusion of American history. As she notes that the exhibits in the museum do not reflect reality, Cora thinks that “ Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach” (119). Though the exhibits in the Museum of Natural Wonders reinforce a false narrative, they are nonetheless accepted as truth by the ruling white class, reinforcing a version of American history that downplays and sanitizes the atrocities that propped up the system of slavery. This mythical history benefits characters like the Randalls and Ridgeway, who profit from the delusion of white supremacy. In his speech on the Valentine Farm, Lander reinforces this idea, stating that “ America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all...its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are” (291). From the perspectives of the slaves that are denied their basic rights, the very concept of American democracy functions as a system that rests upon a faulty foundational myth.

In the novel, the institution of slavery also acts as a reality that is propped up by the misconception that slaves are inherently inferior to whites. The character of Dr. Stevens illustrates this myth during a grave-digging escapade, in which the doctor notes that “ In death, the negro became a human being. Only then was he a white man’s equal” (142). In this way, Stevens establishes that there is no difference between the races from a scientific or anatomical perspective, illustrating that the perceived differences are instead a societal fabrication derived from the myth that one race is inferior to the other. Similarly, Ethel’s philosophy underscores this

myth, as her father teaches her that slaves “ were descendants of cursed, black Ham, who had survived the Flood by clinging to the peaks of a mountain in Africa” (196). In Ethel’s mind, the practice of slavery rests on the biblical myth that Africans are inferior. In response to Ethel’s assertion that slaves deserve their fate, Cora notes that “ All men are created equal, unless we decide you are not a man” (186). In this way, the institution of slavery also rests on a false foundational myth. In this system, beneficiaries of white supremacy consider themselves justified in upholding the subjugation of other races, based on the faulty notion that slaves should be denied personhood because they are biologically different or biblically cursed.

The Thomas Theorem states that “ If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Merton, 380). The theorem posits that believing in a delusion can have material implications. In *The Underground Railroad*, Cora’s escape, American democracy, and the institution of slavery are all rooted in inaccurate foundation myths that serve as the basis for reality. The myth that her mother escaped fuels Cora’s own belief in escaping and Ridgeway’s fixation with her. The Declaration of Independence’s assertion that “ all men are created equal” does not apply to slaves, and therefore the government betrays its founding principle. The white ruling class believes that Africans are members of an inferior race, which justifies their subjugation and the institution of slavery. In response, on the Valentine Farm, Lander states that “ Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth. Nothing’s going to grow in this mean cold, but we can still have flowers. Here’s one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can’t. Its

scars will never fade. “ (290). He continues, saying, “ Everything you ever knew told you that freedom was a trick—yet here you are” (290). Lander argues that in order to counteract the delusion of white supremacy, slaves must create their own delusion, a belief in the possibility of freedom. The Underground Railroad serves as the ultimate symbol for the relationship between delusion and fantasy, a physical manifestation of a myth brought to reality. The myth of the Underground Railroad in the novel therefore becomes a literal, tangible, force, a means for slaves like Cora to escape the delusion of white supremacy through their own belief in the possibility of freedom.

## **Works Cited**

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