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AN ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN THE
UNDERGROUND RAILROAD FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF
EDWARD W. SOJA'S SPATIAL THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The Underground Railroad is the masterpiece of African American writer Colson Whitehead, who won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. Taking the escape route of a marginalized black girl Cora, from south to north, as a narrative line, Whitehead presents the identity crisis of marginalized individuals who were victims of racial discrimination, segregation, and genocide before the 19th century American Civil War to readers. By writing about marginalized groups, represented by Cora, who have suffered from extreme racial systems, Whitehead intends to trigger readers' reflections on the terrible consequences of racialism.

This paper, which is based on Edward Soja's space theory, analyzes the persecution and oppression of racism and patriarchal society led by white culture faced by Cora from the Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace, and how Cora gradually gets rid of her marginalized female identity and pursues physical and spiritual freedom. The southern plantation as the setting where the protagonist Cora resides is explored in the opening chapter as the Firstspace. Here, she is subjected to ubiquitous oppression and bullying, and the contradictions between her and the white race gradually emerge. The second chapter discusses the Secondspace and examines Cora's psychological trauma caused by the above physical space. The racial identity pressure is the source of her identity anxiety. The third part focuses on the struggle and rebellion of the protagonist to cope with her identity crisis through the Thirdspace. Cora in this space confronts her black heritage and eventually completes his self-identity through in the process of pursuing a new life as a female.

Key words: Thirdspace; identity; black woman

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction of Whitehead and *The Underground Railroad*

Colson Whitehead is the New York Times bestselling author of eight works of fiction and two nonfictions, and is a two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, for *The Nickel Boys* and *The Underground Railroad*, which also won the National Book Award. He is referred to as the “literary chameleon” by Harvard Magazine because of how many different subjects and genres he writes about. Whitehead has been devoted to exploring the history of Racism in the United States and its impact on contemporary society. His works are both realistic and satirical, showing the diversity of literary forms and his pioneering spirit. In this era where all races should integrate with each other and coexist harmoniously, there is no doubt that his writings have become particularly eye-catching. Whitehead’s previous works were all based on a male perspective. But in 2016, his first novel with a female theme set against American slavery, *The Underground Railroad*, was published.

The Underground Railroad, as a creative work that combines fiction with reality, won the National Book Award in 2016 and the Pulitzer Prize in Literature in 2017. The novel mainly describes the story of Cora, a female slave, who escapes from the cruel southern plantation and seeks freedom and identity. Taking the underground railway as a hint, the story closely links the constantly changing living space on Cora’s escape route, driving the development of the story via the transformation of actual space. Cora grew up in the prophecy of torture through her continuous pursuit of freedom, accompanied by the progress and evolution of her black female identity in different narrative spaces. Finally, Cora had made it to a place she had longed to go. This novel breaks through the traditional tragic ending of black women losing their subjectivity, strengthens women’s self-awareness, and breaks free from their marginalized female identity. Whitehead’s depiction from multiple spatial perspectives used to Cora’s self-growth presents readers with a novel full of blood and tears.

1.2 Literature Review

The Underground Railroad made Whitehead the only novelist of the 21st century to win both the National Book Awards and the Pulitzer Prize. Since its publication, the novel has received attention and research from many scholars, both nationally and internationally, on history, post-colonialism, narrative theory, feminist, and spatial perspectives.

1.2.1 Research Abroad

Some scholars have attempted to analyze the historical elements in *The Underground Railroad*. Madhu Dubey argues that Whitehead uses “Living History” as an exhibition practice aimed at making history vibrant, concretizing the past era, and inviting people to experience immersion in the past. A number of scholars focused on race relations from the postcolonial perspective. G. Santhana Lakshmi points out that the systematic erasure of slave identities, histories, and cultural heritages by slave owners will lead to the continued oppression of African people. Tanaka Shouhe hold the view that *The Underground Railroad* incorporates the history of coal mining into the escape of slaves, hinting at the role of slavery in the rise of fossil fuels in the United States.

The third perspective is narrative strategy. Kaylie-Anne Ward considered that Whitehead employs the combination of traditional and neo-slave narratives to show the history of America and its torment to the black throughout time. In terms of narrative gaps, Brit Bennett argues that Whitehead tends to intentionally omit some violent scenes, forcing the reader to witness through a “veil” the violence that may have been hidden in the nineteenth century. Feminism has also been a focus of scholarly attention. Afsaneh Askar Motlagh discusses gender in his dissertation, stating that by portraying colored women as self-reliant, self-defining figures who have experienced gender, racial, and class-based oppression, Whitehead tells the important role that courage, experience, knowledge, and action play in empowering African American women.

The last angle is space. Carolin Cichy highly evaluates the novel's use of spatial images. Based on spatial theory, she exposes the hidden racial discrimination in the society through the analysis of buildings such as hospital, museum, and monument, and points out that black people are actively fighting to establish their own space of resistance in spite of oppression.

1.2.2 Research at Home

Compared with foreign studies, domestic research on *The Underground Railroad* started late. It was not until 2016, when Whitehead bagged several heavyweight international awards with *The Underground Railroad*, that it began to attract the attention of domestic scholars.

Some scholars have studied *The Underground Railroad* from the perspective of new historicism. Huang Bingbing explored the black history suppressed by the mainstream discourse through the two core concepts – “the historicity of texts” and “the textuality of history”. Combining Foucault's power theory in her master's thesis, Zhao Jiamin analyzed the operation of disciplinary power in terms of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination, and argued that blacks gradually became tame and submissive during the implementation of these three means. Some scholars focus on the narrative strategy of the novel. Cheng Hua mentions that the novel utilizes postmodern narrative strategies such as spatial narrative and multi-focus narrative to reconstruct American history. Liu Lu explores the geographic and narrative space, viewing Cora's journey as a literary map. Guan Yue analyze *The Underground Railroad* in terms of physical, social, and psychological space, aiming to help readers understand Cora's living space, psychological changes, and the social environment of the time.

Both domestically and internationally, there is a need for systematic research on the text content and connotation of *The Underground Railroad*. Currently, many domestic scholars have studied *The Underground Railroad* from the perspective of spatial criticism, but few scholars have systematically explored the identity construction of the heroine from Soja's spatial theory. This paper attempts to enrich the study of *The Underground Railroad*, link the three kinds of space with identity, and explore how the protagonist extracts herself from the identity dilemma and accomplishes the reasonable construction of identity.

2. Theoretical foundation

2.1 Development of Spatial Theory

The research object of space criticism encompasses forms of space in a variety of disciplinary fields, with the research in the field of literary criticism being its primary object of study. Philip E. Wegner argues that the entry of space into the field of literature helps to focus more attention on representation of space in literary texts, and on how space has changed the way we think about the literary history.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Joseph Frank is credited with being one of the first to notice space and contribute to the theory of spatial narrative. He suggests that novels can be analyzed in terms of linguistic, physical, and psychological space.

Around the 1970s, there was a boom in spatial studies known as the “spatial turn”. Henry Lefebvre and Michel Foucault are representatives of the first stage of spatial turn. In 1974, Lefebvre published the book *The Production of Space*, declaring that production is dominated by space itself, rather than taking place within space. At the same time, he distinguished three concepts: spatial practice, representation of space, and representational spaces of expression. Foucault explained the existence of a Heterotopias space, pointing out that humans do not live in a vacuum, but in a series of relations, which expands the geographical scope of spatial theory and gives it a new face.

The representative figures of the second stage are Mike Crang and Phillip E. Wegner. Crang published *Cultural Geography* in 1988, which studied the cultural connotations between geographical

landscapes and spaces from the perspective of cultural orientation, revealing the process between social ideology and geographical landscapes. Wegner clarified that space is a “production” which “formed through various social processes and human intervention. Space also is a “force” that “directs and delimits possibilities of action and ways of human being in the world”, which has led to the introduction of other perspectives in literary research (181).

Edward W. Soja is a representative figure of the third stage. In his book *Thirdspace* he drew inspiration from Lefebvre’s theory of space and proposed three concepts of space: Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace.

2.2 Soja’s Three Spaces

Soja was one of the key figures associated with the “spatial turn” in geography. He brought the insights of critical social theory, including political economy, postmodernism, and cultural theory, to create innovative analyses of space and society. One of his greatest contributions to spatial theory was the update of the concept of the “spatial triad” with his own concept of “spatial trialectics”.

Firstspace is a material space, which is real and concrete. The living environment of humans and the relationship between society and nature are both integral parts of Firstspace epistemology. Under the influence of this way of thinking, space is perceived as a materialized physical space that people can directly grasp through empirical means such as observation and measurement. Secondspace is a conceptual spiritual space that emerged much later than Firstspace. Soja pointed out that “as Secondspace, conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful representations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms” (Soja 12). Secondspace epistemology can be seen as a reaction to the closed and compulsory nature of the epistemology of Firstspace, which means using art to confront science, using spirit to face matter, and using subject to challenge object.

According to Soja, both Firstspace and Secondspace coexist and have always operated in a binary interpretation mode. While Firstspace still dominates in some fields, Secondspace has totally controlled Firstspace in the field of social history. It is the fact that the imagined space controls the material space. For example, people living in a city are easily influenced by the city’s ideology. In an effort to undermine the dualisms paradigm, Soja proposed the concept of Thirdspace, which was regarded as a powerful weapon against space hegemony.

Thirdspace is a reconstruction of epistemology of Firstspace and Secondspace in addition to a deconstruction of them. By starting with an otherness-thirdness mode and incorporating both Firstspace and Secondspace rather than just adding the two, it breaks away from the original binary space form. Thirdspace shows a strong openness by combining both physical and imagined space as well as creating a brand-new spatial pattern. In such a space, class and ethnic issues can both be discussed without taking sides. As Soja emphasized that “anything which fragments Thirdspace into separate specialized knowledges or exclusive domains – even on the pretext of handling its infinite complexity – destroys its meaning and openness” (56). In other words, it is challenging for us to generalize and summarize Thirdspace because of its openness and inclusivity. If Thirdspace can be easily summarized and generalized by a certain spatial knowledge, it will be controlled by this knowledge mode, forming a new discourse system of rights, which will obviously harm both its deconstruction and constructiveness.

3. Firstspace: Cause of Identity Crisis

“Firstspace epistemologies tend to privilege objectivity and materiality, and to aim toward a formal science of space” (Soja 75). In other words, Firstspace is a directly perceptible physical space that, within a certain range, can be accurately measured and described. To some extent, it can be seen as a concrete and mappable space constructed in novels. Focusing on the slave narrative, Whitehead created many physical spaces in *The Underground Railroad* to set the scenarios for the story. These spaces

vividly reflect the injustices and persecutions that exist in the southern plantations where slaves resided. The oppression and devastation from plantation slave owners severely restricted the amount of physical space that the oppressed black slaves could occupy in order to survive. Cora, who was in a disadvantaged position, had no choice but to live on a lonely dark hob, shuttling through rows of cotton.

3.1 Horrible Randall Plantation

At the beginning of the novel, Whitehead traces the life of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry. She was kidnapped and raped by slave traders, then separated from her family and was confined from head to foot into a slave ship. After countless resale and "each day waking upon the pan of a new scale" (Whitehead 8), she finally arrived at the Randall Plantation in the United States, which is a desolate and narrow place, a truly hopeless wasteland. The slaves were completely isolated from the outside world, and they had very little personal freedom on the property. After the slave owner Randall converted the indigo plantation to cotton farming, they spent day in and day out in the cotton fields, planting, picking, and processing the cotton under strict supervision. Living in such a dreadful environment, coupled with overloaded work, Ajarry "died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean" (8).

The protagonist Cora was born into such a human purgatory filled with discrimination and punishment. "Slave owners presided over plantation, where every manner of cruelty got full airing" (Sinha 3). In Randall Plantation, Cora is just the private property and means of production of slave owners. She not only has to endure the arduous labor and the humiliation of being sold as a commodity, but also constantly guard against cruel abuse from slave supervisors. Undoubtedly, resisting or fleeing will only result in worse punishment. Especially after witnessing Big Anthony being burned alive by the slave owner to warn the slaves that it was the end of escape, Cora's heart was filled with panic and fear, and she was unsure whether this would happen to her in the near future. The environment where Cora lives in vividly shows how racist hegemony achieves the goal of disciplining black people through both physically and mentally, and ultimately constructs a physical space where white people are paramount.

3.2 The Dark Hob

According to Soja, Firstspace can be read at two levels. One "concentrates on the accurate description of surface appearances, and the other searches for spatial explanation in primarily exogenous social, psychological, cultural and historical processes" (Soja 75). As the most fundamental plot location of the novel, physical space is not in a passive position in the text construction, but rather serves as an external representation of the characters' social relationships and psychological activities. It is a controlled space in addition to a place for residents to live and work. Cora, who resided in the plantation at first, was defeated by the harsh reality again and fell into a more passive space. Due to the transaction between Ava and the overseer Moses, Cora was rushed to the terrifying Hob, living "with those who had been crippled by the overseers' punishments, off to Hob with those who had been broken by the labor in ways you could see and in ways you could not see, off to Hob with those who had lost their wits. Off to Hob with strays" (Whitehead 16). It precisely summed up the general condition of this space: narrow, over-crowded, and filthy. Slaves were unable to procure enough food and clothing, and could only consume a meager amount of corn and bacon, wearing uncomfortable stiff wooden shoes and clothes. In these oppressive conditions, white men violently exploited the bodies of Hob's women, resulting in their children being stunted.

In the dark Hob, the discourse hegemony helps white people creates a physical space in which they rule supremely. Black people in this situation have no opportunity to resist, and everyone—including Cora—lives in endless fear. When the slave performed for their master, little slave Chester accidentally spilled a drop of red wine on Terence, the son of Randall and the current owner. It is no

doubt that Chester will suffer cruel punishment. But at this moment, Cora “was bent over the boy’s body as a shield” (34). Terence became enraged by Cora’s actions and hit her hard with his cane. Throughout the process, everyone silently watched Cora, and no one offered to assist her. Terence punished Cora while warning the other slaves to completely obey him. Subsequently, Cora was taken back to Hob. From this moment on, Cora’s interpersonal interactions with other slaves almost stopped.

It can be seen that the dark hob is another physical space where white people can exert male hegemony. The physical abuse renders Cora marginalized and even completely lost the subjectivity as a black woman. The Randall Plantation and Hob can be regarded as representative spaces of racism and gender discrimination, constructed by white people. The difficulty of the Firstspace is the direct cause of the Cola’s identity crisis, as both her identity as a race and her identity as a female subject are questioned and challenged in this space. Cora’s miserable story reflects the shared experiences of black women in the 19th century. For black slaves, their lives are too insignificant. They cannot enjoy the same freedom and justice as ordinary people because their subjectivity has never been recognized, and are instead forced to keep endless silences and faint cries.

4. Secondspace: Loss of Subjective Identity

If only believing that the plight of Cora and other slaves is caused by the physical space, readers can easily fall into the trap of environmental or spatial determinism, which means that all human activities are determined by physical space. In fact, Firstspace’s function is limited, necessitating the supplement of Secondspace. Through the various perceptions that the characters have on real-life conflicts, Secondspace in the novel is presented. Based on this, Cora’s living physical space is no longer a pure objective space, but a space created by the spirit. In this space, the external image, thoughts, and inner states of the characters are all reflected. This chapter describes Cora’s mental state during her life on the Randall plantation, according to the transformation of physical space. The cruel persecution in physical space undoubtedly brings torture to Cora’s psychological space, leading to her limited consciousness of freedom and self-spiritual closure, and thus deeply plunging her into the dilemma of identity.

4.1 Limited Freedom Consciousness.

The understanding of material reality in the Secondspace is essentially achieved through thinking or contemplating things. Mental space reflects the material environment, power relations and social ideology where the characters experienced. Meanwhile, external physical space also influences and shapes mental space. In Georgia, where slavery was prevalent, slaves had nothing but flattery and obedience in their spirit; struggling for freedom and even being on equal position with white people was nothing more than idle chatter. Influenced by the discipline and punishment of slavery, Cora’s psychology was greatly distorted in such a terrifying setting.

At the beginning, when faced with “the first time Caesar approached Cora about running north”, Cora initially wanted to know who sent him to make fun of her (Whitehead 3). Given that they were unable to predict what would take place on the plantation in the following instant, Cora was skeptical that Caesar’s strategy was his real thought. And what made Cora unrest was that Caesar’s plan was an imperfect idea, which would make it easier for white people to kill them. Since the day she was born, Cora had never considered escaping because, living under the laws of slavery in a predominantly white society, she had always been entirely immersed in those rules. What’s more, after witnessing the extreme retribution, Cora became even more determined that the sufferings on the plantation were still tolerable in comparison to the alternative of being caught and brutally killed if fleeing. Such a thought were deeply influenced by absolute authority, so that she made the same choice as other slaves and gave up the right that was the most fundamental right she was entitled to – the gender identity as a woman and the racial identity as a black person.

4.2 Self-enclosed Mind

Black slaves are victims of the oppression of the hegemonic system and are hence considered the “silent majority”. They avoid and cannot directly express their true thoughts, instead, they deliver their inner emotions in a subtle and implicit way. Silence becomes the most powerful and reliable protective weapon for slaves who copes with both ethnic conflict and the burden of life. Cora suffered severe psychological damage while she was a slave on the plantation due to the harsh living conditions and ruthless abuse she endured at the hands of the slave owners. It seems that weak resistance is futile in the face of strong oppression. As a result, Cora could only accept her miserable fate at the beginning, and silence became her way of survival. She became reluctant to talk to the other members as a result of the prolonged silence, which caused a cold interpersonal relationship.

On Jockey’s birthday, Randall brothers’ entrance made slaves feel afraid and worried. Slaves, including Cora, stood at an appropriate distance, waiting for their master’s command, while the slave owner Terrence was evaluating those attractive slave girls. When he says, “one more”, each slave performs, hollering and dancing (Whitehead 38). They paid close attention to the owner’s face and made every effort to win their favor. That is to say, they would prefer to silently alleviate their grievances and anguish in the face of injustice and misery. In a silent way, “Cora dragged herself into the circle, checking the Randall brother’s reactions on every turn like everyone else” (Whitehead 38). Additionally, on this birthday, all the slaves were requested to bring the vegetables to the kitchen. However, Chef Alice secretly tossed away the Cora’s vegetables. As soon as Cora saw her vegetables thrown away, she became furious at her behavior, but she couldn’t speak up because Alice had once enjoyed the favor of the plantation’s owner, Old Randall. It is obvious that Cora is not well liked by Alice. Cora was in a stage of rigid thinking at this time and had gotten herself into a second space predicament: she lacked effective strategies for improving her strained relationships with others.

Cora’s fear and loneliness were also substantially worsened by her mother Mabel’s escape. Overall, the persecution of slave owners, abandonment of family members, and abuse of peer have become the main reasons for Cora’s self-enclosed. The accumulated torment is enough to overwhelm her, making her unable to sleep day and night on the cold and hard floor. She only lives in her own small circle, which further isolates her from the outer world. Except for Lovey, Cora has no friends at Randall plantation. When Lovey dragged her to dance together at Jockey’s birthday party, Cora pulled her away and refused to join. She always makes an attempt to distance from others in order to avoid any potential danger or inconvenience caused by it. Meanwhile, since Caesar suggested they escape together, “Cora averted her eyes and made her face into slate for him” in that she cannot trust or rely on anyone (38). The brutal slavery alienated people from one another and caused moral decay on the plantation by fostering apathy in interpersonal interactions. As Cora continues to move towards self-closure under the effect of silence and indifference, her mentality has also been severely traumatized, and her Secondspace has evolved into a trauma-filled environment.

5. Thirdspace: Awakening and Construction of Identity Awareness

Soja tried to use his inclusive trialectical space theory to transcend the stubborn Dualisms. He holds that Thirdspace epistemologies can be “briefly re-described as arising from the sympathetic deconstruction and heuristic reconstitution of the Firstspace-Secondspace duality.” (Soja 81). That is to say, Thirdspace is seen as a chosen place for marginalized people to struggle, liberate and emancipate. This chapter aims to explore how Cora broke out of the originally enclosed space and enter Thirdspace in different ways. In such a space, Cora bravely throws off the shackles, pursues the true freedom, and ultimately achieves self-harmony and establishes connections with others.

5.1 Exploration of Knowledge

During the period of slavery, black slaves were isolated from knowledge for a long time, and their access to education was always restricted and hindered. Despite the challenging and miserable

environment, Cora still broadened her cognition through the knowledge in books while fleeing, and learned survival strategies in light of interaction with the outside world, which opened up a third space for herself. After escaping to South Carolina, Cora was curious about education and took every chance to overcome her ignorance. She cherishes the old books, and while other girls chatter incessantly, she still focuses on reading. She wants to receive equal education like a free citizen, making up for her years of inadequate education. It turns out that Cora is able to read and write regularly in a short amount of time once the problems with her language irregularities and vocabulary errors are gradually modified, and her literacy skills also make significant progress. She works to establish an equal status in unequal education while striving to integrate into equal social classes.

The production of knowledge is mainly accomplished through the spatial representation of discourse construction (Lu 31). It can be achieved by constructing Thirdspace. Cora never gave up on pursuing education even after her South Carolina experience crushed her dream of freedom. Hiding in a narrow attic in North Carolina, Cora reread the Bible. "She worked on her reading, making the best of the education that had been cut short in South Carolina, squinting in the spy hole's dim light" (Whitehead 229). When Cora was sick, Ethel read the Bible and other books for Cora. It seemed to give Cora a tiny bit of comfort and peace, indicating that her heart was still alive.

For Cora, reading is not only the symbol of culture and education, but also represents the women's personal growth. In addition to seeking bodily liberty, the pursuit of freedom also means expanding one's spiritual realm. Cora never gave up on knowledge during her never-ending escape. She saw an increasingly larger world, which promoted her vision expansion, intellectual growth, and spiritual maturity. Thirdspace of Cora is made up of books and knowledge, which is not a closed structure. On the contrary, it can create new stories and heal fresh wounds. As Cora become fully immersed in this space, her attention shifts from the cruel physical space and the humiliated mental space to a new space without binary opposition. It is a space that Cora has never explored before, and when connected to it, Cora experiences a sense of confidence, safety, and harmony in place of the terror and worry she had previously had. For Cora, Thirdspace serves as the material and spiritual pillar for dealing with traumatic events.

5.2 Pursuit of Freedom

Every one of Cora's escapes represents spiritual growth and sublimation in which she obtained both book knowledge and spiritual strength. Love with Royal as well as the friendship with Caesar has led Cora into a Thirdspace of mutual comfort and encouragement, together overcoming trauma and rushing towards freedom.

After being captured by Ridgeway in Tennessee, Cora was rescued by Royal who was the first free-born black man with high expectations for the eradication of slavery Cora encountered on her escape route. With the help of Royal, Cora took the underground railway to Valentine Farm in Indiana. Although it appears to be a utopian world, it is actually full of contradictions between Abolitionism. Fortunately, Cora noticed the hope of life on this farm. She chose to accept Royal and was excited about their promising future. Royal was an indispensable companion for Cora, assisting her healing her inner trauma of being enslaved. Cora once wished to stop fleeing after having a nice love with Royal. Tragically, Valentines Farm was massacred by the White People's Defense Corps. Royal was killed in the attack and Cora was once again caught by Ridgeway. But this time, with her indomitable will, she overcame the fear of being enslaved, put up with the suffering, and ultimately escape. The love for Royal, coupled with the study of the knowledge, endow Cora with a miraculous power to cross the underground railway and go past numerous obstacles.

In addition, as the first person to propose to escape to the north, Caesar played a significant role in Cora's decision to flee and seek freedom as well. Caesar was born with a desire for freedom, which is why he told Cora about his escape plan. Cora's attitude toward escape evolved from hesitancy to

determination after dedicated dialogue with Caesar, and she eventually came to realize what true freedom means. In a way, the appearance of Caesar serves as Cora's first self-realization. Thanks to mutual encouragement and sufficient preparation, Cora became fearless. In the past, she had never sought to establish a close relationship with others. But later on, they hugged on the railway, giving each other a sense of security, which was a significant change in Cora.

Thirdspace is a place of resistance and a completely openness. It encompasses both physical space and spiritual space while being larger than the sum of the two in that Thirdspace is entirely inclusive, like the link between Cora, Royal, and Caesar. The shared pursuit of freedom and the desire for equality have connected them together, inspiring their mutual reliance on one another. Therefore, they are able to successfully enter the third space, communicate openly, heal wounds, and pursue true freedom.

5.3 Establishment of Connection

Like countless plantations, Thirdspace is also concealed amid numerous links. Whitehead not only focuses on the various physical places where Cora lives, but also extends his vision to the inextricable interactions with other black slaves and Abolitionism, so as to further explore the possibility of creating more third spaces.

Cora, the underprivileged child who fled the plantation, valiantly fought for the principles of freedom and equality, and completely subverted the indifferent social relationships that resulted from racism and patriarchal oppression, thereby constructing Thirdspace. She broke her subordinate position as a woman with extraordinary courage and actively improved her interaction with society. Her accomplishments are credited to her own excellent qualities as well as the fact that she opted to support her black compatriots and the white Abolitionism. Mutual dependence and harmonious coexistence have become a powerful driving force for many black slaves to flee, increasing the possibility of throwing off institutional oppression and pursuing social harmony.

The first person to pick up Cora and Caesar was Mr. Fletcher, a white man who had "abhorred slavery as an affront before God" (Whitehead 52). However, Cora hesitated, fearing that it was a scam designed jointly by Fletcher and the slave owner. Cora didn't dismiss her doubts until Fletcher placed his life in danger to escort her to the railway station. She recognized the severe risk that Fletcher took during the escort and was resolved to actively assist others in the future. Additionally, upon arriving at Valentine Farm, a utopian black community, Cora not only became a member of the community but learned about the life values of black people. She was convinced that the black race was likewise a strong group after hearing the lecture on Abolitionism. While helping others, she also tries to give them love and help in return. Cora let go of her doubts and returned to the community, and now she has the ability to maintain solid and harmonious relationships with those around her, completing a true sense of self-reconstruction.

By constantly accounting the stories of Cora during the survival and escape, this novel illustrates how various people are united by trauma and reach Thirdspace, where they can find hope for life in others and gradually overcome the shadow of slavery through shared comprehension. The plot of this novel interweaves a larger network with more stories of oppression and resistance, proving that vulnerable groups will not be easily defeated. Cola's resistance against the power of white slave owners reflects her bravery and her determination to overthrow her subordinate status and regain her identity as a black female. After enduring the torment of the real situation, Cola eventually escaped with Caesar and reached the underground railway. On the one hand, her various social behaviors reflect her determination to pursue freedom and resist white hegemony. On the other hand, compared to those obedient and submissive slaves who never thought of rebellion due to their inner fear, Cola's escape to some extent proves that she has freed herself from the identity of a slave and reconstructed an identity of a free person.

6. Conclusion

The Underground Railroad is Whitehead's first female themed work. Using pre-war America as the background, he depicts the disasters brought about by slavery and racial discrimination to readers through the black girl Cora. Following Cora's journey, this thesis provides a detailed analysis of her experiences in different spaces from the perspective of Edward Soja's space theory. After attentively reading the novel, it will be discovered that the three different layers of space are mutually integrated and interconnected, all of which have far-reaching impact on the construction of Cora's identity. The hardships, persecution, and abuse from Firstspace have tormented and devastated Cora's Secondspace, causing a sharp deterioration in her social relationships and identity, which forces Cora to flee north. During the escape, she abandoned her previous timidity and apathy and instead yearned for knowledge, cherished love and friendship, and actively strengthened her connections with those around her. Cora's mental space gradually becomes stronger from weak, and finally Thirdspace in which she strives for dignity and freedom is constructed. More importantly, Cora's identity awareness awakened. She successfully constructed the identity of black female.

Exposing the cruelty of slavery and patriarchy, Whitehead portrays the oppression and plight of black women, and believes that they could rise from the darkness through resistance. This paper elaborates on the author's thoughts and argues that the black women can find ways to obtain equal rights and freedom by firmly resisting and pursuing. Through the perspective of Soja's spatial criticism, this thesis provides enlightenment for African-Americans trapped in identity predicaments as well as strategies to reconstruct their identities and truly realize the meaning of racial equality.

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