

Literariness Journal

A Peer-Reviewed Quarterly
Journal of Literature and Cultural
Studies

P-ISSN: 3108-1614
E-ISSN: 3108-172X

LiterarinessJournal.org

Vol. 1, Issue. 3 June 2026

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A Literariness.org Project

The Price of Progress: Interest Convergence and the Medical-Industrial Complex in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract: Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* utilizes the South Carolina episode to dismantle the myth of racial advancement, reframing "progress" as a sophisticated mechanism of state control. Applying Derrick Bell's concept of interest convergence, this paper contends that the state's paternalistic offerings of healthcare, housing, and labor are not humanitarian efforts but strategic tools used to maintain white institutional dominance. By examining Whitehead's depiction of mandatory medical screenings and systematic sterilization, this paper argues that the narrative exposes a proto-medical-industrial complex designed to harvest data and enforce compliance. Furthermore, using Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional framework, this study illustrates how gendered vulnerabilities leave protagonists like Cora uniquely exposed to state-sanctioned reproductive violence. Ultimately, Whitehead's South Carolina serves as a haunting precursor to 20th-century eugenics, proving that when "progress" is decoupled from Black agency, it merely functions as a more palatable mask for systemic oppression.

Keywords: *Interest Convergence, Intersectionality, Biopolitics, Medical-Industrial Complex, Eugenics, Reproductive Justice*

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* portrays the historic Underground Railroad as an actual underground railroad that runs through different ideological spaces of the racial history of America. As opposed to depicting slavery as an immutable phenomenon that occurred within the boundaries of the plantation system only, Colson Whitehead shows that white supremacy has a mutable character. In each new state where Cora finds herself, she experiences a unique manifestation of racial domination.

Among all spaces of racial domination, South Carolina deserves special attention. The place appears to be highly progressive in comparison to the brutal plantation from which Cora had escaped. There are houses, jobs, schooling, and healthcare facilities provided to the Black population. No physical violence can be observed, and South Carolina seems to be striving to raise racial awareness and promote racial equality in America. However, the writer manages to destroy this facade and unveil the reality behind apparent progress and benevolence.

This paper focuses on the representation of South Carolina in *The Underground Railroad* as a specific space. That reflects the process of contemporary racial governance, which is conducted by means of biopolitical management masked by benevolent intentions. Relying on the notion of biopolitics suggested by Michel Foucault, within these spaces, South Carolina is especially notable. Initially, the state seems like a progressive haven relative to the oppressive plantation system from which Cora flees. Its citizens are provided with homes, jobs, schooling, and health care. There is no visible violence, and the state gives the impression of humanitarian reforms for uplifting the oppressed. Yet, in due time, Whitehead dissects the mask behind which these structures operate: surveillance, medical exploitation, and control over Black reproduction.

This paper aims to show that in this sense, South Carolina is an allegory of the modern forms of racial governance, in which power relations are established not through violence and oppression but through biopolitical manipulation and institutionalized subordination. By using the theories of Michel Foucault on biopolitics, Derrick Bell on interest convergence, and Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality, this research proves that what South Carolina represents as humanitarian progress is in fact institutional subjugation under the guise of care. In this context, Whitehead reveals the truth behind the mask, showing how racial oppression becomes increasingly sophisticated and even less detectable.

Academic analyses of *The Underground Railroad* often concentrate on its relation to slavery, its historical representation, and the continuity of racial trauma in the USA. According to these researchers, Whitehead collapses the historical periods and their differences by means of the same narrative pattern to show the continuity of antipathy towards African-Americans. Unlike the novel's

historical context, which sees slavery as an institution of the past, the author manages to prove that it remains a part of the present reality.

Some scholars choose to interpret *The Underground Railroad* as the continuation of the neo-slave narrative tradition. Such interpretations usually pay much attention to Whitehead's reinterpretation of the historical realism and usage of speculative devices to comment on the historical archive. In addition, by making the underground railway metaphorical, Whitehead provides the opportunity to analyze several types of oppression at once within one narration.

Finally, some authors choose to focus on the issues related to state power and surveillance. As for South Carolina, it is singled out by most researchers due to its liberalism. As opposed to other states in *The Underground Railroad*, it uses more sophisticated means of oppression: they are concealed behind bureaucracy and medicine rather than evident violence. Nevertheless, on the other hand, most of these studies give a cursory treatment to such themes without exploring their connection to racial governance and biopolitics.

In this regard, this study builds on previous research by focusing on the Southern state of South Carolina as a biopolitical state. In this study, critical race theory and Foucauldian theory are used to show how Whitehead depicts the increasing institutionalization, science, and medical regulation of racial oppression. Upon reaching South Carolina, this area seems vastly dissimilar to the plantation environment Cora previously inhabited. Here she finds herself working and living in decent conditions and offered an education. The impression created by the atmosphere is one of order, stability, and even modernity—contrary to the chaotic violence she left behind. However, it quickly becomes clear that such progress may be deceiving. The narrator notes that South Carolina has more perfect system. Such an assessment cannot help but seem ironic since what made this system perfect was the fact that violence was no longer visible but institutionalized.

The methods of control used in South Carolina differ from those employed in the plantations—they include administration, regulation, and surveillance instead of brute force. As noted by Whitehead, modern societies are capable of developing such means of maintaining racial dominance. He shows that oppression does not necessarily take place through spectacular acts but can occur within apparently humane systems of governance.

This idea becomes especially relevant in regard to Cora's job at the museum, where she works within exhibits aimed at white spectators and portrays enslaved Black people. According to the narrator, Visitors could see Cora's activities at the museum become significant within this criticism. Cora works at events that are supposed to exhibit the historical experiences of people, especially the enslaved, for

white audiences. According to the narration, The audience could see the colored experience for themselves. The museum is not teaching the viewers about historical truths about slavery; instead, it presents Black suffering through entertainment.

The museum then becomes ideological. It creates spectacles out of violence while allowing white viewers to think of themselves as educated and compassionate. In critiquing liberalism, Whitehead is criticizing representations of Black suffering that recognize the suffering but ignore the power relations that perpetuate such suffering. Indeed, South Carolina is civilized because violence happens behind closed doors rather than being visible. The concept of interest convergence theory by Derrick Bell proves essential when discussing reforms made in South Carolina. The main point here is that African-Americans achieve racial progress only if their development corresponds to the interests of the dominant groups rather than being driven by the commitment to equality.

One may find a perfect example in South Carolina. There, Black education, health care, and job opportunities are pursued not out of the realization of Black humanity but due to their ability to improve social stability and the productivity of the state's economy. African-Americans are allowed to flourish only insofar as they provide benefits to whites.

This notion is demonstrated by Whitehead in the choice of words by one of the characters who talks about improving the Negro race. On the surface, the statement seems very benevolent. However, a closer look at its paternalistic nature will expose assumptions regarding white supremacy. This conditional freedom is further revealed when Cora learns the truth behind the medical policies in the state. While this may seem like an act of humane reform, the reform soon turns out to be one of coercion for social engineering. While the state affords certain freedoms to its citizens, it limits the reproductive freedom and surveillance of Black bodies. Bell's theory helps in understanding the reason for the failure of these reforms in providing true freedom, as these were aimed at institutional maintenance rather than the disestablishment of racial hierarchy.

Foucault's theory of biopolitics is highly helpful in analyzing the institutional framework of South Carolina. According to Foucault, modern nations manage their populations via institutions focused on health, reproductive capacity, efficiency, and bodily discipline. It is not only the case that power now functions via punishment; power also works through life administration. South Carolina is a clear illustration of this development. Its inhabitants are under constant surveillance through medical testing, education testing, and behavioral monitoring. While the state claims that these actions are a manifestation of care, they also construct obedient subjects.

Whitehead provides a vivid portrayal of such a culture through Cora's description of the doctors' activities: They're always watching, always writing. Medical power confers legitimacy on state violence. As oppression is carried out within hospitals and science speak rather than plantations and whips, it looks rational and humanitarian. Whitehead shows how contemporary institutions use professionalism and expertise as a cover for violence. The unveiling of the sterilization program reveals the true character of biopolitics. According to the narrative, the doctors had been performing surgeries without permission. The scientific terminology conceals the violence. The term "surgery" hides the oppressive act.

This scene highlights the peril of institutional power. Violent acts do not need physical force anymore since they are conducted through administrative and scientific institutions without permission. Whitehead's description of South Carolina foreshadows arguments about the modern medicine-industrial complex. According to the story, medicine cannot be considered politically impartial because institutions involved in health care belong to wider social control regimes.

On one hand, the hospital in South Carolina serves as a place where people receive treatment. On the other hand, doctors conduct aggressive treatments with reference to science and social progress. It means that medical institutions follow traditions of social experiments that have been carried out on Black populations without their consent. Whitehead's novel references real experiences of medical racism in America that involve the forcible sterilization of people and experiments without their informed consent. Even though this literature piece takes place earlier than many other similar cases, it discloses the ideology that justified medical crimes against marginalized groups in society.

State interventions are constantly explained in terms of the benefits for Black people. The phrase it was all for their own good occurs several times in the novel. It deprives Black individuals of their freedom because it assumes that authorities have more expertise and understanding of their needs than they do. Consequently, Whitehead's novel criticizes scientific racism and exposes medicine as an apparatus of state domination. The intersectionality theory proposed by Kimberlé Crenshaw contributes significantly to the understanding of oppression in South Carolina. According to Crenshaw, different systems of power intersect in order to create discrimination mechanisms that cannot be explained only by gender or race.

In Whitehead's story, Black women represent an especially fragile group. Although all Black people are watched, the bodies of Black women, in particular, become subjected to reproductive control. Cora gradually recognizes that the system threatens not only her labor but also her reproductive future. This realization intensifies the psychological violence of South Carolina's institutions. The possibility that her body could be altered without consent Represents an assault upon

identity, autonomy, and generational continuity. Whitehead's focus on reproductive control reflects broader histories of racialized gender oppression in the United States. Black women have historically been subjected to both hyper-sexualization and reproductive restriction, positioned simultaneously as laboring bodies and demographic threats. Intersectionality reveals why these experiences cannot be reduced to race alone. The violence directed at Black women operates specifically through the intersection of racial and patriarchal power. Cora slowly comes to understand that the system not only exploits her labor but also her reproductive potential. In doing so, the psychological violence of South Carolina institutions is heightened. The potentiality of altering her body without consent becomes an attack on her sense of self, autonomy, and intergenerational existence.

Whitehead's emphasis on the manipulation of reproductive rights ties into the larger history of gendered oppression against Black women within American society. Black women have traditionally been subject to both hyper-sexualization and reproductive restriction, viewed as both laborers and demographics. The use of intersectionality helps one understand how these experiences cannot be explained solely by their race. The violence that is enacted against Black women exists because of the intersection of racial and patriarchal power. The process of sterilization in South Carolina is a consequence of the ideology of eugenics. According to eugenicist theory, societies may attempt to regulate themselves through discouraging some types of reproduction and encouraging others. Some types of lives are valued by such regimes, and some types are considered either dangerous or inferior.

According to Whitehead, the practice of eugenics continues slavery in the spirit rather than merely in name. In plantation society, slavery controlled the bodies of Blacks by controlling their labor and sexuality; in modern society, such control is achieved by institutionalizing reproductive regulation.

This is not an instance of a change from domination to self-determination, because the latter does not require physical force to be exercised. It is the management of future generations, and this requires different tools. However, even though the rhetoric of sterilization invokes progress and improvement, the practice itself involves a commitment to hierarchy and exclusion—as evidenced by Whitehead's exposure of its true nature.

Another one of Whitehead's masterful narrative strategies is the condensation of time periods into a single fictional geography. South Carolina features allusions to the nineteenth-century legacy of slavery and the eugenic practices of the early twentieth century, as well as the surveillance states of modern times. These allusions challenge linear stories of American progress. Instead of showing the gradual erosion of racism, Whitehead shows it adapting into new institutional guises.

The iconic statement "If you want to see what this nation is all about, you have to ride the rails" positions the novel as an investigation of the changing mechanisms of racism in America. In that sense, each state stands for a new permutation of white supremacy, as opposed to any kind of decline thereof. In fact, the importance of South Carolina lies precisely in its ability to show how modernity itself can be used as a mechanism of oppression. Technological innovation, efficiency, and liberalism are no guarantors of equality. Rather, they serve as a means of establishing complex domination.

The story shatters the concept of racial progress by illustrating how domination evolves via institutionalization. While at first South Carolina may seem like a benevolent alternative to slave plantation life, its apparent benevolence hides the presence of systems of surveillance, medical exploitation, and sexual violence. By employing concepts of biopolitics, interest convergence, and intersectionality, this paper argues that modern racial domination involves regulating populations rather than exercising brutality. It is more dangerous to be oppressed under the guise of progress since violence can then happen in secret underneath the rhetoric of improvement.

The state's healthcare and medical initiatives are just one of the ways the government turns African-American bodies into instruments for controlling their populations. Healthcare, education, and welfare services allow for populations to be disciplined, their reproduction controlled, and their freedom conditional on compliance and dependent on the current power relations. In essence, it is argued that racial progress without justice creates different kinds of domination, not progress. The state of South Carolina represents modernized slavery and not the opposite.

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