



## PREDICAMENT AND RESISTANCE: ANALYSIS OF PROTAGONIST CORA'S QUEST FOR FREEDOM IN *THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD* FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINIST GEOGRAPHY

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### Abstract

This paper applies Linda McDowell's feminist geography theory to analyze the protagonist Cora's struggles and resistance in different spaces: personal, domestic, and public. In personal space, Cora resists the oppression of slavery by reclaiming bodily autonomy. In domestic space, she challenges traditional family roles and asserts control over her reproductive rights. In public space, she combats racial and gender oppression in her quest for self-identity and social recognition. Through these analyses, this paper reveals Cora's resilience and determination in the face of oppression, illustrating how she challenges and overcomes gender and racial oppression to achieve self-empowerment and freedom. This study not only deepens the understanding of the historical plight of Black women but also offers important insights into gender equality in contemporary society.

**Keywords:** Feminist Geography; Space; Cora; Oppression; Resistance

### 1. About the Work and the Applicable Theoretical Framework

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* is a significant work in contemporary American literature, having won both the 2016 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Through its complex narrative structure and rich portrayal of Black female characters, the novel highlights the gender

discrimination and survival challenges faced by Black women in 19th-century America.

Feminist geography examines the relationship between gender and space, focusing on how women experience, manage, and resist in different spaces. McDowell's theory includes concepts such as body (personal) space, domestic space, and public space. Body space refers to the autonomy and control over one's physical body, domestic space to the

gendered division of labor and power within the family, and public space to women's visibility and safety in societal arenas.

## 2. Cora's Oppression and Resistance in Personal Space

In Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, the personal space of the protagonist, Cora, serves as one of the most critical arenas where the brutal realities of slavery manifest. As an enslaved Black woman, Cora's body is not her own; it is a site of constant violation and control by the plantation owners and overseers who view her as property rather than a person. The notion of personal space, which in a free society might symbolize privacy, autonomy, and safety, is completely inverted in the context of slavery. For Cora, personal space becomes synonymous with oppression.

The brutalization of Cora's body begins in childhood and continues into her adult life on the Randall plantation. From an early age, Cora witnesses the dehumanizing treatment of her fellow enslaved people, and she is acutely aware that her body could be subjected to the same violence at any moment. The constant threat of sexual violence looms large in her life, as does the forced labor that dominates her daily existence. The plantation is a place where her bodily autonomy is entirely stripped away; she is forced to work, endure punishment, and live under the perpetual threat of more severe violence. The physical abuse she endures is not just an attack on her body but an assault on her dignity and sense of self.

Despite the overwhelming control exerted over her body, Cora's resistance within this personal space is a key element of her character and narrative. Her resistance is most vividly illustrated in a scene where she physically fights back against a young white boy who attempts to harm her. This act of defiance is not just a moment of self-defense; it symbolizes Cora's broader refusal to be a passive victim. In a society that seeks to strip her of her humanity, her fight is a powerful

assertion of her autonomy. This moment of physical defiance is a crucial turning point in her journey, setting the stage for her eventual escape and her continued resistance against the forces that seek to oppress her.

In addition to physical resistance, Cora's pursuit of literacy represents a form of intellectual resistance that is equally significant. In an era when enslaved Black people were often denied the right to education, Cora's determination to read and educate herself is a radical act of defiance. Literacy, in this context, is not just about acquiring knowledge; it is about reclaiming a sense of agency and self-determination. Cora's commitment to learning, even when she is hiding in a cramped attic, underscores her resilience and her belief in the transformative power of knowledge. Her pursuit of literacy is a rejection of the "illiterate" status imposed upon her by the racist society that seeks to keep her and others like her in a state of ignorance and subjugation.

Moreover, Cora's psychological resistance is another vital aspect of her struggle within personal space. The act of surviving in such an oppressive environment, where her personal space is constantly violated, requires immense mental strength. Cora's ability to maintain a sense of self and dignity, despite the dehumanizing conditions she faces, is a testament to her inner resilience. Her psychological resistance is seen in her capacity to hold on to her humanity and her hope for freedom, even when every aspect of her life is controlled by others. This mental fortitude is what ultimately drives her to seek freedom, even when the odds are overwhelmingly against her.

Cora's resistance in personal space is thus multifaceted. It encompasses her physical defiance, her intellectual pursuits, and her psychological resilience. Each of these forms of resistance contributes to her overall journey toward freedom, highlighting her strength and determination in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Her ability to resist, even

in the most oppressive of circumstances, is a key theme in *The Underground Railroad*, and it serves as a powerful commentary on the broader struggles of enslaved Black women in America.

### **3. Cora's Oppression and Resistance in Domestic Space**

The domestic space in *The Underground Railroad* is another critical site of oppression and resistance for Cora. Domestic space, in the context of slavery, is deeply intertwined with the institution's systematic destruction of Black families. Cora's relationship with her mother, Mabel, and the broader impact of Mabel's escape from the plantation, play a central role in shaping Cora's experiences and her understanding of family and belonging.

Mabel's decision to escape the plantation and leave Cora behind results in profound psychological trauma for Cora. This abandonment is not just a personal loss; it is emblematic of the broader fragmentation of Black families under slavery. The forced separation of family members was a common tactic used by slave owners to maintain control over the enslaved population. By tearing apart families, slave owners sought to weaken the bonds of solidarity and resistance that could form among the enslaved. For Cora, Mabel's departure is a source of deep emotional pain and confusion. She grapples with feelings of abandonment, anger, and betrayal, all of which are compounded by the harsh realities of her life on the plantation.

The destruction of the Black family unit is further reinforced by the dehumanizing practice of forced breeding. On plantations, women like Cora were often paired with men selected by the slave owners to produce more enslaved people. This practice reduces Black women's roles within the family to mere reproductive functions, stripping them of their identities as mothers and caregivers. The loss of control over their reproductive rights is a profound violation of their autonomy and humanity. It underscores the extent to which Black women's bodies were

commodified and exploited under slavery. For Cora, the knowledge that her body could be used in this way adds another layer of oppression to her experience in the domestic space.

Cora's resistance in the domestic space is most powerfully demonstrated in her refusal to undergo forced sterilization in South Carolina. This eugenics program, disguised as a public health measure, is a direct attack on her bodily autonomy and her potential role as a mother. The program represents yet another way in which the state seeks to control and limit the Black population, denying women their reproductive rights as a means of social control. Cora's recognition of this procedure as an attempt to control her body and her future prompts her to resist. Her defiance against this violation is a powerful assertion of her independence. By refusing to submit to the sterilization, Cora challenges the traditional domestic roles imposed on Black women, asserting her right to control her own body and her future.

Cora's actions in the domestic space reflect a broader struggle for self-empowerment and the right to define her own identity. She refuses to be confined to the limited roles that society imposes on her as a Black woman. Her resistance is not just about preserving her physical body but also about protecting her identity and autonomy as a woman. In doing so, she challenges the gendered expectations that seek to confine her within the domestic sphere. Cora's resistance is a rejection of the notion that her worth is tied solely to her ability to reproduce or fulfill the roles assigned to her by others.

Moreover, Cora's resistance in the domestic space extends to her interactions with other enslaved people on the plantation. She forms bonds with others who share her plight, and these relationships provide her with a sense of community and support. However, Cora also resists the pressures to conform to the expectations placed on her by both the slave

owners and other enslaved people. Her decision to escape the plantation, despite the risks, is a rejection of the domestic roles imposed on her and a declaration of her desire for freedom and autonomy. This act of defiance is not just a personal decision; it is a statement against the entire system that seeks to define and limit her based on her gender and race.

Cora's journey through the domestic space in *The Underground Railroad* is thus a complex interplay of oppression and resistance. Her experiences highlight the ways in which the domestic sphere is both a site of intense control and a space where resistance can be enacted. Cora's ability to navigate and challenge the constraints of domestic life underscores her resilience and her determination to assert her identity and autonomy, even in the face of overwhelming odds.

#### **4. Cora's Oppression and Resistance in Public Space**

Public spaces in *The Underground Railroad* are also critical sites where Cora faces significant oppression and where her resistance takes on new forms. In these spaces, the broader societal structures that enforce racial hierarchies and limit Black women's autonomy are most visible. Cora's journey through these public spaces highlights the systemic nature of the oppression she faces and her ongoing struggle to assert her identity and achieve freedom.

In South Carolina, Cora encounters a society that appears to offer freedom but, in reality, imposes strict controls over Black people's lives. The public spaces in this state are designed to reinforce racial hierarchies, limiting the freedom and autonomy of Black women. These spaces, which should represent freedom and equality, instead become extensions of the plantation, continuing to control and dehumanize Black women under the guise of progress and liberation. The contrast between the appearance of freedom and the reality of continued oppression is a central theme in Cora's experience in these public spaces.

One of the most striking examples of Cora's oppression in public space is her participation in a museum exhibit in South Carolina. This exhibit reduces Black people to objects of curiosity, intended to reinforce racist stereotypes and maintain the status quo. Cora is forced to play a role in this dehumanizing display, which serves as a stark reminder that even in a supposedly free state, her body and identity are still controlled by others. The exhibit is a powerful symbol of the ways in which public spaces can be used to perpetuate racism and oppression, even under the pretense of education and culture.

Despite the oppressive nature of these public spaces, Cora's resistance remains steadfast. In the museum exhibit, for instance, she subverts the role assigned to her by refusing to internalize the dehumanizing messages the exhibit conveys. Her resistance in this context is subtle yet powerful, as she maintains her dignity and refuses to become a passive participant in the racist display. Cora's actions in this public space demonstrate her ability to resist even when her options are severely limited.

Cora's resistance in public spaces also includes her physical and mental endurance as she navigates the dangerous journey northward. Each state she passes through presents new challenges and threats, yet she remains determined to reach freedom. Her journey is not just a physical escape but also a symbolic rejection of the limitations imposed on her by society. Cora's resistance is an ongoing struggle against the forces that seek to define and confine her based on her race and gender. Her determination to continue moving forward, despite the obstacles, is a testament to her resilience and her unyielding quest for freedom.

Moreover, Cora's resistance in public spaces is also seen in her refusal to conform to the expectations placed upon her by the white society she encounters. In Indiana, for example, she joins a Black community that is working towards self-sufficiency and independence. However, even in this relatively safe space, Cora

is aware of the fragility of their freedom. When the community is attacked, Cora's survival becomes an act of resistance against the forces that seek to destroy Black autonomy. Her decision to continue her journey after the community is destroyed reflects her understanding that true freedom cannot be found within the constraints of the society she inhabits; it must be fought for and reclaimed on her own terms.

In each of these public spaces, Cora's resistance is an assertion of her right to exist as a free and autonomous individual. She challenges the societal structures that seek to dehumanize her and other Black women, and in doing so, she reclaims her agency. Cora's journey through these public spaces is a powerful testament to her resilience and her unyielding quest for freedom. Her actions in these spaces underscore the novel's broader themes of resistance, autonomy, and the ongoing struggle for racial and gender equality.

## 5. Conclusion

Cora's journey in *The Underground Railroad* is a powerful narrative of resistance against the multifaceted oppression faced by Black women. Through her struggles in personal, domestic, and public spaces, Cora exemplifies the strength and determination required to reclaim autonomy and pursue freedom. Her resistance is not just a fight for physical freedom but also an assertion of her identity and humanity in the face of systemic dehumanization. The novel highlights the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality, emphasizing the resilience of Black women in overcoming the oppressive forces that seek to confine them. Cora's story is a profound exploration of the intersection of race, gender, and space, offering valuable insights into the broader struggles for social justice.

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