

"A Long Way Away": Unreachable Freedoms in Contemporary Afrofuturist Neo-Slave Narratives¹

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Abstract: Both Colson Whitehead's celebrated novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and the hybrid rap/space opera by the group clipping., *Splendor & Misery* (2016), present Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives. Both the novel and the album are obsessed with the relationship between enslaved persons and technological advancement. In each text, technological advancements (a railroad, a sentient spaceship) initially represents the financial and militarized empowerment of the enslaver; in each text, the technology is suborned by the enslaved and used to carry them to what they imagine is freedom. Whitehead, in an homage to Octavia Butler, literalizes the underground railroad in order to provide a vehicle for Cora, the novel's lone surviving escapee, to witness and reject other "advancements" in civilization (in particular, eugenicist gynecological medicine and anthropological museums) as she moves North and, eventually, hopes that she has "pushed beyond" America (305). In mastering the mechanical function of the railroad, Cora masters a kind of futurist promise of refashioning: "On one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light" (304). In *Splendor & Misery*, set in some presumed distant future and far in space, a sentient cargo ship narrates its growing attraction to the sole surviving "cargo" which has rebelled and overridden the shipping route. Daveed Diggs, the rapper in the group, explicitly acknowledges his debt to Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, and N.K. Jemison in conceiving this album; its textual and afrofuturist roots run deep. By the end of the album, the ship and the otherwise-unnamed Cargo #2331, much like Cora, decide to just keep moving away, hoping to find "a better place" somewhere in uncharted space. Each of these works is experimental and genre-bending; more importantly, each work offers an anti-triumphalist emancipation narrative.

For neither Cora nor Cargo #2331, however, is freedom actually fully realized. Both end their narratives still in transit, still far from where they came but equally far from where they hope to be. And, in a tragic throwback to many traditional ex-slave narratives, even the chance of freedom is perforce a largely solitary one; "Who got time for this love shit anyway?" the ship/cargo reflects at the end of *Splendor & Misery*. I argue that for each of the enslaved characters, emancipation rings hollow and freedom is precarious. Given that the novel and the album appeared within months of each other, taken together they become a powerful joint indictment of our not only our current

¹ The author would like to thank Stephen Levin and the Clark University English Department colloquium for insights on an early version of this, as well as the helpful suggestions from Laura Thiemann Scales, Heather McHale, and the journal's readers.

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political climate and longstanding amnesia about the technological and institutional ills of slavery. They also become indictments of the way that this nation has often stopped short by celebrating "freedom" but failing to offer any tangible security to actually live a full life beyond that point. These texts ask us to reconsider how Afrofuturist texts will come to define freedom's relationship to place.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; Neo-Slave Narrative; African American Literature; Science Fiction; Music; Rap Music; clipping; Colson Whitehead

In Mark Dery's now familiar formulation of Afrofuturism, two things stand out: the "African American signification that appropriates images of technology," and the determination to stake a claim on the "unreal estate of the future" (Dery 180). Similarly, Ytasha L. Womack's accessible overview, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*, published two decades later, situates Afrofuturism at the "intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 9), a notion that she later explicates as a "liberation edict in Afrofuturism" (Womack 38). The relationship between Afrofuturism, technological ad-

vancement, and liberation is at the heart of two Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives that appeared within a few months of each other in 2016: Colson Whitehead's acclaimed novel, *The Underground Railroad*, and an experimental album, *Splendor & Misery*, by the rap group clipping.² These works interrogate freedom and the limits of technology in attaining freedom for the formerly-enslaved, and they also ask us to consider the relationship between freedom and movement. Taken together, the works suggest that we must rethink both the relationship between human intervention with technology as well as the capitalist notion of freedom represented by claims to land, even the as-yet "unreal estate." *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* both question the scope and sustainability of racial progress in the 21st century in works where freedom for the protagonists continues to recede on the horizon. Each of these works strands the protagonist in an indeterminately free space (literally, in the case of *Splendor & Misery*). These endings contrast to the more optimistic early days of Afrofuturism. After all, when Sun Ra promised followers that "space is the place" as an alternative to the intractably-racist Planet

² The precise appearance of the group's name appears to be fluid: Clipping, clipping., and clipping have all been used in print; the group appears to favor clppng (or CLPPNG) on its website and social media but clipping. for its YouTube videos. For consistency and visual convenience, I have chosen to use clipping in reference to them.

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Earth, there was still a tangible, known planet that he depicted in his genre-defining film.³ The correlation between land/place and freedom has long been a hallmark of Afrofuturism and narratives of slavery. By retreating from a celebratory stance toward technological appropriation and ending with protagonists still on the run, the works of Whitehead and clipping ask us to dwell more fully in the present and to re-assess the certitude of freedom located in new frontiers.

In *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery*, technological advancements, in the form of railroads in the novel and a sentient spaceship in the album, initially represent the financial and militarized empowerment of the enslaver. Whitehead's Cora and clipping's Cargo #2331 both begin their works as enslaved people whose value is in their more primitive capacity as physical laborers, in contrast to the wide-ranging financial and technological interests of their captor-owners. Cargo #2331 is in the midst of his own Middle Passage-like transport to a life of servitude: his rebellion is mostly physical, in contrast to the sentient spaceship's advanced technological supervision and counter-measures. The Mothership emphasizes Cargo #2331's physicality

by observing "spiking in the pulse" and "endorphins" and "rage in the nervous system" more attentively than any precise technological capability ("The Breach").⁴ The contrast between Cargo #2331 and the Mothership is heightened by their different musical styles. As the Mothership, Daveed Diggs raps swiftly, with a mechanical feel, while Cargo #2331's expression is through slower, mournful songs that invoke traditional African American spirituals. By beginning with the emphasis on un-free laborers and physical toil, clipping and Whitehead mirror the "typical cyberpunk acceptance of capitalism as an unquestionable universe" (Bould 182). Much as Afrofuturism accepts the subversion or appropriation of technology as the next necessary step toward emancipation, there tends to be a capitalist equation of freedom with property ownership of one's own. We see this in the long legacy of the famous "40 acres and a mule" edict issued by General William Tecumseh Sherman during the Civil War (and notably recalled today in the name of filmmaker Spike Lee's production company); I argue that both *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* are working within a framework that has long held that freedom requires a place in which to be free—

³ For a quick summation of *Space is the Place* and its influence, see Womack 60-62. See also van Veen 77-79, in which he invokes Sun Ra and discusses the "dynamic" potential of the "extravagant expression in Afrofuturism, in which 'Earth' and 'human' are abandoned apace" (78), a move that van Veen characterizes as "progressive" (78)—though the space-faring Afrodiasporic future considered by van Veen seems to invoke a tangible eventual alternative location.

⁴ clipping does not appear to provide lyrics with the album book or on their official website; all lyrics are quoted from repeated listening and corroborated through Genius.com's extremely helpful transcriptions: see <https://genius.com/albums/Clipping/Splendor-misery>

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even if that place is no longer on Earth. By revealing the continued inaccessibility of a place upon which freedom can rest, both of these works suggest that the sustainable liberatory promises of Afrofuturism have stalled because of this tether to the idea of place.

Let me offer some historical background for this edict and this particular understanding of freedom. In December of 1864, General William Tecumseh Sherman, at the end of his famed and feared "march to the sea," captured the city of Savannah, Georgia. He flamboyantly gifted it to President Lincoln for Christmas, and he and his army occupied the city through the holidays and into mid-January. During this time, the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, came to inspect the city and to question Sherman about his army's conduct during the march—a line of inquiry, in Sherman's opinion, driven by political maneuvering that sought to score abolitionist points and to undermine Sherman's accomplishments. Stanton and Sherman gathered together nearly two dozen African American leaders from the Black population in the city, the majority of whom had been enslaved until either freed by the Union army or through financial self-manumission. Only five of the men were free-born, and those all the sons of slaves, per their descriptions in the *New York Daily Tribune's* report of the event. Stanton submitted them to a patronizing series of questions about their understanding of freedom and their opinion of Sherman. As recorded in Sherman's *Memoirs* (and corroborated by the *New York Daily Tribune*):

Second question: State what you understand by slavery, and the freedom that was to be given by the President's Proclamation?

Answer: Slavery is receiving by irresistible power the work of another man, and not by his consent. The freedom, as I understand it, promised by the proclamation, is taking us from under the yoke of bondage, and placing us where we can reap the fruit of our own labor, and take care of ourselves and assist the Government in maintaining our freedom. (Sherman 725-726)

What I find vitally important in this answer is the emphasis on not only self-determination ("take care of ourselves") but also the requirement of property—the "placing us where we can reap the fruit of our own labor." While the men of course cannot name a particular place, certainly the importance of spatial/geographic security and autonomy can be seen reflected in Sherman's famous Special Field Order No. 15, the "40 acres and a mule" command. In this order, issued on January 16, 1865 from Savannah, Sherman is actually quite specific about where such land may be found: "The islands from Charleston south, the abandoned rice-fields along the rivers for thirty miles back from the sea, and the country bordering the St. John's River, Florida" (Sherman 730). In short, we have a textual precedent for quite concretely imagining the geographic boundaries and promises of freedom for the formerly enslaved where "the sole and exclusive man-

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agement of affairs will be left to the freed people themselves" (Sherman 730). And yet, in the neo-slave narratives of Whitehead and clipping, the geographic imagination has, in fact, regressed. Each work has become even less certain that there is actually a place for the fruits of the protagonists' labor. Each narrative is open-ended, making us question whether the protagonists will ever be able to stop running and to settle—and if settling is, in fact, the true enjoyment of freedom. We can read these newest Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives as texts of the Black Lives Matter Era indicting the continued failure for Black lives to find sustainable safety. In particular, "home" and "freedom" are forever a dichotomy that cannot be resolved: as clipping sings, in their refrain made to sound like an authentic "sorrow song": "I can't go back home/'cause I want to be free" ("Long Way Away").

In this, *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* position themselves as warnings against the complacency of seeing freedom as tangible and assured. The 19th-century American slave narrative traditionally enacts a trajectory from the horrors of slavery to the triumph of emancipation and the life—a home life—beyond it. Afrofuturist works, similarly, posit escape, be that literal (escaping Earth) or more metaphysical (resituating one's frame of mind, or reshaping technoculture and the future to benefit the marginalized). Reynaldo Anderson and Charles E. Jones emphasize this liberatory promise in their definition of "Astro-Blackness," which they position as an update of Afrofuturism "in which a person's

black state of consciousness, released from the confining and crippling slave or colonial mentality, becomes aware of the multitude and varied possibilities and probabilities within the universe" (vii). But as A. Timothy Spaulding reminds us in *Re-Forming the Past*, the "triumph" of escape is one beset by ongoing trials: "A free identity in the slave narrative is one wrought with the physical and mental abuses of enslavement, the cultural and familiar alienation of being stripped from one's homeland and family.... And, in many instances, the slave narrators point out that theirs is, at best, a contested freedom" (9). In short: "Even when he or she gains the internal sense of a free identity, the external world operates in opposition to that self, making freedom always a deferred and conditional concept" (Spaulding 10). Cora and Cargo #2331 may have gained self-awareness by the end of their narratives, but they are still in many ways physically restrained and far from a certain destination: Cora confined to the wagon that hopes to head West but seems unlikely to make it, and Cargo #2331 confined to the ship that is keeping him alive but possibly setting its own course.

Spaulding's reminder of the contingency of freedom serves as an important supplemental view to the more triumphalist generic markers of the slave narrative form, particularly in the weight given to the first-person perspective in more traditional narratives. The traditional narratives, especially Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*, highlight the importance of narrative control as self-realization "by writing themselves more resolutely as agents

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who can and do manipulate discourses" (Rushdy 130). For many of the original fugitive authors, Ashraf Rushdy and others argue, "autobiography" allows the ex-slave "to assume and construct a subjectivity which frees him from a former identity as a slave" (Rushdy 216). Douglass's famous "written by himself" appended to this title "certifies that Douglass has authored his own existence in much the same way that naming his own postslavery name...certifies his identity" (Olney 5). Each of Rushdy's primary exemplars in *Neo-Slave Narratives* hews to a first-person narrator, though he notes that works like Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* do not sustain this conceit for long: "Reed's strategic silencing of the first-person narrator is also a critique of how slave narratives required the absence of the African American voice" (Rushdy 119), a result of the problem of white abolitionist intervention in traditional slave narrative publication. Notably, *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* eschew the first person, and thus the enslaved characters are denied this kind of liberatory self-fashioning.⁵ Whitehead's protagonist reclaims only her enslaved name, and the enslaved protagonist of *Splendor & Misery* is never named and thus perhaps never truly escapes his categorization as property. Both are rendered passive by the narrators that intervene to tell their stories for them, and even often cut away from their stories to focus on other plots.

"Liberty was reserved for other people": *The Underground Railroad's* uncertain future

Where Octavia Butler's Afrofuturistic "vehicle" for imagining the slave experience was to literalize time travel for her protagonist, Dana, Colson Whitehead instead literalizes an underground railroad to assist his protagonist, Cora, in her escape. Whitehead begins the novel with the story of Cora's grandmother's kidnapping in Africa, her survival of the Middle Passage, and her experience of (and death in) slavery on a plantation in Georgia. Observing her death, at work in the cotton field, the narrator dispassionately discounts the idea that she could have changed her life once enslaved: "Liberty was reserved for other people, for the citizens of the City of Pennsylvania bustling a thousand miles to the north" (Whitehead 8). In this, we get some sense of geographic specificity, if only to make escape seem all the more distant a possibility: "To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible" (Whitehead 8). But though Whitehead gestures to a triumph in Cora's escape, ultimately the novel acknowledges that freedom comes at the price of the "fundamental principles of [one's] existence"—and that requires a longer journey than even the 1000 miles to Pennsylvania.

⁵ Morrison's *Beloved* also largely eschews the first person, perhaps signaling a shift in the genre. As Arlene R. Kiezer observes in *Black Subjects*, "it is striking... how few contemporary narratives of slavery are written in the first person" (3).

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In Whitehead's novel, the underground railroad is not a smoothly operating vehicle. It is described as "an ungainly contraption" that is "soot-colored" and has just one "dilapidated boxcar" (Whitehead 69). Through the depiction of the railroad apparatus itself and the microcosms of horror that Cora experiences when she surfaces—including narrowly escaping eugenics experiments to sterilize Black women, being put in a living museum display as a savage, and witnessing public lynchings—Whitehead forcefully challenges the romanticized notion of the underground railroad as viewed in popular American memory. Kathryn Schulz's *New Yorker* essay covering the novel and the recent boom in Underground Railroad narratives reminds us to "incite our curiosity and skepticism" (Schulz 66) about the feel-good aspect of the typical underground railroad myths (often emphasizing white heroics) and sees Whitehead as a challenge to this: "he turns our most evocative national metaphor into a mechanical contraption. It is a clever choice, reminding us that a metaphor never got anyone to freedom" (Schulz 68). This echoes David W. Blight's critique, in *Passages to Freedom*, that in "our need to find an ennobling past through which to establish our identities, we have sometimes used the story of the underground railroad as a comforting 'midway world'" still somewhat far from reality (Blight 4). Cora, initially seduced by the possibilities, ultimately becomes horrified by each new stop on the railroad as she recognizes the abuses and further entrenchment of racism that the railroad, medicine, museums, and

even abolition-minded hosts represent. By the end of the novel, she seems to abandon all faith in America when she hopes that she has "pushed beyond" the nation while riding the rails (Whitehead 305). Thus, in Whitehead's novel the railroad carries Cora to ill-defined and precarious freedom, one that questions whether America can ever offer Cora any security or stability. As Julian Lucas so aptly notes in a review of the novel, "[Whitehead's] railroad is little like the emancipation superhighway imagined by abolitionists—a metaphor in which the railroad's techno-optimism underwrites the inevitability of freedom. It is, instead, an incomplete warren of provisional refuge—a maze filled with precarious junctions and alarming dead ends" (Lucas 3). Advancement, whether in railroad technology or medical practice, brings very little that is safe or healthy for Cora; rather, she must instead reject the promises of "advancement" and return to the "old-fashioned" values of her own embodiment. In short, technology holds little lasting promise for Cora, while the body hardened by a life of enslavement allows her to physically vanquish her the slave-catcher who has stalked her across three states and propels her as she moves herself along the railroad tracks. Whitehead's novel rejects the railroad's technological promises of futurity in favor of more traditional, low-tech solutions: "the miracle you made with your sweat and blood" (304).

So although the underground railroad is, for Whitehead, literally a Black-propelled enterprise, it still tethers Cora to the past and is abandoned for more old-fashioned travel by

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the novel's end. To heighten the rejection of the Afrofuturist promise of not only an intervention into the past but also an appropriation of the future, first Whitehead gestures toward the ways in which Afrofuturism needs to "re-purpose... motifs of the past" (van Veen 82). An example of what van Veen might characterize as the "production of counterrealities" is legible through the inclusion of an altered runaway slave ad that fully and plainly inscribes Cora's humanity and rights near the novel's end (van Veen 84). The ad notes that she escaped "from her legal but not rightful master" and concludes with all all-caps declaration that "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY" (Whitehead 298). Here, then, is the novel's most significant rebuke of the narrator's initial condemnation of Cora's grandmother and of the capitalistic weight of white supremacy. And yet, Whitehead undermines his own triumphalist and potentially Afrofuturist ending by mirroring the narrative and his protagonist in the past, and then through the Huck Finn-like conclusion that sees Cora condemning what she knows and lighting out, as it were, for the unknown frontier—except that this is a frontier that will continue to see Black bodies as "alien" and that readers know full well

will be hostile to Black lives for centuries to come.

Whitehead's rejection of a subversive fusion between past and present challenges the conventions of Afrofuturism and the neo-slave narrative as literary genres, both of which tend to correlate a reformulation of the past with the potential for an improved future.⁶ Rather, the novel moves toward repeated scenes of failure and a curtailing of future promise. The final straw for Cora is her experience at the Valentine farm project in Indiana, which was a thriving a free Black community where generations of African Americans were successfully working the land. In offering a "haven" (Whitehead 265) that was "too big, too prosperous. A pocket of blackness in the young state," (Whitehead 276), the Valentine farm's mere existence eventually invites fear and loathing from the surrounding White community: "white towns had simply banded together to rid themselves of the black stronghold in their midst... If they can't control it, they destroy it" (279-280). The farm's destruction seems to anticipate the 1921 Tulsa Race Riot that forever destroyed the "Black Wall Street" in the West. During one of the final debates within the community about proposed reloca-

⁶ For example, as Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu writes approvingly, "[t]he women writing neo-slave narratives are indeed concerned both with the past and with the future; their special talent rests in their ability to use the past and the treasures they have uncovered there to evoke the promise of the future" (156). Or as Spaulding argues, "[b]y erasing the boundaries of time and space, African American writers claim the authority to re-form history from their present perspective and compel readers to embrace an expansive, imaginative, and *liberating* representation of slavery" (19, emphasis mine). See also Ricardo Guthrie's persuasive chapter, "The *Real* Ghost in the Machine" in which he argues for "far more optimism, or at least the possibility of emancipation through an embrace of technology and the elevation of an Afrofuturist awakening" (46).

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tion, one of the leaders, Lander, states plainly: "Here's one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can't. Its scars will never fade" (Whitehead 285). Thus, for all that Whitehead plays with technology and advancement, the experience of slavery will forever anchor his characters in body and mind; this novel, then, becomes less a celebration of escape than another reminder that, as Lander concludes, "This nation shouldn't exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty" (Whitehead 285). The Valentine farm is indeed betrayed and overrun, and Cora once again must strike out on her own; any solidarity or companionship she enjoyed—as was the case for the entire novel—was short-lived.

Whitehead further emphasizes the dead-end nature of freedom by making freedom and death effectively the same thing, collapsing the choice famously offered by Patrick Henry.⁷ In the novel's penultimate chapter, Whitehead suddenly cuts away from Cora in order to backtrack to and expand upon the story of Mabel, Cora's mother. To this point in the novel, the narrator had implied that Mabel ran away and chose freedom over her daughter. While that suggestion does provide an interesting re-vision of the traditional narrative arc for a woman's slave narrative, in which maternal duty is more important than any solitary

attempt at freedom, Whitehead retreats from this intervention into the genre's history to make Mabel's story tragically pointless.⁸ Mabel runs away in the swamp, enjoys some solitude and some turnips, and realizes how incomplete, unsatisfactory, and fleeting her freedom feels: "She was free. This moment" (Whitehead 294). This is immediately followed by: "She had to go back" (Whitehead 294). But does this become a Harriet Jacobs-like moment of a mother realizing that freedom without one's children is worthless? Not quite, since Whitehead then mercilessly dispatches Mabel to death by snakebite and unmarked burial as the swamp takes her body. The 19th-century slave narrative, as Melvin Dixon notes, often borrowed from spiritual autobiography to emphasize the fugitive's "wilderness confrontation" as a solitary "trial" that resulted in "regeneration": "Through the text and trial of his faith he has fixed time and space in his quest; he has conquered the future by realizing it now; he has gained free territory by stepping forth from bondage; he has conquered life as a slave by being struck dead. Rebirth and immortality are his rewards" (Dixon 314). For Mabel, there is no rebirth, spiritual or otherwise. For Cora, there is no actual realization of the future because her final thoughts, as we shall see, are still on the past. Time and space remain unattainable by the end of Whitehead's narrative in a prolonged deferral of Afrofuturist promise.

⁷ Popularly remembered as "Give me liberty or give me death!"

⁸ For more on the gendered elements to traditional slave narratives, see Valerie Smith's definitive *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, 9-43; see also Beaulieu 1-25.

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In revealing Mabel's story, Whitehead undercuts the myth he had previously made of her; rather than her "success" constantly haunting the slave-catcher Ridgeway and inspiring Cora, her success turns out to be empty, her death no better (and arguably much worse) than that of Cora's grandmother at the start of the novel, as Mabel's final experience is "no sound but pain" and being "swallowed ... up" (Whitehead 295). This complete consumption—and then negation—of being frames Cora's final movement, makes it clear that she will never find her family, and warns readers that freedom rarely brings safety. When Cora emerges from her final railroad tunnel, she takes a step backwards in transportation technology by first "decid[ing] to go on foot" before hitching a ride in a horse-drawn wagon (Whitehead 304). The wagon's driver is another ex-slave who hopes to make it to Missouri and then California. In response, rather than thinking about the future, Cora's final thoughts are for the past: "She wondered where [the wagon driver] had escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him" (Whitehead 306). We find ourselves with a neo-slave narrative that concludes by looking backwards rather than forwards; by remembering pain rather than anticipating peace; where any sense of a definitive place for Cora to live free seems to require still more luck and good fortune. Will the aged Ollie really be able to make it to St. Louis? Would they really be accepted into a wagon train? Both possibilities seem rather unlikely. We end, then, with a sense of motion but no fixed des-

tinuation and no clear plan for freedom in a tangible place. In wondering about Ollie's own history, Cora can affirm a desire in the human-interest story; that is, Cora can only focus on trying to forge human connections rather than celebrating technological advancement. While I do not wish to go so far as to say that Whitehead's novel is anti-Afrofuturist (and certainly not that it is Afro-pessimistic), I do think that the novel cautions us against uncritically celebrating the railroad as a liberatory technology. In particular, Ollie and Cora's plans to head West should jolt readers into considering not just the advancements that westward expansion (and railroad expansion above all) brought to the nation, but also the terrible cost to indigenous and immigrant lives along the way.

A Long Way Away: *Splendor & Misery's* Unending Space

The uncertainty with which Whitehead ends *The Underground Railroad* is echoed in the uncertain frontier traversed in *Splendor & Misery*. Over the course of the album, a sentient cargo ship narrates its fascination with and increasingly protective stance toward the sole surviving "cargo" which has rebelled and overridden the shipping route. Daveed Diggs, the group's rapper and the voice of the ship, explicitly acknowledges his debt to the great figures of African American science fiction, citing Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney, and N.K. Jemison as major influences (Caramanica), while fellow group member William Hutson further emphasized their SF literary debt, list-

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ing Tolkien, Kim Stanley Robinson's *Mars Trilogy*, and *Star Trek* as major sources of his reading and media consumption (Heller).⁹ Indeed, the title of the album, and one of the most poignant lines in the album's final song, is taken from the title of Samuel Delany's unwritten (and much awaited) sequel to *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, which was to be titled *The Splendor and Misery of Bodies, of Cities*.¹⁰ Thus, this novel's literary and Afrofuturist roots run deep; indeed, perhaps the ultimate genre credential for the album is the fact that it was nominated for the prestigious Hugo Award for Best Dramatic Presentation, Short Form.¹¹

Diggs and his partners, William Hutson and Jonathan Snipes, amidst the industrial noise and quick rapping that are signatures of clipping's sound, here also incorporate songs that sound like traditional African American spirituals of the 19th century. Indeed, one song was "interpolat[ed]" from "I Know When I'm Going Home," published in *Slave Songs of the United States* in 1867 (liner notes). Diggs wrote

the lyrics beyond the single borrowed line, but the sound is strikingly traditional; it adds both an historic depth to the album but also a strain of sentimentality, of nostalgia for this "authentic" art form that stemmed from the experience of slavery. Notably, these sorrow songs come across on the album as slightly scratchier, and perhaps more distant, as if they were discovered in antiquated records. It recalls what Alondra Nelson has characterized as "past-future visions" of historical interpolation in Afrofuturist projects (Nelson qtd in Rambsy 208). As Caitlin White writes in an excellent, in-depth look at the group and the album for Uproxx¹²:

Clipping's work grapples with the generational trauma of racism that has been going on for centuries – how it has and does lives [sic] on in black bodies – and embraces the ideas of Afrofuturism for offering an alternative to that. Incorporating the long-sought quartet [members of Take 6, a renowned gospel group] on those intermittent story songs

⁹ Further situating this album in the tradition of African American migratory experience, Hutson also cites Jacob Lawrence's famous *Migration* paintings as an influence (Heller).

¹⁰ For a reading of *Stars in My Pocket* as a science fiction neo-slave narrative, see Spaulding 110-122.

¹¹ That is not to downplay the essential tradition of Afrofuturist music itself as an inspiration. There is excellent scholarship on Janelle Monáe, OutKast, and other acts currently less commercially successful but no less vital: as Howard Rambsy writes, "Music, for centuries now, has been one of the most consistently innovative sites in black creative life; thus, not surprisingly, thinkers interested in Afrofuturism and African American culture in general have viewed black music as a vital source of knowledge" (Rambsy 206). And Diggs himself also gives credit to Monáe and P-Funk as musical inspiration in addition to his literary reading list (White 10).

¹² Link found thanks to the annotations at genius.com.

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is a huge part of remembering and acknowledging that history.

"So much about coded slave spirituals were about leaving behind where they're at," Diggs said. "They're actually coded messages about how to get north, but the philosophy behind them was about transcending place. They were about home actually being in the unknown.... So we have these spirituals and work and story songs appear as interludes to indicate that." (emphasis mine)

Diggs offers an optimistic read on the eternal binary of home and freedom as experienced by the enslaved, where movement is now transcendental. It is a "repurposing of the past," to recall Van Veen, similar to Whitehead's allusion to historical figures (the eugenicist doctor, inspired by J. Marion Sims) and texts (the runaway slave ads which appear in Whitehead's narrative). The final song on *Splendor & Misery*, however, seems to undermine this pleasure of the unknown, given that, as with Whitehead's Mabel, escape may only hasten death.

Ruben Ferdinand, writing for Medium, gives a lengthy and appreciative analysis of the album that praises it as "an Afrofuturist memory that uses science-fiction to retell the Atlantic slave trade, making use of the genre's surgical and chilling vocabularies" that is reinforced by the "minimalist sonic cartography" of the music. While Ferdinand does note the

technological critique embedded in the album's conceit of the Mothership-narrator, calling it "a comment on how technological advancements have benefitted institutionalized racism by improving, augmenting, and actualizing it," still Ferdinand ultimately reads this album as one full of positive messaging, from the "catharsis" of the spiritual song interludes to what he sees as the "elation of true freedom" in the final song. Ferdinand's enthusiastic insights into the messaging of the individual songs are provocative, but his interpretation of the final song fails to take into account the ongoing and future violence to the human body still within the ship. The album is filled with the Mothership's repeated reminders of the frailty—psychological as well as physical—of the human it carries. The newly-emancipated survivor is fully dependent on the Mothership's loving protectiveness, but even a sentient ship cannot actually find a permanent safe location for Cargo #2331's freedom beyond the ship's own confines.

At first glance, *Splendor & Misery* appears to present the emancipation of two enslaved and dehumanized subjects: first, the Mothership (a literalization of the dehumanizing mechanics of the slave-trade-economy); then the flesh-and-blood subject known only as Cargo #2331, the sole ex-slave who survived an attempt to take over the ship. The album does flirt with an intriguing role reversal from the standard slave narrative: here the male figure is the object of fascination, while the Mothership is the one making increasingly rash decisions in order to express its attraction

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to the subject incapable of granting consent. In some ways, this is certainly a refreshing twist, one that gestures toward rich readings of posthuman romance and genderqueer readings, given Daveed Diggs's voicing of the Mothership and the domestic enclosure of the ship. However, even in a technologically miraculous future, this narrative cannot imagine a world where the slave family can escape as a unit, where a home can be made among the emancipated. Escape remains as depressingly solitary as it was in Douglass' *The Heroic Slave*. Freedom becomes even more nebulous.

Daylanne K. English and Alvin Kim, in praising the "new liberatory possibilities" (218) of Janelle Monáe's work, quote Monáe's *Wondaland Collective*: "We believe songs are spaceships. We believe music is the weapon of the future" (qtd. in English and Kim 218). The Mothership is our narrator and the main actor; Cargo #2331's most effective actions happen before and during the first song. *Splendor & Misery* in many ways literalizes the idea that songs are spaceships by devoting the narrative privilege of the album to the Ship: the ship gains a first-person perspective with a fullness never granted Cargo #2331. This lack of narrative self-authority for Cargo #2331 is a regression from the celebrated and hard-fought assertions of self-narration passed down from the likes of Douglass and Jacobs. Though we learn much about Cargo #2331's habits and culture—his prayers, his actions, his music, in sorrow and work songs that seem to speak for him—in many ways the Mothership is a more fully developed character across the album. In

the third and pivotal song on the album, "All Black," we learn that Cargo #2331 "has commandeered the vessel," which might indicate action—but the rest of the Mothership's narration undermines any sense of control Cargo #2331 might have by emphasizing how "inconsolable" his actions are, how they seem to indicate "madness" and, to the ship, how he enacts unfathomable traditions:

The subject seems upset by that to which he is subjected

[...]

That's why he roll with a Bible on the console

Inconsolable, no consolation, no cancellation

Not turning all keys, he puts the ship through paces

And paces the halls, pacing is madness ("All Black")

As reported by the Mothership, there is no celebration of a Black mastery of technology as a means of liberation here; as with *The Underground Railroad*, the fugitive slave must still rely on more old-fashioned, physical skills and hope to provoke a sympathetic response for assistance. While the ship defends Cargo #2331's escape, he has no direct control over it. He remains a passenger rather than the captain of this venture.

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Cargo #2331 is mostly along for the ride as the Mothership decides to ignore its own programming and not return him to the "Administration" to which the Mothership reported in "The Breach."¹³ The end of "All Black" suggests that the Mothership has perhaps been humoring him out of fascination, which slowly turns to support and a maternal feeling of protectiveness:

He is still a runaway slave and so lonely

If only he realized this ship is more than metal

There's friendship in the wiring, and so lonely

If only he realized this ship has many levels

There's pleasure in here hiding, come find it

Don't mind this frame, time has made stranger bedfellows

[...]

Warning: Mothership reporting

This love will be defended at all costs

Do not fuck with it

In claiming a maternal protectiveness over Cargo #2331, the Mothership, too, becomes a fugitive who has broken free of her obligation (read: enslavement) to her corporate overseers. This raises intriguing questions about the affective reaches of abolitionist sentiment, but still the Mothership carries the power in their relationship, as the vehicle of freedom and, of course, the literal life-sustaining environment for Cargo #2331. Even in his putative freedom, Cargo #2331—who never gets to name or re-name himself—is rendered wholly dependent on the Mothership. And he is completely without the hope of family or community, unless we accept the Mothership's assertion that the "frame" does not matter and that this high-tech relationship is an adequate replacement for the human family and community commemorated in Cargo #2331's sorrow songs. Perhaps: after all, as Kodwo Eshun argues in his deeply influential *More Brilliant Than the Sun*, "machines don't distance you from emotions, in fact quite the opposite" (Eshun 002, original emphasis). Perhaps the Mothership's emotional investment in Cargo #2331 can eventually become sufficient.

There is the suggestion that the Mothership and Cargo #2331 reach some kind of agreement which makes their relationship seem more collaborative. By the end of the album, the Mothership, possibly in consultation with Cargo #2331, decides to just keep mov-

¹³ It is intriguing to consider the Mothership and Cargo #2331 as their own hybridized version of Monáe's alter-ego of Cindi Mayweather, the futuristic fugitive rebel android; see English and Kim, "Now We Want Our Funk Cut," Gipson, "Afrofuturism's Musical Princess Janelle Monáe," and Womack 74-76.

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ing away, hoping to find "a better place" somewhere in uncharted space. This ending mirrors Cora's decision to be carried West at the end of *The Underground Railroad*. *Splendor & Misery* returns to the theme of loneliness that framed the introductory song and "All Black" in the album's conclusion. In "A Better Place," the final song on the album, Cargo #2331's perspective is represented in the plaintive singing of: "It's a long way away/ A long way away/ And I'm all alone, alone." Thus, in this moment, at least, the Mothership does not yet seem to be fully adequate for Cargo #2331's needs; the Mothership bridges neither distance nor emotional support for Cargo #2331. And much like Cora does with her vague sense of heading westward, Cargo #2331 and the Mothership gamble on something utterly unknown, with no guarantee that they will find either freedom or happiness:

Set a course

It's a bet upon an endless Roulette
wheel

Odds are ungodly

As are the odds of the body

Making it through and surviving the
gravity shift

[...]

There must be

A better place... ("A Better Place")

It is important to note here the dogged uncertainty embedded in the refrain: "there must be a better place" indicates no sense of surety, as "there is a better place" would. Not only that, but the Mothership expresses strong doubts that Cargo #2331 can survive their journey. Cargo #2331's final subject position, at the end of the album, as one who is "missing where the air tastes gritty/ The splendor and misery/ Of cities/ Of bodies, of being missed" seems to indicate a permanent liminal state for Cargo #2331: forever severed from his human community (there is no one left alive to miss him, per the Mothership's implication) and forever severed from actually escaping from space, as the Mothership "set up a random course away from suns" ("A Better Place"). This seems like a regression to what Ruth Mayer has argued is represented by the Middle Passage in an earlier generation of slavery narratives: "the fantasy spaces in-between and nowhere at all, spaces that present themselves as mixed-up, ambivalent, floating" (Mayer 556). There is no future here, as even the industrial future's grandest hopes in the form of a sentient spaceship with faster-than-light capabilities signal failure by every metric: failure to perform as programmed (as a slave ship); failure to definitively deliver "a better place" to the cargo for whom it has developed feelings; failure to even chart a definitive new course to something rather than merely "away." The Mothership may have helped a rebellious slave escape, but now they're going nowhere fast, nowhere tangible. The frontier, here, is fully de-romanticized, and Cargo #2331's own

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insufficient identity is constantly cast into doubt by the song's suggestions that he will "be somebody else." But who? And where? Without answers—without a locatable future in a fixed place—the older Afrofuturist escapist fantasy of finding another place in space sours slightly. Much like Whitehead's novel, this narrative, too, condemns the places that participated in the institution of slavery but seems skeptical that other locations free from slavery can actually be found.

Conclusion

Afrofuturism is clearly a term and a concept that is ever in flux, always evolving: the cultural productions that are considered Afrofuturist seem to be held together with only the loosest set of parameters, as suggested at the start of this article. In probing the Afrofuturist hopes of technological mastery, *The Underground Railroad* and *Splendor & Misery* both offer anti-triumphalist emancipation narratives. As in the lived experience of the freedmen after the Civil War, no 40 acres and a mule, to say anything of other significant reparations, were offered to either Cora or Cargo #2331. In a challenge to the Afrofuturist emphasis on technological mastery, the ex-slaves' travels require an abdication of technological control in favor of passivity. Moreover, each journey posits that truly free Black communities are still prone to failure or wholly unreachable. Taken together, their narratives become a powerful joint indictment of our current political climate, with its longstanding amnesia about the technological and institutional ills of

slavery as well as its continuation influence upon Jim Crow, segregation, and the newest incarnations of white supremacy in the "Alt-Right."

Splendor & Misery and *The Underground Railroad* approach the technological future with a more measured enthusiasm; they ask us to perhaps slow down on the posthuman bandwagon and the heady possibilities of the future and to instead spend more time recalling the lonely toll on the human body that any hope of emancipation requires. The technology, in each of these works, is ultimately of far less importance than the unrelenting reminders of the need for connection, of a partner for one's journey—especially the pragmatic realization of making the best of the partner you find, rather than the partner you love and miss. We are left trying to find satisfaction in the alliances formed by Cora and Ollie and Cargo #2331 and the Mothership. If you "can't go back home/ 'cause [you] want to be free," then you must keep taking your home with you, in the form of a vehicle and co-traveler. In order to fully access future liberation, these works suggest that we need to reject our longstanding faith that property ownership offers security; certainly, American history shows us that this has never been the case for Black (and other non-white) lives. More broadly, these narratives are valuable for asking audiences to accept uncertainty and movement; to no longer see constant exodus as dystopian even if it is disappointing. Home cannot be material, and so technology serves best when it provides a pathway to relationships, unexpected



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or non-normative as they may be. To truly embrace the future, space—without any hope of place—must become adequate. As Tracy K. Smith writes in her poem "Sci-Fi," which opens her evocatively Afrofuturist collection, *Life on Mars*: "Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift/ In the haze of space, which will be, once,// And for all, scrutable and safe" (Smith 7).

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