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The Author of a Fictional Slave Advertisement

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Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* presents the reader with a pairing of both fact and fiction. Throughout the chapters, the audience follows the fictional character Cora as she flees her bondage on Randall's Georgia plantation. As she runs, she enlists the help of the underground railroad, a historical group that helped to ferry slaves northward. In the novel, Whitehead's interpretation of the underground railroad replaces the houses of friendly whites with secret train stations and rails. Yet, one continuous historical aspect of the story is the inclusion of digitalized slave ads. In the novel, chapters named after states begin with said ads. All, except for Cora's poster — which is signatureless and fictional — are historical. While appearing to be authorless, Whitehead informs his reader, through the writerly text, of the originator of the fictional document. I argue that the author of Cora's runaway slave advertisement in the final chapter of *The Underground Railroad*, titled "The North," was written by Ridgeway's former companion, Homer.

Before the analysis of the ad's text begins, it is important to understand Homer's character, for it provides definitive proof that only he could have written Cora's ad. In the chapter titled "South Carolina," the reader is introduced to him as "a little colored boy, about ten years old, [driving] a wagon up the street through the crowd..." (191). In the chapter "Tennessee," Homer is further explained as being a former slave who was freed by Ridgeway. The slave catcher states that "[he] bought [Homer] for five dollars and drew up emancipation papers the next day" (206). When Cora questions Homer's decision to stay with Ridgeway after being freed, Ridgeway responds, "a black boy has no future, free papers or no" (207). He further states that "with me, he can learn about the world" (207). Ridgeway's comments regarding Homer provides an understanding of Ridgeway's racial bias. When the slave catcher refers to Homer as "black boy," he demonstrates that he sees Homer as a non-equal. Moreover, Ridgeway's comment of "with me" — which refers to him being a white male — "he can learn" notifies the reader that if a black individual wishes to be successful in the novel's America, they must be controlled by a white man. Finally, the repetition of the word "no" creates a negative, dead-ended view towards life that awaits everyone who is not white in America. Sadly, this sentiment embeds itself in Homer's character, as he

willingly helps Ridgeway track down and deliver escaped slaves to their masters.

Being employed by Ridgeway, Homer arguably exhibits a superior understanding of the slave-capturing business. Homer would additionally understand the importance of spreading information to the masses through slave posters. Using the historical ads on pages 10, 86, 144, 202, and 242 as examples, the reader realizes that masters would publicly post advertisements asking for the location or capture of their runaway slaves. In addition, on page 206, the reader learns that Ridgeway has helped Homer with his reading and writing, which is most notably confirmed on page 309 when the boy records the dying thoughts of Ridgeway. With his familiarity with slave-catching and writing, these experiences would manifest themselves in Cora's ad. Homer knows that to catch a slave, he would need to publish an advertisement, entailing that Homer possesses the necessary background to be the author of the ad for Cora.

Given that Homer has the necessary skills to write the ad about Cora, he also has the experience of dictating a poster about the runaway slave girl. As previously stated on page 206, Homer was both freed and employed by Ridgeway. Homer's freedom is essential and establishes a connection to Cora, which presents itself in two specific instances of the advertisement's text. The relation between Cora and Homer, in the sentences, "RAN AWAY from her legal but not rightful master fifteen months past..." (304), and "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY" (304), indicates that Homer is writing Cora's ad. Upon close analysis of the first quote, a connection between Cora's situation with her "master" and Homer's freedom can be made. In the chapter "Georgia," the reader indirectly learns from the writerly text that James Randall was Cora's master. On page 25, Connelly, an overseer on the Randall plantation, is introduced as commanding Cora to find a husband. Later, the reader realizes that James Randall left "the daily operations to his man Connelly" (30). Since James allowed Connelly to run his "daily operations," and Connelly had power over Cora, James thus is Cora's master too. After James' death on page 43, his brother Terrance assumes control over the plantation. (p 47). Upon Cora's capture, Ridgeway informs her that "[her] master is dead" and that "I don't know if the current master of Randall will pay your reward." (307). Ridgeway's reference to Terrance as "the new master of Randall" reveals that he sees Cora as masterless. Likewise, Homer, who is free but employed in a servant-like manner, most likely cannot differentiate between his experiences and Cora's due to his young age. Therefore, he sees Cora as belonging to Terrance in a "legal" fashion, although he is not her "rightful" master. Moreover, Homer's belief that both he and Cora share an experience could present itself in the second quote. Because of his freedom and "masterless" environment, his experience transposes itself on Cora, resulting in the line, "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY" (304).

It is important to mention here that although one may argue that Cora has written this ad, Cora has reflected that “she had not been [Terrance’s] and now she was his. Or she had always been his and just now knew about it” (48). The repetition of the word “his” when Cora is contemplating her situation subtly demonstrates to the reader that Cora is a slave. Additionally, Cora questions whether she was just now “[Terrance’s]” or if he had always been in control. Nevertheless, Cora understands that Terrance is her legal master and that she is a slave. Since Cora knows she is a slave, the author would need to be an individual outside of the Randall plantation who would not know that Cora saw herself as property. As a result, the only person with that experience is Homer.

Since Cora did not write this ad, it is critical to explain that Terrance Randall — another possible author — had no hand in the advertisement for his runaway slave. Once again, using the historical ads on pages 10, 86, 144, 202, and 242, the reader is presented with two common aspects in the texts’ language: a signature and the names of the masters who are missing slaves. The five inscriptions are of “*W. M. DIXON*” (10), “*BENJI. P. WELLS*” (86), “*RIGDON BANKS*” (144), “*JOHN DARK*” (202), and “*JAMES AYKROYD*” (242). Each poster additionally includes the names of “Mrs. Steel’s plantation” (10), “L.B. Pearce, Esq.” (242), and “William M. Heritage” (242). Whenever the master’s name is not directly indicated in the text, the author uses the word “subscriber” (10, 144, 202) to refer to them. Historically, the inclusion of the master’s name was important for slave catchers and citizens reporting on the whereabouts of the missing individuals. In an age without mass media, a name and location were necessary if the master wanted to have their property returned.

In contrast, Cora’s ad presents no similarities to the historical examples. Other than the opening line of, “RAN AWAY from her legal but not rightful master...” (304), there is no mention of Terrance Randall. Moreover, the ad is signatureless, only stating “*December 23*” (304). Given that there is no information on the location of the Randall plantation, a signature with a name, or mention of Terrance Randall, the reader can see that the plantation owner did not write this ad. If he did, he would have—following the five historical examples presented in the novel — included his location for a more straightforward return of Cora. Subsequently, the only person who could have written this ad is Homer. The poster contains specific details that only a person in close contact with Cora would understand. Homer is that individual since he is the only living character who spent enough time with Cora to understand her character well enough to write the advertisement properly.

The next textual evidence to suggest that Homer is the ad’s author is the line, “possessed of a spirited nature and devious method” (304). As Homer, Cora, and Ridgeway are traveling through Tennessee, Ridgeway informs Cora that “you absconded for ten months...Insult enough. You and your mother are

a line that needs to be extinguished” (226). In a twisted and racist manner, Ridgeway compliments Cora and her mother, Mabel, for escaping capture for an extended period of time. Although Ridgeway appears to be angered, he further reflects that “people like you and your mother are the best of your race” (227). Although he is clearly racist, he believes that the two women are still cunning, and therefore are a danger to white society. He states “we [white men] can’t have you too clever...[and] so fit [that] you outrun us” (227). Due to Ridgeway’s warped respect for Cora, Homer adopted a similar mentality. The boy further learns of Cora’s “devious methods” when she tackles Ridgeway, forcing the pair to fall down a set of stairs as she initiates an eventually successful plan of escape (308-309). Since Homer learned from Ridgeway and experienced Cora’s skillfulness firsthand, he best understands her skillfulness when it comes to avoiding capture. Thus, only Homer possesses the experience to reflect Cora’s nature truthfully in the advertisement.

The concluding evidence for the argument that Homer is the author of Cora’s ad is the line, “last seen in Indiana among the outlaws of John Valentine Farm” (304). The term “outlaws” directly relates to Ridgeway’s racial ideals. In his job of catching slave fugitives, he views individuals like Cora as being dangerous. This further implies that Ridgeway views those who assisted runaways as dangerous criminals too. A fantastic example of Ridgeway’s sentiment towards the people who help slaves escape is during his discovery of the underground railroad. Whitehead describes Ridgeway as “[not] the first white man to see the underground railroad, but the first enemy” (308). Ridgeway, being considered an “enemy,” indicates that he views the other “whites” as “outlaws” or “enemies.” With Homer’s extended exposure to Ridgeway’s worldview, he would eventually share the same ideas. This is actively demonstrated in Homer’s use of the word “outlaws.” The boy views Valentine — who runs a farm for runaway slaves — as a criminal, since he harbors fugitives from the law. Upon raiding the farm, Ridgeway and Homer recapture Cora; however, the girl escapes, fleeing down a tunnel, leaving the dying Ridgeway and attending Homer behind (309).

Since she escapes, Homer becomes the last person to see Cora in Indiana, specifically on Valentine’s farm. Once again, Cora’s presence in Indiana can be interpreted as evidence for her writing the ad. However, Cora does not see Valentine as an “outlaw,” but rather a person who granted her “unlikely [gifts]...after all her prisons” (246). Therefore, she cannot be the author of the ad since she does not view Valentine as a lawless individual. Likewise, while Ollie, one of the westward-bound travelers mentioned at the novel’s end, may appear to know that Cora was in Indiana, the text fails to state where the two meet, implying that it is not Indiana. Furthermore, Cora mentions to Ollie that she “was [from] Georgia” (313), and not Indiana. Consequently, the only person who can definitively say that Cora was in

Indiana is Homer, providing concrete evidence that only he can be the author of this ad.

Therefore, Homer is the only one in the novel with enough information to write this advertisement. He was the last one with Cora before she disappeared. He knows she is skilled at eluding capture. He understands that he is free and not property; thus, he sees the masterless Cora as not being property, although she still belongs to a master. Finally, his literacy and employment in the slave-catching business provided him with the experience needed to publish this ad. Thus, the only character in the novel, *The Underground Railroad*, with this combined experience is Homer. Therefore, he is the only person who could have written Cora's advertisement.

Bibliography

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