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# “She was never property”: how Colson Whitehead’s “The Underground Railroad” rewrites history

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Mémoire

Présenté pour l'obtention du Grade de

MASTER

« **Métiers de l'Enseignement, de l'Éducation et de la Formation** »

**Mention 2<sup>nd</sup> degré, Professeur des Lycées et Collèges,**

'She was never property': How Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* Rewrites History.

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### *Abstract*

In *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead reimagines the anti-slavery network known as the underground railroad as a real set of trains and tracks to create a vast, adventurous narrative which takes the main character Cora through various American states, evading danger and capture to try and find the community which was denied to her on the plantation where she was born. By reading this work through the lens of the traditional slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative genres, the themes of family and community, literature and history, and the hidden and the visible become prevalent. Family and community are constantly undermined, yet literature offers Cora an escape from the violence that follows each time she believes to have found a home. The importance of literature allows Whitehead to question how American history is represented, and the exploration of what is hidden and visible evokes the denial of racism and slavery in modern-day society. Through these themes, and deft manipulation of genre, time, and place, this novel interrogates American history and offers hopeful visions of a more enlightened future. A pedagogic sequence will demonstrate how the themes of the novel can be used with pupils to develop their understanding of race and Black history in America.

### **Key words :**

The Underground Railroad ; slave narratives ; neo-slave narratives ; family ; community ; literature ; history ; visibility ; denial ; violence ; education.

## Contents

Acknowledgements.....	1
Abstract .....	2
<i>‘She was never property’: How Colson Whitehead’s The Underground Railroad Rewrites History.</i>	
Introduction.....	4
1. The influence of the traditional slave narrative.....	6
1.1 ‘She was Never Property’: Affirming Cora’s Identity.....	7
1.2 ‘Jumping Off the Shelves’: From Literacy to Freedom.....	9
1.3 ‘Freedom was a Community Laboring for Something Lovely and Rare’: Cora’s Search for Family and Community.....	10
2. The Influence of the Neo-slave Narrative.....	18
2.1 Political and Social Influences.....	20
2.2 ‘Truth was a Changing Display’: Questioning Historical Representations.....	21
2.3 ‘Caught Between Two Worlds’: the Hidden and the Visible.....	25
2.4 Moving Between Time and Genre.....	28
Conclusion.....	30
<i>Pedagogic sequence</i> .....	31
Présentation de la Séquence.....	32
Objectifs .....	33
Déroulé de la Séquence .....	34
Exploitation détaillée d’une activité.....	43
Annexes .....	47
Works Cited.....	53

**‘She was never property’: How Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* Rewrites History.**

**Introduction**

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead is a story about an escape from slavery which is at turns thrilling, darkly funny, and deeply harrowing. The novel also portrays tensions at the heart of American society through the themes of family and community, literature and history, and the hidden and the visible. It is influenced by the genres of the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative, and by examining the principal themes of the novel in the context of these genres, it is possible to further appreciate the ways in which the novel questions and reworks the historic and literary traditions of the United States.

*The Underground Railroad* was published in 2016 to great critical acclaim. The novel won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award amongst other literary prizes, was endorsed by Barack Obama, and was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for her high-profile Book Club. Whitehead takes the Underground Railroad- which was a network of people who helped others to escape slavery, transporting them across states lines, usually northwards, and assisted them in many ways, mainly during the early nineteenth century- and reimagines it as a subterranean set of trains and tracks, taking the protagonist Cora through different American states as well as various ‘states of possibility’ (Whitehead, NPR) as she escapes from the plantation on which she was born. Cora’s escape is clearly reminiscent of the traditional slave narrative, a genre epitomised by Frederick Douglass’ autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* amongst others. A slave narrative can be defined as an autobiographical narrative written by an author who escaped from slavery,

which was often published with the aim of convincing white readers from Northern states of the horrors of slavery. In James Olney's 1984 work "'I Was Born"; Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature', Olney identifies the 'virtually obligatory figures, scenes, turns of phrase, observances and authentications' (50) which are common to nearly all slave narratives. Whitehead makes a playful reference to this work on slave narratives on page 321 when a member of the underground railroad network uses the pseudonym 'James Olney' when posing as a slave catcher to free jailed former enslaved people, thus making a brief acknowledgement of his reworking and manipulation of features of this genre in the narrative of *The Underground Railroad*. These reworked features include the chronological narrative which follows Cora's journey closely and shares parallels with the slave narrative 'framework' put forward by Olney; the affirmation of her identity despite the oppressive and violent situations she finds herself in; the themes of literacy and freedom which are closely interlinked; and the different forms of family and community which are often under attack.

The theme of family and community being subverted is one feature amongst others which are reminiscent of the genre of the neo-slave narrative. The neo-slave narrative often shares the subject matter and setting of traditional slave narratives, but emphasises primarily the themes of history and memory, amongst other themes identified and summarised by Valerie Smith in the chapter 'Neo-slave narratives' from *The Cambridge Companion to African-American Literature*. Smith draws on the definition and conceptualisation of neo-slave narratives in the critical works of Bernard W. Bell and Ashraf Rushdy, and identifies the following themes:

The challenges of representing trauma and traumatic memories; the legacy of slavery (and other atrocities) for subsequent generations; the interconnectedness of constructions of race and gender; the relationship of the body to memory; the agency of the enslaved; the power of orality and of literacy; the ambiguous role of religion;

the commodification of black bodies and experiences; and the elusive nature of freedom. (168)

These themes are explored in the novel through the undermining of community, which means Cora does not experience any meaningful or safe freedom, as well as through representations of the history of the United States. Whitehead also questions how slavery has traditionally been depicted, by representing a slavery museum in South Carolina, as well as elements of magical realism, including anachronistic features which demonstrate how oppression throughout different time periods cannot be understood individually and also through the underground railroad itself. By depicting a real train in the narrative, Whitehead evokes the power of what is hidden and visible, in historical representations and in American society.

### **1. The influence of the traditional slave narrative**

The form of *The Underground Railroad* can be interpreted as reminiscent of slave narratives, which are described by Olney as a ‘chronological, episodic narrative beginning with an assertion of existence and surrounded by various testimonial evidences for that assertion’ (54). *The Underground Railroad* is narrated in the third person, thus precluding the possibility of starting with the assertion ‘I was born’, which is almost ubiquitous to the beginnings of slave narratives (Olney 52), yet it does begin with a description of Cora’s grandmother’s life from when she was kidnapped into slavery: ‘Dahomeyan raiders kidnapped the men first, then returned to her village the next moon for the women and children, marching them in chains to the sea two by two’ (3), which sets the scene for the chronology of Cora’s story and asserts her existence by anchoring her story within her family history. The influential presence of her ancestors in her life is demonstrated in the first line: ‘The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no. This was her grandmother talking’ (1) and ends:



It was her grandmother talking that Sunday evening when Caesar approached Cora about the underground railroad, and she said no.

Three weeks later she said yes.

This time it was her mother talking. (9)

Cora thus becomes a mouthpiece for her mother's desire to escape as well as having expressed her grandmother's oppression and loss of hope after being continually sold, resold and finally enslaved on the Randall plantation. Ajarry's experience is summarised in the lines: 'To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible' (9) She is both physically restricted by the plantation boundaries, and by the constant transactions during her life as she was sold from slave-owner to slave-owner: 'If you were a thing - a cart or a horse or a slave - your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place' (7). Therefore, Cora's escape is not just a personal victory but also represents the suffering and hopes of several generations, again giving the narrative a sense of chronological progression as it moves forward through the representation of the history of slavery in America, echoing the slave narrative structure which has a clear sense of structure and movement through time.

### **1.1 'She was Never Property': Affirming Cora's Identity.**

Throughout *The Underground Railroad*, Cora's existence and identity is affirmed and uplifted in other ways, despite attempts to kill her or deny her personhood, in the same way that in slave narratives the opening statement 'I was born' or the tagline underneath the title 'Written by himself' would assert the existence of the narrator (Olney 53). One way in which Cora's identity is affirmed is through the use of an advertisement calling for her return on page 356. Advertisements for enslaved people who ran away are placed throughout the novel, and there are five in total- Cora's advertisement is the final one and the only one to

have been invented while the others are genuine historical adverts, from archives classified adverts digitised by the University of North Carolina (Whitehead, NPR). Some of the phrases in the classified adverts seem ironic: ‘Left [...] without any provocation whatsoever’ (284) or ‘has a down look when spoken to’ (238) as they convey how the enslavers so completely refused to acknowledge the humanity of the people they enslaved and were thus bemused by their apparent sadness or decision to run away. In an interview with NPR in 2016, Whitehead comments on the banality of evil demonstrated by these adverts, comparing them to adverts for ‘a lost cat in a laundromat’. The everyday quality of the classified adverts is in contrast with the horrifying punishments which awaited the runaways if they were captured or returned, for example when Big Anthony of the Randall plantation is ‘whipped [...] doused with oil and roasted’ in front of a white audience who eat their dinner in front of the spectacle (54-55). The advert for Cora contains the phrases: ‘her legal but not rightful master’ (356) and:

She has stopped running.

Reward remains unclaimed.

SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY. (356)

This reimagining of the advert not only affirms Cora’s identity outside of being enslaved and accords her character the freedom she was denied, as was the purpose of slave narratives, but also enters into a dialogue with documents from the past, manipulating them and changing the viewer’s perspective in order to demonstrate the possibility of a different representation of history, which is further explored in elements of the narrative which take inspiration from neo-slave narratives.

The notion of identity is one of three prevalent themes of slave narratives alongside literacy and freedom (which are, according to Olney, sub-themes of the social theme of ‘the reality of

slavery and the necessity of abolishing it'). The themes of literacy and freedom are also developed extensively throughout *The Underground Railroad*.

## **1.2 'Jumping Off the Shelves': From Literacy to Freedom**

The significance of literacy is most clearly illustrated in the chapter detailing Cora's experience at Valentine Farm. The extensive library belonging to Valentine, the farm's founder is representative of the rich and peaceful future that Cora could experience as a free woman: 'They were stories of all the coloured people she had ever known, the stories of black people yet to be born, the foundations of their triumphs' (327). In this sentence the past moves seamlessly into the future, as the stories of 'Africans who had been stolen, torn from their homes and families' (327) both remind Cora of her own past, and allow her to imagine a more hopeful future. The awe that all of these books inspire in her is clear: 'The farm's carpenters were true artisans-they had to be to keep all those books from jumping off the shelves, so many wonders did they contain' (327). The books almost seem to come alive because they contain so much novelty and represent so much of the world. This passage conveys optimism on a personal level for Cora, as well as an optimism for American society, that it could change for the better, and this is conveyed through the reflection that 'She'd have to get started if she was going to get through them all' (327). This optimism represents the comfort and safety she experiences on the farm. A passing teamster states that the library must be 'a big pile of black powder' (326) referencing the belief held that it would be dangerous to allow enslaved people to read as it might lead them to organise themselves and overthrow their enslavers. Literacy thus being acknowledged as a weapon to fight against the systems of slavery and upset political order means that this library is especially powerful. The abundance of books is in contrast with the almanacs that sustained Cora when she hid in the North Carolina attic – the almanacs were 'obsolete', containing 'last year's weather', yet like the library they also offered hope for a different life: Cora 'adored [them] for containing the

entire world' (220). While they represent different forms of literature, both the almanacs and the Valentine library are symbolic of a more hopeful future for Cora and an opportunity to escape her reality.

The Valentine Farm is also where Cora learns to write. As described in Michael Feith's article 'Tracking the Slave Narrative in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*', as Cora learns to read and write this 'shifts the cursor closer to the original slave narratives' (Feith 154), so while it perhaps is not conceivable that she is the narrator of *The Underground Railroad* as Feith suggests, one can imagine that Cora may one day write down her story. The narrative is shaped by Cora's perspective through, the use of internal focalisation in the chapters in which Cora is the protagonist (the chapters entitled 'Georgia' (11), South Carolina (99), 'North Carolina (169), 'Tennessee' (237), 'Indiana'(283) and 'The North'(355)) giving the reader access to Cora's inner thoughts which are often described with striking metaphors, for example on page thirty-four: 'Cora did not move..[...] She shrank from the idea of loosening the leash on herself'. This gives the novel the confessional style of a slave narrative written in the first person with vivid imagery, which conveys how the themes of literacy and freedom are intertwined, as the symbolic language conveys how Cora is able to take control of her own narrative. Literacy thus comes to represent freedom, as do the ideas of family and community.

### **1.3 'Freedom was a Community Laboring for Something Lovely and Rare': Cora's Search for Family and Community**

The significance of the notions of family and community and how they were undermined is explored in Brenda E. Stevenson's chapter 'Family and Community in Slave Narratives' in *The Oxford Handbook of the African American Slave Narrative*, through the analysis of many works written by former enslaved people as well as interviews with people who had experienced slavery from the 1930s Works Progress Administration. Stevenson

states that ideals of belonging or support were often ‘impossible to realize and certainly, if ever realized fully, difficult to sustain’ due to the ‘violent oppression imposed by owners, overseers, drivers, slave traders, and southern law’ (288) Harriet Jacob’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is a significant example, as Jacobs presents her family as a solace and a comfort, for example when describing her grandmother: ‘We longed for a home like hers. There we always found sweet balsam for our troubles. She was so loving, so sympathizing!’ (Jacobs, 13), yet she is repeatedly separated from her family members as her enslaver attempts to isolate her, and a whole chapter is devoted to the traumatic separations of families during the New Year’s Day ‘Hiring Day’ in the South: ‘[the slave mother]sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns’ (12). Family is thus presented as a source of comfort to the enslaved which is nevertheless precarious and easily destroyed. This difficulty in establishing meaningful familial or community relationships is also explored extensively through *The Underground Railroad*.

The importance of Cora’s family is immediately clear, when her decision to run away with Ceasar is presented as due to the influence of her mother, while her initial hesitation was due to the influence of her grandmother (9). Throughout the novel, while community and family are presented as notions that would represent stability and belonging for Cora, she is constantly precluded from finding any lasting sense of community, and the family – both Cora’s family and white families with whom she comes into contact – becomes a site of rupture and violence.

The loss of her mother, whom she believes to have run away, affects Cora deeply, and the sentence ‘When Mabel vanished Cora became a stray’ on page seventeen demonstrates how it completely changed her identity and place among the enslaved society of the plantation, through the verb ‘became.’ As a ‘stray’, she is ignored by others and sent to live in

the 'Hob' cabin which is reserved to outcasts: 'Off to Hob with those who had been crippled by the overseer's punishments, off to Hob with those who had been broken by the labor in ways you could see and in ways you could not see, off to Hob with those who had lost their wits. Off to Hob with strays' (19), reflecting her sense of emotional abandonment by this physical isolation.

Cora develops a hatred for her mother stemming from the resentment she feels at being abandoned: 'How she hated her. The nights without number she spent up in that miserable loft, tossing about, kicking the woman next to her, devising ways off the plantation.' (117) Being enslaved thus deprives her of a relationship with her mother, a loss which becomes more profound through comparison with other maternal relationships portrayed in the novel, such as the displays of affection between Lovey and her mother: [Lovey's] mother, Jeer, had been born in Africa and loved to tell her daughter and her friends stories of her childhood in a small village by a river [...] Despite her torments, she was always tender to her girls [...] (69) and between Sybil and Molly on Valentine farm: 'The silent theatre of Sybil and Molly's love moved her always. The way the child asked for assistance without speaking and the mother pointed, nodded, and pantomimed her child out of a fix' (291).

Despite being designated a 'stray' at the start of the narrative, Cora finds various communities throughout the novel, which can constitute a sort of surrogate family, but they are nearly always undermined by white violence. For example, on the Randall plantation, Jockey's birthday party offers a moment of community between the enslaved people which offers them respite from their reality:

When the music started and the dancing commenced, they appreciated the extent of their gratitude for Jockey. He had been attuned to a shared tension, a communal apprehension beyond the routine facts of their bondage. It had built up. The last few

hours had dispelled much of the ill feeling. They could face the morning toil and the following mornings and the long days with their spirits replenished, however meagerly, by a fond night to look back on and the next birthday feast to look forward to. By making a circle of themselves that separated the human spirits within from the degradation without. (33)

The celebration thus offers a release and creates an exchange that brings the enslaved people of the plantation closer together, as portrayed in the image of them 'making a circle of themselves'. However, the brevity of this moment is juxtaposed with the repetitive nature of life on the plantation, emphasised by the polysyndeton in the list: 'the morning toil and the following mornings and long days'. The party is violently interrupted when the two Randall brothers make an appearance and Terrance Randall, who oversees the Southern quarter, asks to hear another song and see the enslaved people of the Northern quarter dance. Chester, a young boy with whom Cora is friendly, accidentally bumps into Terrance Randall, making him spill some wine on his shirt. When she sees Terrance beating Chester as punishment, Cora is overcome with a 'spell' that comes over her and 'before the slave part of her caught up with the human part of her, she was bent over the boy's body like a shield' (40). For this transgression she is struck by Terrance Randall's cane, and later she is whipped by the overseer (43-44). Therefore, the brief respite and sense of togetherness that the party represented is quickly destroyed by the display of bloody violence and injustice when the young boy and Cora are punished, demonstrating that there can be no meaningful sense of escape or safety on the plantation.

Cora again experiences a false sense of safety and community in the chapter entitled 'South Carolina'. She lives in a boarding house with other young black women and is able to earn money and socialise, yet this is later revealed to be a false freedom which has been manufactured by the white authorities who wish to control the Black population (149). The

scene during which Cora and Ceasar attend a social dance conveys the happiness and comfort they first experience there:

It was a beautiful night. As promised the musicians were very talented and played the rags that made everyone happy at previous socials. [...] The audience contributed dances from their own plantations and copied each other in the circles. The breeze cooled them when they broke away to rest and flirt. Then they started in again, laughing and clapping hands (125).

This scene conveys an easy coexistence of people who share laughter and enthusiasm during the dance. Yet the music and dancing evoke the scene of Jockey's birthday party at the Randall plantation, which was violently disturbed by the slave owners. Therefore, while Cora and Caesar start to feel happy and relaxed enough in South Carolina to decide to stay there: 'Three trains had passed through since the pair arrive. [...] They stayed. Maybe the next one' (124), the celebratory scene has foreboding undertones.

This sense of foreboding is confirmed when Cora learns the white doctors of the town are carrying out unethical experiments and forcing sterilisation upon the Black population. This completely changes how she perceives her environment: 'The women were still being herded and domesticated. Not pure merchandise as formerly but livestock: bred, neutered. Pinned in dormitories that were like coops or hutches' (149). The illusion of freedom is revealed to be just another form of a controlled existence, where Cora, Caesar and the other Black people are forced to exist in servitude to a controlling white upper class.

Notions of community and exchange are similarly undermined during Cora's stay at the Valentine Farm. As Royal, who rescued Cora and later becomes her lover, tells Cora, the farm was established by John and Gloria Valentine, and it became a station on the underground railroad, then later a collective farm where people fleeing slavery could stay and



‘contribute’ (316). It is presented as a place of peace and fruitful exchange, illustrated on page 325 when Cora appreciates the difference between working at the farm and the Randall plantation:

A beautiful soul like Caesar could be anything he wanted here, all of them could be: own a spread, be a schoolteacher, fight for colored rights. Even be a poet. In her Georgia misery she had pictured freedom and it had not looked like this. Freedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare.

The farm is thus a place of safety where people can flourish and live to their full potential. It represents freedom itself. However, from Cora’s arrival at the farm it is clear that it is coming under threat from various sources of white violence. The inhabitants of the farm start to experience resentment and harassment from the white people living in the nearby town: ‘Last week a feed store hung a shingle saying WHITES ONLY – a nightmare reaching up from the South to claim them’ (330) and ‘Last spring, two catchers appeared with a warrant to search every house on the farm. Their quarry was long gone but the reminder of the slave patrols exposed the precarious nature of the residents’ lives’ (331). These examples demonstrate that even though the farm is geographically and ideologically far removed from the plantations of the South, the same patterns of cruelty and oppression are manifest by the white population, and the violence of slavery reaches them in more insidious ways. Ultimately, the farm is destroyed by a ‘white posse’ (343), people shot and the buildings set on fire: ‘then came a chorus of rifle fire, screams, and broken glass, and a mad scramble overtook the meeting hall’ (343). The destruction of this seemingly utopian community represents how even in states without legally enforced slavery or segregation, there is still white violence and racism which prohibits the possibility of a truly peaceful existence for Black Americans.

The notion of family is also undermined through the presentation of the white family as a site of violence and cruelty. The reader learns that Caesar was sold to the Randall plantation after having grown up with his parents in the home of the white woman, Mrs Garner, who enslaved them. Mrs Garner treated him and his family maternally and let them have a certain amount of freedom: 'Mrs Garner helped in her own way, teaching her slaves their letters so they could receive the word of God with their own eyes. She was liberal with passes, allowing Caesar and his family to range across the country as they pleased' (58). Despite these degrees of intellectual and physical freedom, when she dies they learn that she had not made any provision to emancipate them as she had promised (58). For Caesar, her kindness accentuates the feeling of betrayal when he is eventually sold with his parents: 'The old woman had destroyed his family so thoroughly it couldn't be accidental. It wasn't her niece's greed- the old woman had played a trick on them the whole time. Tightening the knots every time she held Caesar in her lap and taught him a word' (280). Thus, while Mrs Garner represented a 'kind' slave owner, in contrast with the Randall brothers who run the plantation, it is revealed that her power over them always placed them in danger.

The white family is further represented as being a space of exploitation and abuse through the family of Ethel, the wife of the North Carolina station master. Ethel is a white woman unhappily married to Martin, a feed shop owner who unwillingly inherits the North Carolina branch of the Underground Railroad from his father. Ethel is horrified to find that Martin agreed to hide Cora in the crawlspace of their attic after she arrived unexpectedly at the underground station. After Cora, Ethel and Martin are captured by patrollers, a chapter entitled 'Ethel' describes her childhood in more detail. As a child, she played 'missionary and native' (229) with Jasmine, the girl of Ethel's age enslaved by her family, which allowed her to act out a fantasy of going to Africa to be praised and worshipped by Africans: 'And then the village, where the natives receive her as an emissary of the Lord, an instrument of

civilisation' (229). Their relationship thus resembles a microcosm of European and North American colonialism in Africa, conveying the how ideas of white supremacy were not just present at all levels of North American society, but also inextricable from the wider historical context.

After a few years, Ethel realises that her father goes regularly up to Jasmine's room at night, and the reader understands that he rapes her. When Ethel asks him for an explanation, he replies in euphemistic terms:

"Going upstairs," he said, and they both experienced a strange relief now they had a term for his nocturnal visits. He was going upstairs—where else did the stairs lead? Her father had given one explanation for the separation of the races in fratricidal punishment. His nighttime trips elaborated on the arrangement. Whites lived downstairs and blacks lived upstairs, and to bridge that separation was to heal a biblical wound. (231)

Similarly euphemistic language is used to explain Ethel's discomfort when she sees Jasmine's son years later: 'His face was a dark mirror' (233). These instances demonstrate how language is employed by Ethel's father and then by Ethel herself in order to dehumanise the enslaved and justify their suffering.

The sexual abuse of Jasmine takes place at the heart of the house and can be compared with the abuse from her older male enslaver that Harriet Jacobs suffers in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The narrator states that when she turned fifteen, 'My master began to whisper foul words in my ear' (23). The perversion of a paternalistic relationship is evident as it is in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, as Jasmine was previously 'like a sister' to Ethel. This passage also evokes parallels with Martin visiting Cora in the attic and Ethel bringing her downstairs to mind her when she falls ill.

When the girl got sick, the moment Ethel awaited for so long had finally arrived. In the end she had not gone to Africa, Africa had come to her. Ethel went upstairs, as her father had done, to confront the stranger who lived in her house as family. The girl lay on the sheets, curved like a primeval river. She cleaned the girl, washing her filth from her. She kissed the girl on her forehead and neck in her restless slumber with two kinds of feeling mixed up in those kisses. (234-235)

Ethel takes advantage of Cora in the same way her father exerted his power over Jasmine, albeit less violently. The use of free indirect discourse as the narrative perspective shifts to Ethel in this chapter also communicates how Cora comes under Ethel's control, emphasising the loss of her voice and identity. Her body is fetishised by Ethel: the phrase 'curved like a primeval river' demonstrates how her body comes to represent all of Ethel's ideas about Africa.

## **2. The Influence of the Neo-slave Narrative.**

The subversion of traditional values associated with the family can also be identified as an important theme in the genre of the neo-slave narrative. *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, while a work which defies simple categorisation, can be read as a neo-slave narrative demonstrating how slavery destroys the bonds between a mother and her family, in the case of her character Sethe and her four children, inspired by the real-life story of Margaret Garner, a woman who escaped from slavery into Cincinnati with her four children in 1856 but was found by slave owners several years later. She attempted to kill all of her children to protect them from being enslaved, and while three of them survived with injuries, one of her young daughters died after Garner cut her throat. Garner was tried for murder and later returned with her children to a Kentucky slave owner, before being sold again to a slave owner in New Orleans (Wolff). In *Beloved*, Morrison explores how the character of Sethe is

led to such violence through a maternal instinct to protect her children: Sethe states of the daughter she killed: 'She had to be safe and I put her where she would be' (Morrison 200). The abuse and violence of the white slave owners at the farm from which she escapes also subverts the natural order of motherhood when she is raped by the slave owner's sons, and her breast milk taken from her so that she is unable to feed her children (Morrison). Killing her children is the only way Sethe can imagine they would be safe from the pervasive violence and oppression that characterises her own life, which demonstrates how even the structure of the family cannot offer protection or comfort to people who have been enslaved, and this is the case for Cora in *The Underground Railroad*.

*Beloved* is one of the most eminent examples of the neo-slave narrative genre, a genre which is less easily defined than the traditional slave narrative. The most obvious distinction from the traditional slave narrative is that it is generally a work published in the twentieth or twenty-first century, thus presenting a different perspective on slavery to the traditional slave narratives which were generally written and set while slavery was still practised in Southern states. It is not just the context of writing and publication which varies, however, in general, writers of neo-slave narratives also explore and emphasise Black subjectivity beyond the experience of slavery, often in contrast to traditional slave narratives which were nearly always heavily influenced by white editors and publishers. In Judie Newman's chapter 'Slave Narratives and Neo-Slave Narratives' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South* it is argued that the genre of the slave narrative could consist of a 'majority straitjacket' (26) in which the stories of enslaved people are constrained. Neo-slave narratives thus represent ways in which the genre continues to expand in order to accommodate diverse experiences and stories. In *The Underground Railroad*, the influences of neo-slave narratives can be observed through the narrative's engagement with the social context at the time of its publication, the questioning of history and historical representations, and how it explores the

influence of slavery on present day American society, by exploring the notions of the hidden and the visible and creating a polyphonic narrative which weaves together diverse experiences of slavery.

## **2.1 Political and Social Influences**

The authors of neo-slave narratives can reference and be influenced by political and social movements of their time of writing. For example, Newman underlines Ashraf Rushdy's identification of many neo-slave narratives published during the 1960s which were 'writing back' (28) against the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which contained offensive racial stereotypes, as well as echoing the 'renewed interest in questions of race and power' (28) prevalent during the rise of the Black Power movement and the Black Arts movement during the 1960s. *The Underground Railroad* should thus be considered within its political and social context, at a time when the question of how far slavery should be acknowledged as an influence on American society is frequently raised, notably in the debate around teaching slavery and other racial issues in schools, and the consequences of slavery and racial oppression are being clearly manifested through the Black Lives Matter movement. According to a study detailed in *The New York Times* the topic of slavery is insufficiently addressed in American high schools, leaving students with gaps in their knowledge, or fundamental misunderstandings of slavery and the Civil War (Stewart). The article describes a study led by the educational branch of the Southern Poverty Law Centre in which teachers and students across high schools in America were interviewed and it was found that the textbooks they had at their disposition to teach about slavery often misrepresented the realities of slavery. There has been increased scrutiny over the teaching of slavery with both the Black Lives Matter movement, which became much more present in the public consciousness after the protests over the killing of George Floyd in 2020, encouraging

teachers to address questions of race and racism in the classroom with their students (Thompson, Tulp, Associated Press), and the more recent media debate around the teaching of ‘Critical Race Theory’ in schools. Critical Race Theory is the university-level study of how societal structures such as the legal system can be responsible for perpetuating racism, rather than individual bias. While the extent to which these ideas are actually being taught in schools seems to be somewhat lost in the media debate, as demonstrated in an NBC survey which recorded the responses of teachers explaining that they were not required or inclined to address critical race theory with their students (McCausland), it has sparked a controversy and illuminated the role of teachers and school curricula in addressing social issues such as race and inequality. The difficulty of acknowledging the influence of slavery on American society is not limited to the school curriculum however, and this polarising issue is often in the spotlight, another notable example being the calls to remove statues which honour historical figures who owned slaves or were leaders of the Confederacy for example. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead explores how representations of history can be fractured and twisted, which means that the truth can get lost, after being ‘manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking’ (139). This is especially pertinent as an understanding of slavery is thus essential to fully comprehend the significance of the racial issues which are prevalent in American society today, such as Black Lives Matter and controversy around Critical Race Theory, yet its realities are ignored and denied.

## **2.2 ‘Truth was a Changing Display’: Questioning Historical Representations**

Whitehead’s novel questions and undermines traditional historical narratives, in order to demonstrate a disparity between what is recorded and communicated and how enslaved people lived these experiences, similarly to how Morrison’s *Beloved* reworks and re-represents the story of Margaret Garner from her perspective. In contrast to the emphasis

placed on authenticity and authorship in traditional slave narratives, neo-slave narratives question and undermine these concepts, and draw attention to the ‘instability of the narrative representation of the past’ (Newman). History is portrayed as a flexible and malleable concept, often manipulated by white people to justify the owning of slaves, for example through Ethel’s interpretation of the Bible: “‘It means what it says,’ Ethel said. ‘It means that a Hebrew may not enslave a Hebrew. But the sons of Ham are not of that tribe. They were cursed, with black skin and tails. Where the Scripture condemns slavery, it is not speaking of negro slavery at all’” (219). Cora questions the moral authority of the Bible and tries to debate with Ethel, drawing on her own experiences of slavery and destabilising the Biblical justification by juxtaposing it with the cruelty of the overseers on the Randall plantation: ‘Under the Georgia sun, Connelly had recited verses while scourging field hands for infractions. [...] The slash of the cat-o’-nine-tails punctuating every syllable and a wail from the victim’ (219).

Historical representations are further questioned through the ‘Museum of Natural Wonders’ in South Carolina. Cora works at this museum as a living member of the exhibits, which are designed to show people ‘the rest of the country beyond their small experience, from Florida to Maine to the Western frontier’ (130). The scenes in which Cora discovers the museum exhibits are deeply ironic, again given the stark contrast with the simple and innocuous scenes presented in the museum and the brutal reality that she experienced on the Randall plantation. For example, the birds hung from the ceiling in the ‘Scenes from Darkest Africa’ room remind Cora of ‘the buzzards that chewed the flesh of the plantation dead when they were put on display’ (130). When Cora offers Mr Fields, the museum owner, her ‘critique’ of the unrealistic plantation scene, his reply is given: ‘Would that he could fit an entire field of cotton into the display and had the budget for a dozen actors to work it. One day perhaps.’



(131) which demonstrates a wilful avoidance of the fact that any kind of representation could not effectively portray the experience of the enslaved on such plantations.

At first Cora is not certain of her right to question Mr Field about his exhibits: she does not express her 'numerous suspicious about the accuracy of the African and the ship scenes' (131). The narrative tone changes later in this chapter, when what would have been the reality is clearly and bluntly stated: 'There had been no kidnapped boys swabbing the decks and earning pats on the head from white kidnappers. The enterprising African boy whose fine leather boots she wore would have been chained belowdecks, swabbing his body in his own filth.' (138), ensuring that no doubt remains as to the contrast between reality and Mr Field's wilfully ignorant vision that he shares with the museum visitors. The hypocrisy of historical representations is later represented from Cora's perspective in every-day terms, as on page 139: 'Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren't looking, alluring and ever out of reach.' This metaphor conveys how lies and manipulations seem to be an intrinsic part of her reality, inviting the reader into her world where nothing can be trusted or depended upon. Cora's revelations about the museum exhibit develop further after her conversation with a doctor who suggests that she could be sterilised in order to 'take control over your own destiny' (135). After reflecting on the offer, Cora realises that it is tantamount to stealing her future and stealing the futures of enslaved people: 'because that's what you do when you take away someone's babies-steal their future. Torture them as much as you can on this earth, then take away the hope that one day their people will have it better' (139). Control of the past thus begets control of the future, which allows this section of the narrative to demonstrate how understanding the manipulation of the past is extremely important to ensure a more equitable and enlightened future.

After some time working in the museum, Cora becomes frustrated with the intrusive stares of the museum visitors and demonstrates her agency by staring back and fixing them with the

‘evil eye’ (150). The ‘unwavering and fierce’ (150) regard that she places on certain visitors unnerves and frightens them as she unexpectedly returns their gaze and subverts the dynamic of power between them. By ‘breaking’ these individuals with her stare she reminds them that ‘the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too’ (151), thus challenging the false story that she knows her role as a living exhibit is telling. This small rebellion gives her a sense of optimism: ‘As a community, they were shackles. If she kept at it, chipping away at weak links wherever she found them, it might add up to something’ (150-151). In this passage, Cora’s subjectivity is emphasised, which is in contrast to historical representations of slavery where the perspective of the enslaved is absent or severely limited, or traditional slave narratives for example, where the narrator was obliged to ‘maintain that he exercises a clear-glass, neutral memory that is neither creative nor faulty’ (Olney 49) at the risk of white readers dismissing their work, thus restricting their self-expression.

Whitehead further explores historical representations by incorporating fantastical and anachronistic elements into the narrative, such as the skyscraper and the medical experiments that Cora and Caesar discover in South Carolina, as well as the physical railroad itself. The decision to introduce elements which were not accurate to the historical setting of the novel stemmed from his choice to make the railroad a physical train, as he states in a 2016 interview with NPR:

Yeah. I think, you know, once I made the choice to make a literal underground railroad, you know, it freed me up to play with time a bit more. And so, in general, you know, the technology, culture and speech is from the year 1850. That was my sort of mental cutoff for technology and slang. But it allowed me to bring in things that didn't happen in 1850 – skyscrapers, aspects of the eugenics movement, forced sterilization and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. And it's all presented sort of matter-of-factly...

Chronology is therefore manipulated in the narrative in order to mix together precise historical representations and imagined elements of society, thus juxtaposing diverse and changing attitudes and policies around slavery and race in the United States. The railroad allows Cora to move not only between geographical states but also between different visions of America. This implies that a faithful, linear historical representation could not convey the vast landscape of experiences of slavery in America, and neither would it convey the importance of recognising these diverse experiences in order to understand American society today.

### **2.3 ‘Caught Between Two Worlds’: the Hidden and the Visible.**

The railroad also embodies the relationship between the hidden and the visible, and this theme leads the reader to consider the place of slavery in American society and history. Throughout the narrative the railroad is an invisible presence yet spoken about and known about by the enslaved and enslavers. Before Caesar and Cora escape, they hear about it through word of mouth:

It was commonly held that the underground railroad did not operate this far south, Fletcher told him. Caesar already knew this. In Virginia, you could smuggle yourself into Delaware or up the Chesapeake on a barge, evading patrollers and bounty hunters by your wits and the invisible hand of Providence. Or the underground railroad could help you, with its secret trunk lines and mysterious routes. (62-63)

Furthermore, when Ridgeway visits the Randall plantation to apologise for not having captured Cora’s mother he passes on what he has heard about it: ‘The slave catcher shared rumours of a new branch of the underground railroad said to be operating in the southern part of the state, as impossible as that sounded’ (49).

While the underground railroad is underground and out of sight, it exists in the public imagination, offers hope to enslaved people, and threatens the order of plantations and slave-ownership. Moreover, the question of who would have built the railroad is evoked but the answer is never explicitly given: when Cora asks Lumbly, the first railroad operator she meets who built it, he replies: ‘Who builds anything in this country?’ (81). The railroad thus represents the labour of enslaved people which has gone unacknowledged. The use of a physical representation further valorises the contributions of people who helped the enslaved escape from slavery: ‘The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died for them. The station masters and conductors and sympathizers’ (363). This conveys how while the history of the United States is a history of violence and oppression, it is also characterised by resistance and solidarity. The labour of the enslaved is transposed here into a context where it was worthy and helped to liberate others, which thus demonstrates the power of re-interpretations of the past and history to offer hope and inspire action.

Throughout the chapters ‘South Carolina’ and ‘North Carolina’ the place of formerly enslaved people in society is also questioned. In South Carolina their visibility in society depends on how white people choose to acknowledge them, and in North Carolina Cora must remain invisible in order to survive. The different situations are compared directly in this passage:

She had never left the plantation before she and Caesar ran away, so South Carolina gave Cora her first glimpse of the mingling of races in towns and cities. On Main Street, in stores, in factories and offices, in every sector, black and white mixed all day as a matter of course. Human commerce withered without it. In liberty or bondage, the African could not be separated from the American.

In North Carolina the negro race did not exist except at the end of ropes. (187)

While Cora and Caesar can move freely around the South Carolina town where they live, their ability to do so is incumbent on them following the rules of the white authority figures of the town and contributing to the economy. The abrupt one-line sentence echoing the rhetoric of the white authorities in North Carolina conveys the brutal change that Cora experiences. One night during her stay in the attic Martin explains to Cora how the politicians of North Carolina, fearing an insurrection of the nearly three thousand slaves in North Carolina, bought enslaved people from farmers and sold them onto other states, replacing them with Irish immigrants who would work on the cotton plantations. They subsequently banned any black person from setting foot in the state, expelling or killing any free Black people already there who refused to leave (196-198). These people are lynched in a public ceremony then their bodies are strung up as part of the 'Freedom Trail', described as consisting of:

Putrefying bodies, bodies consumed by carrion eaters were constantly replaced but the heading always advanced. Every town of any real size held their Friday Festival, closing with the same grim finale. Some places reserved extra captives in the jail for a fallow week when the night riders returned empty-handed. (199)

The trail of bodies and the festivals are therefore visual and ostentatious representations of subjugation and murder which are designed to scare away black people who may have come into the state or wish to stay, as well as assuaging white fears of insurrections of enslaved people. Their policies rely on a constant message of racial violence and oppression in order to create the illusion of a stable white society. As Cora arrives at the station by chance and is smuggled into Martin's house, she sees the North Carolina town from within, in a place where she is not supposed to be. Her invisibility thus accords her a kind of power, as she

witnesses the lynching ceremonies from afar, up in the attic, and this circumstance gives her a different perspective on the ceremonies: she witnesses them and understands them outside of the context that the townspeople use to justify what they do. On page 212, Cora reflects on the lack of morality of the townspeople: ‘No wonder the whites wandered the park in the growing darkness, Cora thought, her forehead pressed into the wood. They were ghosts themselves, caught between two worlds: the reality of their crimes, and the hereafter denied them for those crimes.’ She is uniquely placed to identify the evil of their actions and their state of denial. This is characteristic of the neo-slave narrative genre, which according to Valerie Babb demonstrate a more ‘multifaceted questioning of moralities affected by the institution of slavery’ (227), interrogating the institution as a whole and the structures which allowed it to take place, rather than simply denouncing individual acts of cruelty by enslavers.

#### **2.4 Moving Between Time and Genre**

The structure of *The Underground Railroad* is also characteristic of the neo-slave narrative genre, as it moves between different narrative perspectives and time periods. Newman evokes the potential of the neo-slave narrative to create a ‘reciprocal cultural conversation between black and white, master and slave, slave narrative and neo-slave narrative, popular and literary writing’ (31), and Whitehead achieves this in this instance among others by presenting the perspectives of different characters, creating a polyphonic effect.

While Cora’s viewpoint is predominant, the use of free indirect discourse between different characters, for a chapter or just a paragraph, creates a collage of different viewpoints representing a broad range of characters with different relationships to slavery. For example, the chapters which convey the interiority of Ridgeway (85-98) or Ethel (227-235), communicate the viewpoints of the characters who are ‘against’ Cora. In the case of

Ridgeway, the banality of his attitude towards his work, and how he sees it primarily as a judicious career choice, is emphasised: ‘The revolts in the West Indies and disquieting incidents closer to home worried the local planters. What clear-thinking white man wouldn’t be worried, slaver or otherwise. The patrols increased in size, as did their mandate. A boy might find a place’ (89). While Ridgeway’s hatred of and violence towards Black people is not diminished or excused, the economic and social factors which lead him to become a ‘slave-catcher’ are equally recognised. As described earlier, the chapter from Ethel’s perspective demonstrates the ways slavery was justified morally by white people, primarily through religion. This once again reflects the capacity of the neo-slave narrative to demonstrate the ‘pervasiveness and complexity of a social system’ (Babb, 218) rather than focusing on individual acts of cruelty.

The narrative also offers the perspectives of minor characters, often at key moments of the narrative, for example, during the attack on the Valentine Farm the narrative temporarily shifts to the future of one of the children:

Mingo’s daughter Amanda shook on her knees, her family absent. Desolate in the dirt. [...] As an old woman she would read about the Great War in Europe and recall this night. She lived on Long Island then, after roaming all over the country, in a small house with a Shinnecock sailor who doted on her to excess. [...] The conflict in Europe was terrible and violent, she told her sailor, but she took exception to the name. The Great War had always been between the white and the black. It always would be. (344)

By widening the perspective at this point and moving forward in time, the narrative voice reminds the reader that these events are situated in a vaster historical timeline, and that they can only be fully understood within this wider context. The details, such as ‘She lived on

Long Island in a small house with a Shinnecock sailor' humanise and dignify the victims of atrocities, honouring, as does the rest of the narrative, the real human lives lost to or damaged by the violence of slavery.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while *The Underground Railroad* makes many references, both overt and implicit, to the genres of the slave narrative and neo-slave narrative, its power rests in its movement through these genres to create a fluid, shifting narrative which interacts with history as it interrogates various representations. While the history that the novel illuminates is violent and bloody, the narrative consistently evokes the hope and humanity that can be found in the telling of these stories. Whitehead's novel demonstrates how one genre, or one character's story, could not be enough to portray the complicated history of slavery in the United States, and the movement between place, time and genre portrays how ideas about race in the United States cannot remain static but must constantly be in motion, interrogated and adjusted. The novel is thus the ideal cultural starting point for a pedagogical sequence that will aim to help students begin to understand the complicated history of race relations in America and appreciate this contemporary literary work of great significance.



## Pedagogic sequence

### **Introduction**

Cette séquence a été conçue à partir des thématiques abordées dans le roman *The Underground Railroad* de Colson Whitehead, notamment l'esclavage aux États-Unis et ses répercussions sur la société américaine d'aujourd'hui. À partir de cette thématique, d'autres documents apportent de différents points de vue et différentes expressions de lutte pour l'égalité et de célébration de la liberté. Les élèves découvriront dans un premier temps plusieurs aspects de l'esclavage et la représentation de celle-ci dans la culture américaine. Dans un deuxième temps ils étudieront les paroles de personnages importants comme Alicia Girza et Amanda Gorman, ce qui leur permettra de construire un discours solide et convaincant sur l'importance de reconnaître l'histoire des afro-américains.

La séquence se destine à une classe de Terminales en option LLCER AMC (langues, littératures et cultures étrangères et régionales – anglais monde contemporain). Le niveau attendu en fin de classe de terminale de cette spécialité est le niveau C1. Les activités langagières prévues dans cette séquence visent donc une progression du niveau B2 vers le C1.

Après une présentation des principaux enjeux de la séquence et des objectifs de la tâche finale, la grille de séquence détaillera le déroulement de chaque étape, avec un plan détaillé de l'étape basée sur *The Underground Railroad*. Les supports de chaque étape se trouvent dans les annexes. Chaque étape peut représenter une séance de deux heures, ou peut être adaptée à une durée qui convient à l'enseignant et le profil du groupe pendant la mise en pratique.

La flexibilité est donc un atout de la séquence, et l'abondance de documents permet la possibilité d'en enlever certains pour laisser place aux autres. Par exemple, l'activité d'analyse des extraits de livre pourrait être développée sur deux ou trois séances. La séquence peut aussi être adaptée pour différents niveaux, la chanson de Cynthia Evro étant un document plus simple qui pourrait être exploité au niveau collège, par exemple.

Plusieurs abréviations sont employées dans la grille de séquence, notamment pour désigner les activités langagières. Leurs significations sont les suivantes :

CE : Compréhension écrite

CO : Compréhension orale

EE : Expression écrite

EO : Expression orale

EOC : Expression orale en continu

EOI : Expression orale en interaction

PRL : Pratique raisonnée de la langue.

## Présentation de la Séquence

**Titre :** Black History Matters.

**Problématique :** What are the consequences of slavery on modern American society?

**Niveau :** Terminale LLCER AMC : B2 vers C1.

**Thématique :** Faire Société.

**Axe d'étude :** Égalités et inégalités.

**Tâche finale :** You are an American high school student and you have been asked to give a speech to the rest of the school for Black History Month. Prepare a three-minute speech about the legacy of slavery and why it is significant today. (EOC)

### Compétences du cadre européen de référence pour les langues (CECRL) visées (C1) :

- **S'adresser à un auditoire :** Peut faire un exposé clair et bien structuré sur un sujet complexe, développant et confirmant ses points de vue assez longuement à l'aide de points secondaires, de justifications et d'exemples pertinents. Peut gérer les objections convenablement, y répondant avec spontanéité et presque sans effort.
- **Compréhension générale de l'écrit :** Peut comprendre dans le détail des textes longs et complexes, qu'ils se rapportent ou non à son domaine, à condition de pouvoir relire les parties difficiles.
- **Lire pour s'informer et discuter :** peut comprendre dans le détail des textes longs et complexes, qu'ils se rapportent ou non à son domaine, à condition de pouvoir relire les parties difficiles.
- **Interaction orale :** Peut s'exprimer avec aisance et spontanéité, presque sans effort. Possède une bonne maîtrise d'un vaste répertoire lexical lui permettant de surmonter facilement des lacunes par des périphrases avec apparemment peu de recherche d'expressions ou de stratégies d'évitement. Seul un sujet conceptuellement difficile est susceptible de gêner le flot naturel et fluide du discours.

**Objectifs**

<b>Citoyens</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprendre l'importance de l'histoire de l'esclavage pour la société américaine contemporaine.</li> <li>• Se mettre à la place d'un élève américain.</li> </ul>
<b>Culturels</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Découvrir les personnages importants de l'histoire des États-Unis.</li> <li>• Prendre conscience de la lutte pour l'égalité raciale aux États-Unis.</li> <li>• Connaître des écrivains, activistes et autres personnages importants de la culture américaine.</li> </ul>
<b>Grammaticaux</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer la voix passive.</li> <li>• Utiliser un langage persuasif.</li> <li>• Repérer le discours indirect et le différencier du discours direct. Employer le discours direct.</li> </ul>
<b>Lexicaux</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Découvrir et utiliser le vocabulaire autour de l'histoire de l'esclavage ; les luttes pour la justice sociale aux différents moments de l'histoire, l'oppression dont les esclaves et les afro-américains ont été victimes, la résistance à cette oppression, la célébration de l'identité afro-américaine.</li> </ul>
<b>Phonologiques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Utiliser le rythme de la phrase et du texte pour capter l'attention de l'auditoire.</li> <li>• Comprendre comment l'emphase sur certains mots peut communiquer le sens d'une phrase.</li> </ul>
<b>Pragmatiques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Donner un discours informatif et persuasif.</li> <li>• Synthétiser et structurer des informations.</li> </ul>
<b>Sociolinguistiques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Écrire un discours.</li> <li>• S'adresser à un public dans un registre soutenu.</li> </ul>

## Déroulé de la Séquence

### Étape 1 :

#### **Supports :**

Image 1 : Un tableau intitulé *The Underground Railroad* de Charles T. Webber, 1893.

Image 2: Un image de l’affiche du film ‘12 Years a Slave’

Image 3 : Photographie d’une manifestation aux États-Unis.

Liste des évènements du début de l’esclavage aux États-Unis à la société moderne.

#### **Objectifs :**

- Cerner les enjeux de la séquence.
- Émettre des hypothèses sur des images.
- Prendre la parole en continu et réagir aux propos de leurs camarades.
- Découvrir les représentations de l’esclavage dans la culture américaine, et les dates clés dans l’histoire des droits des afro-américains.

#### **Activités d’apprentissage :**

1. Accueil des élèves
2. EOI. En groupes de 4, les élèves auront une image par groupe pour émettre des hypothèses, suivant les mots-consignes : ‘Who, What, Where, When Why’.  
Pédagogie différenciée : Une fiche de ‘sentence stems’ pour ceux qui veulent.
3. EOC et EOI. Chaque groupe présente son image. Les contributions des autres élèves suivant les présentations sont ajoutées aux informations sur le tableau.
4. CE et EOI. Distribution de morceaux de papier avec des événements clés à propos de l’esclavage et du mouvement des droits civiques aux États-Unis écrits dessus.  
Jeu en équipe pour les mettre dans l’ordre, avec points bonus pour les groupes qui peuvent suggérer d’autres événements importants.
5. EE. Travail individuel pour créer une carte mentale qui aurait pour titre ‘Black History Matters’ sur l’esclavage et la race aux États-Unis selon la frise chronologique créée ensemble et les documents vus en phase d’anticipation.
6. Conclusion de la séance - présentation de la problématique de la séquence, la tâche finale et des objectifs.

#### **Devoirs ou Evaluations :**

Carte mentale à compléter pour le prochain cours.

## Étape 2 :

### **Supports :**

Vidéo : *The Underground Railroad: On the Road to Freedom* de UntoldEdu.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7M2FAEM3blQ&ab\\_channel=UntoldEdu](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7M2FAEM3blQ&ab_channel=UntoldEdu),  
 jusqu'à 2'00.  
 Fiche de questions de compréhension.

### **Objectifs :**

- Repérer des informations clés d'une vidéo pédagogique.
- Comprendre et utiliser le vocabulaire autour de l'esclavage et de l'abolition.
- Créer une affiche informative.
- Repérer la voix passive et comprendre les raisons de son emploi.
- Employer la voix passive à l'écrit et à l'oral.

### **Activités d'apprentissage :**

1. Vérification des devoirs.
2. Récapitulation de la dernière séance. À partir des images, les élèves produiront des phrases entières pour résumer le dernier cours.
3. EO. Phase d'anticipation : tableau de Webber projeté sur le tableau. Récapitulation des informations écrites su sujet de cette image, et expression des connaissances pré-requises au sujet du 'Underground Railroad'.
4. CO sur une vidéo qui explique le 'Underground Railroad'. Les élèves lieront les mots-clés de la vidéo à leur traduction en français, ils noteront des informations clés sur les personnages principaux de la vidéo et répondront à des questions de compréhension. Ils auront un temps pour partager les réponses en groupes de deux avant un deuxième passage de la vidéo et une phase de correction en classe entière.
5. PRL sur la voix passive : pendant la CO ils doivent identifier les instances de la voix passive. Récapitulation ensemble des emplois différents du passif. Transposition des phrases en voix active vers le passif.
6. EOI, EOC. Discussion en petits groupes puis en classe entière autour de la question : Why is the passive structure used in this video ? pour confirmer que dans cette instance le passif souligne la souffrance des personnes réduites en esclavage.
7. EE : Création d'une affiche informative sur le underground railroad, utilisant les chiffres et vocabulaire de la CO.

**Devoirs ou Evaluations :**

Compléter l'affiche informative.

**Étape 3 :****Supports :**

Trois extraits du livre *The Underground Railroad* de Colson Whitehead.  
Bande-annonce de la série Amazon Prime inspirée du roman.

**Objectifs :**

- Se familiariser avec un ouvrage littéraire contemporain.
- Repérer des informations clés d'un texte.
- Reformuler des citations d'un texte.
- Identifier l'implicite dans un texte littéraire.

**Activités d'apprentissage :**

1. CO, EO. Présentation du livre. Passage de la bande-annonce de la série inspirée du roman, à partir de laquelle les élèves feront des hypothèses sur le contenu du livre. Rapide aperçu des événements clés du livre.
2. CE. Lecture individuelle de l'extrait du livre. Les extraits seront distribués sur des tables différentes et les élèves pourront choisir sur lequel ils veulent travailler, afin d'intégrer une pédagogie différenciée.
3. Les élèves travailleront en groupe pour répondre aux questions de compréhension. Ils auront des dictionnaires uni ou bi-langues à disposition.
4. Chaque groupe présentera son extrait à l'oral au reste du groupe.

**Devoirs ou évaluation :**

- Les élèves se verront attribuer une note individuelle pour leur présentation et leur participation au sein du groupe.

**Étape 4 :****Supports :**

Chanson 'Stand Up' de Cynthia Eviro, du film *Harriet* (2019)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNO40mDaOEY&ab\\_channel=BackLotMusic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNO40mDaOEY&ab_channel=BackLotMusic)

**Objectifs :**

- Découvrir une chanson inspirée par l'histoire des États-Unis.
- Identifier le registre familier et les contractions des verbes.
- Identifier et utiliser le futur proche avec 'going to'.
- Mener une recherche individuelle en utilisant les ressources numériques.

**Activités d'apprentissage :**

1. EOI : Récapitulation à l'oral en groupes de la dernière séance, et mise en commun en classe entière.
2. Première écoute de la chanson sans prendre de notes.
3. CO. Deuxième écoute avec prise de notes guidée par les questions suivantes :  
What words or phrases can you hear?  
What do you think this song is about?
4. EOI : Mise en commun des notes prises et émission de hypothèses sur la chanson et en réponse à la question :  
Who do you think Harriet is? (Think back to our lesson on the Underground Railroad)
5. CO, EE. Troisième écoute, cette fois, les élèves auront devant les yeux les paroles de la chanson sous forme lacunaire. Les mots importants seraient à repérer par les élèves qui complèteront ensuite les paroles de la chanson. Correction collective.
6. PRL sur le futur proche/
7. Explication des devoirs.

**Devoirs ou Evaluations :**

- Cinq phrases à compléter utilisant le futur proche.
- Faire des recherches sur la fête nationale de 'Juneteenth' aux États-Unis.  
Consigne : Find out at least five facts about the 'Juneteenth' holiday in the United States, using the following sites: [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov); [www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org); [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

**Étape 5 :****Supports :**

NPR article : ‘Juneteenth Brings Joy, A New Tubman Museum And Questions Of The Future’.  
21 June 2021.

**Objectifs :**

- Synthétiser des informations et les mettre en relation.
- Lire un texte pour repérer des informations clés.
- Extrapoler le sens d’un texte civilisationnel.
- Repérer et employer le discours indirect, et faire la distinction entre le discours direct et indirect.

**Activités d’apprentissage :**

1. EOI : Récapitulation de la dernière séance en classe entière.
2. EO, EE : Mise en commun des recherches au sujet de Juneteenth : création d’une carte mentale au tableau qui fera partie de la trace écrite.
3. CE : ‘Scanning’ de l’article pour repérer les différents sentiments qui accompagnent la célébration de Juneteenth, et création de deux colonnes : une colonne de sentiments négatifs et une colonne de sentiments positifs, puis scanning pour repérer les différentes informations concernant Harriet Tubman.  
Association des images aux légendes correspondantes.
4. CE. Lecture plus détaillée du texte pour répondre aux questions de compréhension.  
Activité d’extension : trouver un sous-titre pour chaque sous-partie de l’article – l’article peut être divisé en trois sous-parties distinctes.
5. PRL : Les élèves souligneront les instances de discours directe d’une couleur, et les instances de discours indirecte dans une autre couleur. Révision ensemble de comment formuler le discours direct et indirect sur le tableau.
6. Explication des devoirs.

**Devoirs ou Evaluations :**

- Cinq phrases à recopier avec transposition du discours directe vers le discours indirect.
- Travail de recherche à faire à la maison selon la consigne suivante: Find at least one quote from a famous American person that you will be able to use in your final task. Make sure that it is correctly expressed in indirect speech.





**Étape 6 :****Supports :**

Vidéo d'une interview avec Alicia Girza du mouvement Black Lives Matter.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1KoOd0aS0&ab\\_channel=GoldenStateWarriors](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1KoOd0aS0&ab_channel=GoldenStateWarriors)

**Objectifs :**

- S'exprimer et réagir aux propos de ses camarades.
- Synthétiser ses connaissances pré-requises.
- Comprendre les enjeux d'une interview sur l'activisme aux États-Unis.
- Extrapoler le sens d'une vidéo en répondant à des questions de compréhension.
- S'exprimer à l'oral en interaction pour compléter une tâche partagée.

**Activités d'apprentissage :**

1. Partage des citations choisies pour le devoir et correction des exercices grammaticaux.
2. EOI. Création d'une carte mentale sur le tableau autour de la question 'What do you know about the Black Lives Matter movement?'. Discussion en groupes de deux puis partage de réponses en classe entière. Les élèves copient la carte mentale dans le cahier en tant que trace écrite.
3. CO. Première visionnage de la vidéo. Les élèves noteront les mots de la carte mentale qu'ils entendent dans la vidéo et ils ajouteront des mots ou phrases supplémentaires de la vidéo. Mise en commun des informations repérées.
4. CO. La classe se divisera en trois pour les questions de compréhension plus détaillée. Chaque groupe aura un segment de la vidéo à regarder et répondra à des questions détaillées, puis écrira une synthèse de leur partie en utilisant du discours indirect, travaillant en groupe de deux et puis en groupes plus grands. Mise en commun en classe entière et création de trace écrite de toutes les synthèses.
5. CE, EO. Lecture du script ensemble. Travail phonologique sur les mots accentués et de comment cela peut modifier le sens.

**Devoirs ou Evaluations :**

EE. Choix d'un 'exit ticket' à remplir. Les élèves compléteront un des titres de la vidéo : 'What we want to see from Black Lives Matter is .....'; 'Movements are not just about protest. Movements are about.....'; 'Black Lives Matter is.....' en appuyant sur les connaissances acquises pendant cette séance et les autres séances de la séquence.

**Étape 7 :****Supports :**

Discours d'Amanda Gorman : 'Using your voice is a political choice.'. Jusqu'à 2'32".

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaZBggfEa1E&ab\\_channel=TED](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zaZBggfEa1E&ab_channel=TED)

**Objectifs :**

- Découvrir un personnage important du milieu culturel américain.
- Se préparer à donner un discours informatif et persuasif.
- Comprendre un discours informatif.
- Comprendre comment utiliser le rythme de la phrase et du texte pour capter l'attention d'un auditoire.

**Activités d'apprentissage :**

1. EOI : Récapitulation à l'oral de la dernière séance.
2. EOI. Brainstorming sur les caractéristiques d'un bon discours.
3. CO. Première visionnage de la vidéo. Mise en commun après des caractéristiques repérées dans la vidéo, puis ajout des autres.  
Deuxième et troisième visionnage de la vidéo avec pauses, pour remplir une fiche de travail avec questions de compréhension.
4. CE, EO. Lecture du script en classe entière et travail phonologique sur le rythme du discours.
5. Exit ticket à remplir avant la fin de la séance.

**Devoirs ou Evaluations :**

1. 'Exit ticket' à remplir avec le choix de deux consignes : soit 'Write down a piece of advice for giving a speech' soit 'Write your own mantra in the style of Amanda Gorman's.'

**Étape 8 :** Réalisation de la tâche finale qui servira d'évaluation finale de la séquence.

Les élèves écriront le discours en cours et l'enregistreront chez eux avant de l'envoyer en format mp3.

### **FINAL TASK:**

*You are an American high school student and you have been asked to give a speech to the rest of the school for Black History Month. Prepare a three-minute speech (around 400 words) about the legacy of slavery and why it is significant today.*

#### Remember to include:

- Facts about slavery and important figures that we have learnt about during this sequence.
- Verbs in the passive form.
- Indirect quotes.
- Persuasive language.
- Features of a good speech, such as an attention-grabbing introduction, and a rhythm which keeps the audience's attention.

### **Exploitation détaillée d'une activité**

**Support/activité :** Compréhension écrite des extraits de *The Underground Railroad*.

**Pré-requis :** Connaissances d'analyse littéraire, connaissances du contexte historique du récit.

**Éléments facilitateurs :** travail en groupe qui permet l'entraide entre élèves, le langage du récit est plutôt clair, un aperçu du livre sera fait en début du cours pour que les élèves puissent situer les événements des extraits.

**Obstacles :** plusieurs mots de vocabulaire difficile, registre littéraire, extraits isolés du roman.

#### **Supports :**

1. Look up the underlined words in a dictionary and write down their definitions. Look up any other words that you don't know.
2. Answer the comprehension questions.
3. Get ready to present your extract to the rest of the group:
  - Summarise the extract in your own words.
  - What do we learn about Cora from this extract?
  - Share the sentence that you think is the most important from the extract and tell us why you think it is the most important.
  - How is slavery represented in the extract? What links can you make with what we have already learnt about slavery and the underground railroad?

Passage 1: (pages 326-327)

They put up the library next to the smokehouse. The room smelt pleasantly of smoke when Cora sat down in one of the big chairs with Valentine's books. Royal said it was the biggest collection of negro literature this side of Chicago. Cora didn't know if that was true, but she certainly didn't lack for reading material. Apart from the treatises on farming and the cultivation of various crops, there were rows and rows of histories. The ambitions of the Romans and the victories of the Moors, the royal feuds of Europe. Oversize volumes contained maps of lands Cora had never heard of, the outlines of the unconquered world.

And the disparate literature of the coloured tribes. Accounts of African empires and the miracles of Egyptian slaves who had erected pyramids. The farm's carpenters were true artisans- they had to be to keep all those books from jumping off the shelves, so many wonders did they contain. Pamphlets of verse by negro poets, autobiographies of colored orators. Phyllis Wheatly and Jupiter Hammon. There was a man named Benjamin Banneker who composed almanacs – almanacs! She devoured them all- and served as a confidant to Thomas Jefferson, who composed the Declaration. Cora read the accounts of slaves who had been born in chains and learned their letters. Of Africans who had been stolen, torn from their homes and families, and described the miseries of their bondage and then their hair-raising escapes. She recognised their stories as her own. They were the stories of all the colored people she had ever known, the stories of black people yet to be born, the foundations of their triumphs.

People had put all that down on paper in tiny rooms. Some of them even had dark skin like her. It put her head in a spin every time she opened the door. She'd have to get started if she was going to read them all.

1. What types of books does Cora find in the library? Quote from the text.
2. What famous people does she mention? Quote their names and any information given about them from the text.
3. Identify a metaphor in the text.
4. How does the library make Cora feel? Explain in your own words.
5. Is the mood of this extract positive or negative? Justify your answer with examples from the text.

Passage 2 (pages 362-363):

She pumped and pumped and rolled out of the light. Into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere.

She discovered a rhythm, pumping her arms, throwing all of herself into movement. Into northness. Was she travelling through the tunnel or digging it? Each time she brought her arms down onto the lever, she drove a pickaxe into the rock, swung a sledge down onto a railroad spike. She never got Royal to tell her about the men and women who made the underground railroad. The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died for them. The station masters and conductors and sympathizers. Who are you after you finish something this magnificent—in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. 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. The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart. [...]

When she woke, she decided to go the rest of the way on foot—her arms were empty. Limping, tripping over crossties. Cora ran her hand along the wall of the tunnel, the ridges and pockets. Her fingers danced over valleys, rivers, the peaks of mountains, the contours of a new nation hidden beneath the old. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America. She could not see it but she felt it, moved though its heart. She feared she'd gotten turned around in her sleep. Was she going deeper in or back from where she came? She trusted the slave's choice to guide her—anywhere, anywhere, but where you are escaping from. She'd find the terminus or die on the tracks.

1. Where is Cora in this extract? What is she doing?
2. Find examples of people that Cora describes in the second paragraph. How does she describe them?
3. Identify the passage that refers to the underground railroad network. How is it described?
4. What does Cora compare the walls of the tunnel to?
5. What decision does she make at the end of the passage?

Passage 3 150-151: [*Cora works in museum as a 'living exhibit', so she has to dress up as a slave in various settings while visitors come to look at her.*]

One day she decided to retaliate against a red-haired woman who scowled at the sight of Cora's duties "at sea". Perhaps she had wed a seaman of incorrigible appetites and hated the reminder- Cora didn't know the source of her animus, or care. The woman irked her. Cora stared into her eyes, unwavering and fierce, until the woman broke, fairly running from the glass toward the agricultural section.

From then on Cora selected one patron per hour to evil-eye. A young clerk ducking out his desk in the Griffin, a man of enterprise; a harried matron corralling an unruly clutch of children; one of the sour youths who liked to batter the glass and startle the types. Sometimes this one, sometimes that one. She picked the weak links out from the crowd, the ones who broke under her gaze. The weak link-she liked the ring of it. To seek the imperfection in the chain that keeps you in bondage. Taken individually, the link was not much. But in concert with its fellows, a mighty iron that subjugated millions despite its weakness. The people she chose, young and old, from the rich part of town or the more modest streets, did not individually persecute Cora. As a community, they were shackles. If she kept at it, chipping away at weak links wherever she found them, it might add up to something.

She got at her evil eye. Looking up from the slave wheel or the hut's glass fire to pin a person in place like one of the beetles or mites in the insect exhibits. They always broke, the people, not expecting this weird attack, staggering back or looking at the floor or forcing their companions to pull them away. It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too.

1. Write down all the adjectives that are used to describe the visitors to the museum. What do you notice about them?
2. Pick out examples of the effect that Cora's 'evil-eye' has on people.
3. What does Cora compare the people who live in the town to?
4. Explain the last sentence in your own words.
5. Rewrite the first paragraph from the red-haired woman's perspective



## Annexes

### Étape 1 : Images pour la phase d'anticipation :



Source:  
<https://www.theartsdesk.com/film/dvd-12-years-slave>

Source :  
[https://www.abolitionseminar.org/underground\\_railroad\\_450/](https://www.abolitionseminar.org/underground_railroad_450/)



Source: <https://edition.cnn.com/us/live-news/black-lives-matter-protests-06-23-2020/index.html>

**Étape 4:** *Stand Up* de Cynthia Evro. 2019.

Paroles de genius.com

[Verse 1]

I been walkin' with my face turned to the sun  
Weight on my shoulders, a bullet in my gun  
Oh, I got eyes in the back of my head just in case I have to run  
I do what I can when I can while I can for my people  
While the clouds roll back and the stars fill the night

[Chorus]

That's when I'm gonna stand up  
Take my people with me  
Together we are going to a brand new home  
Far across the river  
Can you hear freedom calling?  
Calling me to answer  
Gonna keep on keepin' on  
I can feel it in my bones

[Verse 2]

Early in the mornin' before the sun begins to shine  
Gonna start movin' towards that separating line  
I'm wading through muddy waters, you know I got a made-up mind  
And I don't mind if I lose any blood on the way to salvation  
And I'll fight with the strength that I got until I die

[Chorus]

So I'm gonna stand up  
Take my people with me  
Together we are going to a brand new home  
Far across the river

Can you hear freedom calling?

Calling me to answer

Gonna keep on keepin' on

[Bridge]

And I know what's around the bend

Might be hard to face 'cause I'm alone

And I just might fail, but Lord knows I tried

Sure as stars fill up the sky

[Chorus]

Stand up

Take my people with me

Together we are going to a brand new home

Far across the river

Can you hear freedom calling?

Calling me to answer

Gonna keep on keepin' on

I'm gonna stand up

Take my people with me

Together we are going to a brand new home

Far across the river

Do you hear freedom calling?

Calling me to answer

Gonna keep on keepin' on

I'm gonna stand up

Take my people with me

Together we are going to a brand new home

Far across the river

I hear freedom calling

Calling me to answer

Gonna keep on keepin' on

I can feel it in my bones

[Outro]

I go to prepare a place for you

I go to prepare a place for you

I go to prepare a place for you

I go to prepare a place for you

## **Étape 5:**

### Juneteenth Brings Joy, A New Tubman Museum And Questions Of The Future

June 20, 2021 8:50 AM ET

PETER CRIMMINS | WHYY

A Juneteenth celebration in Cape May, N.J., yesterday doubled as the grand opening day of the new Harriet Tubman Museum.

About 200 people gathered in Rotary Park for the city's first significant Juneteenth celebration, organized by the museum. The event of African drumming and speeches by town leaders drew some for their first taste of Juneteenth as it becomes a national holiday.

"I thought the event was very inspirational," said Shirlene Darby, of nearby Whitesboro, who had never celebrated Juneteenth before. "Just knowing that we're going to be getting together every Juneteenth as a national holiday, I just think it's something good. It's a long time coming."

Some celebrants in other cities had a mixture of enthusiasm and challenging questions for the federal government.

"It's a day of excitement and exuberance, but we have to temper it," said the Juneteenth commissioner in San Antonio, Texas. Tempered, Byron E. Miller said, because full justice has yet to emerge.

In Denver, the long-established Juneteenth celebration in the Five Points neighborhood drew large and energetic crowds.

Butterfly White, who marched with members of the Colorado Democratic Party, summed it up this way:

"We need tangibles along with symbolic things. So I appreciate the effort," she said, "but we need more."

Karen Britt, who spearheaded Juneteenth Lehigh Valley, the first major Juneteenth celebration in the region around Allentown, Pa., said the future of the holiday is still to be determined.

"I hope it doesn't go into the commercialization of what we have with mattress sales and all that kind of thing all around the Fourth of July...but that we really keep it authentic."

Back in Cape May, N.J., many came to Rotary Park on Juneteenth specifically to celebrate the opening of the Harriet Tubman Museum. The Smithsonian magazine had listed it as [one](#)

[of the most anticipated museums of 2020](#), but its opening was delayed for a year because of the pandemic.

"I know a lot about Harriett Tubman, that history. That's what made me come here," said Gerald Brown, who came down from Pleasantville, N.J. "They talk about the Underground Railroad, but after that. What she did in the military, you know, she was a nurse. There's a lot of different things she's done."

Tubman's time in Cape May was short. It is known she spent a summer there – maybe two summers – working in the resort hotels to raise money to fund her work with the Underground Railroad. She later came back through Cape May to shepherd nine escaped former slaves up to Canada.

The small museum in a restored 19<sup>th</sup> century parson's house tells the story of Tubman, and also that of the once-vibrant African American community in Cape May. One wall is filled floor-to-ceiling with a list of all the Black-owned businesses in Cape May since the 1930s. The opposite wall features a timeline of Black activity in the town, from the founding of the first free Black community in the 1820s, to the first Black resort hotel – the Banneker House – in 1845, and up to today.

The museum board president Lynda Anderson-Towns said Cape May's Black community is now not nearly as large as it was 50 or 100 years ago.

"The African American community has almost disappeared," she said. "Many are not here anymore, and the world needs to know that story. We want to make sure it doesn't disappear."

Anderson-Towns sees the Harriet Tubman Museum as the first step toward building out a Black historic district in Cape May, by preserving the surrounding buildings that tell the story of the Black community.

"Our goal is to not just have the Harriet Tubman Museum to tour, but also the [Stephen Smith house](#) to tour, to talk about him as one of the wealthiest African Americans in 1800," she said. "The historic [Franklin Street School](#), which will be turned into a library, and then also the historic AME [church]. We want that full corner to be eventually our [Freedom's Corner](#)." Elaine Moore-Wright came with her mother, Betty Eugenia Dozier Moore, from Williamstown, N.J. Longtime visitors to Cape May, they say the history is there, if you look.

"There's always a piece of African American history," said Moore-Wright. "But then there are certain places where it's just all about African American history."

"It's been that way for a long time in Cape May, because they lived here ever since there was a Cape May," said Dozier Moore. "I used to come down here when I was a kid, and I'm 84 years old, so Cape May's been having people of color here for a long time."

*Kevin Beaty and Claire Cleveland, Colorado Public Radio, and Jack Morgan, Texas Public Radio, contributed to this file.*

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