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# "SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY"

The Underground Railroad *and John Locke's Labor Theory of Property*

*Samuel Christensen*

Born in 1632, John Locke was one of the preeminent philosophers during the Enlightenment period. He contributed significantly to this influential epoch by developing classical liberalism, reviving classical republicanism, and instituting the social contract. Individual sovereignty, the foundation for many of the arguments propositioned by Locke, resonated with many in the burgeoning American colonies. In fact, Thomas Jefferson and other Founding Fathers drew extensively from Locke; he was, perhaps, the most influential philosopher to the creation of America and the American ideal (Huyler 223). This is evident in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, which claims that "all men are created equal . . . [and] are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" ("Declaration"), nearly reiterating word for word Locke's theories from over a century earlier about man's right to life, liberty, and property (Huyler 221). An early draft of Jefferson's Declaration contained a paragraph decrying the evils of the slave trade in Great Britain but was removed by the American Continental Congress so as not to appear hypocritical and blatantly betray the moral high ground Americans sought (Jefferson). Understanding the rough draft

of the Declaration of Independence beyond its historical value, and instead viewing it philosophically, leads to an analysis of the myriad postulations espoused by Jefferson, including “how equality may be the foundation of rights” (Ginsberg 40)—a foundation that encounters a host of complexities when considering the history of slavery in America, a practice which flagrantly violated these ideals.

In his 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, Colson Whitehead confronts the contradicting philosophies of American ideals and slavery head-on. He makes it clear that Antebellum America, as a whole, has failed to live up to its noble founding and has fundamentally misunderstood the country’s foundational doctrines. This is most clearly evidenced by Cora who, on her “spatial” journey north, peels back the psychological veneer obstructing her vision of her Lockean rights to life, liberty, and self-ownership as guaranteed protection by the Declaration of Independence. She comes to view her labor and actions as indisputably her own, which builds in her a correct knowledge of her inherent human value and of a beautiful, proud heritage—a heritage from which all Americans can derive righteous pride and motivation to engage in honest labor, irrespective of race or creed.

As seen in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, John Locke’s philosophies undergird much of the political and moral principles of the founding documents of the United States. Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* set forth the complex relationship of individual human rights to the authority of government, and Chapter Five, “Of Property,” bolsters many of the arguments Locke made in support of the individual and limited power of government. These high-minded ideas on property, however, become convoluted when applied to African American slavery in the nineteenth century. Locke believed that property was a basic human right, along with the inalienable rights of life and liberty, and that human beings were both responsible for, and privileged to, their own individual labor.

Locke’s emphasis on the individual recasts the very dynamic of property as a relationship between an individual and nature, instead of an individual and government. Property, Locke argues, existed before civil government and, as such, is not beholden to it (qtd. in Locke xiii). While the earth in its natural state provides sustenance for its inhabitants, it is incumbent upon inhabitants to gather the sustenance for themselves. In doing so, the goods of the earth pass from “common” property to “individual” property (Locke 17);

that is, when a person expends energy—or labor—to harness substance for gain, that substance becomes the right and property of the expender.

A person's property comes not only as a result of collecting something that nature created, but in conjunction with work enacted on other parts of nature. Lockean theory dictates that the world was to be used by the "industrious and rational," and that labor was a man's right to the world (Locke 20). Industriousness, according to Locke, was a mandate from Heaven: "God and his reason commanded [mankind] to subdue the earth, i.e., improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labor" (20). So, Locke argues, nature, when mixed with labor, becomes improved and more valuable than it had been or otherwise would be, for "it is labor indeed that put the difference of value on everything" (24). Mankind, then, is not simply granted the right to the product of his labor, but entitled to it—it is undeniably his property by virtue of his work (23). This property "could not be taken from him wherever he had fixed it" (21). Most important, perhaps, is the knowledge that man was "master of himself and proprietor of his own person and the actions or labor of it." Man's property "was perfectly his own and did not belong in common to others" (27). From this, it becomes evident that labor and property have an important effect on individualism and identity.

In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau explains in "Spatial Stories" how actions transform places into spaces, and why owning property conveys heritage and value to a person or object. First, Certeau outlines the difference between mere "places" and "spaces," saying that a "place" is a stable, inert thing or location whereas a "space" is an "ensemble of movement" performed by someone or something within a given dimension (117). A space is in a constant state of modification while a place is, essentially, "dead" (118). Applying this knowledge to the framework of property, then, land and possessions take the form of place, while labor—movement and operations—takes the form of space. Certeau's theories are almost exclusively applied to land, but may just as well apply to human slaves, who were regarded by slave owners as property as much as any given plot of land.

Certeau argues that the very basis of all stories comes from the transformation from place to space or, the reverse, space to place (118). Cora's story in *The Underground Railroad* shows her transformation from incorrectly viewing herself as a "place"—as property—to learning that she is, in fact, a "space." Through her experiences, Cora learns that the actions she performs

in space—which comprise her labor—found, build, and become her story, history, and, thus, heritage. The function of this created story establishes and legitimizes the claim to the Latin “*fās*,” or divine law, “without which all forms of conduct that are enjoined or authorized by [human law], and . . . all human conduct, are doubtful, perilous, and even fatal” (qtd. in Certeau 124). Understanding that stories found and establish *fās* promotes a recognition of inalienable rights and a sense of a certain divine heritage for the individual. In the text, Cora notes the gulf between the “slave part” of her versus the “human part” of her (Whitehead 34), which could easily be interpreted as the dead “place part” versus the living “space part.” These two ends present a starting point, an ending point, and a sort of internal trajectory implied between the two that makes up Cora’s own spatial story. On Cora’s journey to “space,” her enemies try to ignore, delegitimize, and discredit her rightful claim to her individual human rights by attempting to erase her story and failing to recognize her actions and labor as contributing to an ever-growing body of heritage.

Understanding both Certeau’s theory of spatial stories and Locke’s property theory is essential to uncovering the internal journey Cora takes and its application to American history. The unprecedented success America has experienced since its eighteenth-century founding may, in part, be explained by the large number of Americans who have consciously or subconsciously embraced Locke’s theory on property. Cora likely did not know Locke’s property theory directly, but came to subconsciously embrace it, which, in turn, aided her psychological story journey from “place” to “space” and made her the master of her own actions and heritage. To better understand Cora’s journey, it is instructive to first view the source from which her knowledge about American and human rights sprung: white southerners. A brief analysis of Ridgeway, the most prominent white character in the novel, reveals a flawed perception of America and of Locke’s property theory that was foisted upon Cora and other slaves.

Ridgeway’s job was simple and he was excellent at it: find and return lost property to its proper owners. According to the novel, “Ridgeway gathered renown with his facility for ensuring that property remained property” (Whitehead 82). Throughout the text, Ridgeway continually attempts to discredit Cora’s actions and labor as illegitimate evidence of intrinsic, divine rights. He may have believed that in doing this, Cora would continue to view

herself as less than what she truly was—she would continue to view herself as dead property with no claim to freedom over her own actions.

In performing the requirements of a slave catcher, Ridgeway reveals that his nefarious actions are guided by his personal philosophical interpretations rather than by the philosophy intended by America's founders. Largely, his philosophy is derived from the American concept of "Manifest Destiny" and an erroneous comprehension of the spirit of United States law. Manifest Destiny was a sacrosanct belief that advocated for and justified the expansion of the U.S. throughout the American continents. Ridgeway interpreted Manifest Destiny as the reason for his white skin and as a moral justification for the egregious damage he and others inflicted upon America's "others" during this time. He reveals this justification explicitly in Tennessee by defining Manifest Destiny to Cora as "taking what is yours, your property, whatever you deem it to be" with others allowing you to take it "so that we can have what's rightfully ours" (Whitehead 225). Here, it is clear to readers that Ridgeway subjectively defines personhood and property, often violating a person's right to rule over themselves. Ridgeway mistakenly believed that the "Great Spirit" of America was "if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent. The American imperative" (82). He does not see universal human value and instead adheres to the view that white men were destined to own American land simply because they did own it and were not in chains (82). Lockean property theory can approve the doctrine of Manifest Destiny because it encourages people to make use of natural land through labor. But, Ridgeway and evil whites violate the Lockean justification of Manifest Destiny by offending the core values of life and liberty in pursuit of property, a result that would have in no way been approved by Locke.

Ridgeway's understanding of Manifest Destiny as subjectively defined property waiting to be reclaimed by its proper owner contributed to an overall misunderstanding and misapplication of the law. He fails to adhere to the belief held by Locke and Jefferson that, ultimately, mankind is the property of God and, as such, is endowed with immutable rights, such as the right to life, liberty, and property (Huyler 221). Instead, Ridgeway believes that the "same laws governed garbage and people" (Whitehead 82)—particularly poor people or people of other races—a detestable and inherently false conclusion. Yet, Ridgeway seems to fully believe this. Inalienable rights, if existent at all to Ridgeway, are different or distributed differently among people.

Particular mention is made of Michael, a slave who was overworked and murdered on the Hog plantation because he could recite passages from the Declaration of Independence. Michael could, in fact, recite long passages from the Declaration of Independence, but did so at the behest of his master who found it entertaining (Whitehead 32). To Michael's master, this was nothing more than a cheap parlor trick—nothing in this act reflected the high ideals inscribed in the founding document. The slave owner forcing his slave to memorize and recite passages from the Declaration of Independence only served to cheapen and discard the philosophies of the document. In fact, uneducated Cora understands the meaning that lay in the words of the Declaration better than the majority of white men mentioned in the novel. She recognizes the hypocrisy that “the ideals [white men] held up for themselves, they denied others . . . created equal was not lost on her. The white men who wrote [the Declaration] didn't understand it either, if all men did not truly mean all men” (119). The repeated injustices and violations of the spirit of the founding committed by whites against black slaves evidence this. Indeed, it seems as though whites operate under a fundamentally different law than the laws to which America claimed subscription. Royal identifies the hypocrisy of “white law” and intelligently suggests “there are other ones” (231)—other laws besides “white law.”

The southern misunderstanding of law and the philosophical founding of America, of which Ridgeway is merely an example of the group at large, had a particularly damning effect on Cora, who was inflicted with trauma and indoctrinated with this damaging falsehood since childhood. Cora, at one point, reaches the understanding that “slavery is a sin when whites were put to the yoke, but not the African. All men are created equal, unless we decide you are not a man” (186). This clear subversion of the doctrine of humanity upon which America was built exhibits the subjective comprehension and application of that doctrine—a doctrine that claims virtue specifically because of its objectivity.

Cora's journey from place to space can only begin with a discussion about Ajarry, who exhibited many aspects of “place” and several sparks of “space.” For the repeated references in the novel to the three-yard plot of land that first belonged to Ajarry (Whitehead 13), there is no mention of the plot in the “Ajarry” section, the first of the book. In this section, Ajarry's value, more than anything, is shown to be only exchange value, with Whitehead using a variety of transactional terms in regard to Ajarry, like

“sold,” “appraised,” “swapped,” “price,” “asset,” and “market” (3, 5, 6, 8). These financial words reinforce the notion that Ajarry was fundamentally property, and, as property, “her price fluctuated” (6). As Cora understood it, “Each thing had a value . . . [i]n America the quirk was that people were things . . . If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities” (6–7). Prices for assets and “things” do fluctuate and have always fluctuated as a principle of economic theory; the incorrect and insidious assumption made by the white slave owners and communicated, in turn, to black slaves was that “price” was equivalent to inherent human value. This mode of understanding leads Ajarry to devalue her own worth and self-limit her rightful access to human rights. Ajarry understands “liberty” to be “reserved for other people.” Thinking otherwise “was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible” (8). According to Locke and the founding principles of the United States, this simply is not true. Inherent human value is endowed by God, infinite, and inalienable; it does not fluctuate. Violating the assumption of value serves only to sever the divine bonds of humanity. The view that human value is not absolute, subject to the whims of the economic marketplace, was the view that Cora inherited and internalized from Ajarry and white slave owners.

Despite not explicitly mentioning the plot of land in the “Ajarry” section, Whitehead makes it clear that Cora inherited the land from Mabel and Ajarry. The land did not become family property simply through its own existence or because the law decreed it. Instead, in the beginning, the paltry plot was nothing more than “a rumble of dirt and scrub behind [Ajarry’s] cabin” (13). But Cora understood that “the dirt at her feet had a story” (13)—a mention like this hearkens back to Certeau’s theory wherein land is saturated with significance and tells a distinct story. The story of the plot, then, is its transformation from dead, “inert” (Certeau 118) place to living, active space made possible through the labor exerted upon and mixed with the land by Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora. A “space” plot boasted value and a proud heritage that a “place” plot did not. Among the myriad actions perhaps taken on the land by Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora to transform the plot into a space, Whitehead includes, tying a goat, building a chicken coop, growing food (13), and fighting for it (15). Whitehead asks, “Why should [Old Anthony] and everyone else respect this little girl’s claim just because her grandmother had kicked the dirt over once?” (17). In response, Old Anthony should respect this little girl’s claim because Cora’s grandmother kicked the once-worthless

dirt over, expended her labor upon it, and made it productive; so did Cora's mother, and Cora, likewise, continued in this tradition.

While on the Hob, Cora valued her plot of land highly, but after escaping the plantation, she thinks back to the plot—the land itself—and recognizes it as an almost trivial form of property. This garden that she once “cherished,” she “now saw it for the joke it was—a tiny square of dirt that had convinced her she owned something” (Whitehead 184). This revelation comes to Cora on the second stop of her journey in North Carolina, where she begins to see that simple material goods or land do not alone constitute true property; rather, labor—the willing actions taken by an individual—upon an object or in pursuit of an objective forms the basis for true property. According to an interview with Whitehead, the garden was the one thing on the plantation Cora could call her own. It was a place where, “in the midst of a complete lack of agency,” she could “be creative” (“Conversation”). More than its economic value as a physical object or location, however, the land itself had redemptive value precisely because it permitted Cora to act and labor for her own self, thus generating property that was uniquely her own. While Cora is beginning to understand this important distinction, this conclusion is not immediately recognized as she is in the process of her own internalized, psychological “spatial story” moving toward understanding. In North Carolina, “her plot was a shadow of something that lived elsewhere, out of sight” just as “the Declaration of Independence was an echo of something that existed elsewhere” (Whitehead 184; emphasis added). “Something,” in this context, almost certainly refers to the promise of equal rights unearthed to her knowledge through the expenditure of her individual labor.

Throughout the novel, Cora labors for herself and finds satisfaction in her labor; however, Cora's labor did not merely satisfy, it instructed her, over time, about the inherent right to herself. For example, in the Sunday hours at Hob when she was not forced to perform regular slave duties, Cora engaged in various forms of labor that encouraged her discovery that “she owned herself” (Whitehead 12). Labor here includes “tug[ging] weeds, pluck[ing] caterpillars, thin[n]g out the sour greens, and glar[ing] at anyone planning incursions on her territory” (12). Each of these acts constitute a form of labor for Cora—an act voluntarily performed upon an object—and is similar to Locke's own theory of mixing labor with nature. Interestingly for Cora, even the simple act of “glaring” was an act of individual labor that convinced her of her own property and right to existence, and she engaged in this behavior

again while at the museum in South Carolina. In time, Cora's actions added up to a knowledge of her ability to interpret the actions and labor she chose to engage in as belonging to her and her only. Other acts and labors Cora engages in to build the knowledge of herself as her own property include the effort she put forth into reading and writing. In South Carolina, where reading and writing classes were taught to black laborers, Cora diligently consumed the "nourishing" education (98)—even while others did not—and was proud of what she was learning to accomplish through her work.

Other examples of instructive labor along Cora's journey toward defining her own existence as rightful and valuable include running away, working to a purpose at the Valentine Farm, and learning from the examples of others, like Sam and Royal. In running away, Cora necessarily subjected herself to strenuous acts of labor at each stop along the way. On the Valentine Farm, Cora learned that "work needn't be suffering, it could unite folks" (Whitehead 277) and anyone could be anything they wanted to as a result of their labor, including the rightful owners of themselves: "Freedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare" (278, emphasis added). Sam instructs Cora on the ephemeral value of material possessions by losing all his possessions and shows that his greatest "property" was his actions: the relationships he had labored to build. Royal, too, assists Cora's understanding by rebutting her claim that "Land is property. Tools is property. . . . I'm still property, even in Indiana" (277) and firmly reminding her that she was free (277). Cora's experiences, taken as a whole, make up a unique story of labor—a story that was her own. Like the inalienable rights granted by God to all people and supposedly protected by the United States government, this story was Cora's property, and it could not be taken from her. She owned it and began to unlock the philosophical significance it held for her. In this new story, all Americans worked for themselves and were the rightful recipients of the fruits of their labors, both the physical fruits and the psychological fruits that came from accomplishing tasks and making meaningful contributions to a community. They began to create their own legacies through labor.

The first time Cora sees the underground railroad station, she is overwhelmed by its grandeur but always wonders who constructed the railroad. Cora thought the railroad "was a marvel to be proud of" (70), "appreciated the labor that had gone into its construction" (68), and "wondered if those who had built this thing had received their proper reward" (70). The

labor in constructing an edifice like this was a fundamentally different type of labor than the slave labor she was accustomed to, for “not one of [the slaves] could be prideful of their labor” (70) on the plantation because slave labor stripped them of real property. Cora questions who built the railroad, and, by implication, who ought to receive the pride associated with its magnificent construction (262). She never receives a clear answer and is told only that the “sheer industry that had made such a project possible” took more years to construct than she knew (68).

In coming to a knowledge of Locke’s property theory and its direct effects on her sense of value, heritage, and inherent rights, Cora increasingly values the labor put into the construction of the railroad by those unnamed actors who took something and made it their own unique, magnificent property. Astute readers will note the postmodernist element of the text and realize that Cora is, in fact, valuing the vast and magnificent network of the intangible, true underground railroad that led as many as 100,000 slaves to freedom (Hillstrom xiii). She is sensing those “who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died from them” (Whitehead 310). And yet, Royal tells Cora, she is more than just an observer of the railroad or a passenger on its route: “The underground railroad is bigger than its operators—it’s all of you, too” (272). Cora learns that she is, in fact, a contributor to that labor she had marveled at for so long. Her actions throughout the book coalesce with the actions of her ancestors, predecessors, and others who gave their time, effort, will, and labor to the noble work of digging the tunnel, making it something they could, without any degree of hesitation, call their own property. Cora finally accessed the knowledge that the worth, value, and ownership she felt as a contributor to the railroad was, in reality, present in her being the entire time.

This revelation of the absolute and inalienable right to self-ownership through labor is vital for modern times. For a book that hints about troubled race relations in the twenty-first century, *The Underground Railroad* encourages all Americans—blacks, whites, and every other intersectional group in the United States—to embrace the history, heritage, and legacy of their American ancestors who labored to produce goodness and deliver it to later generations. Blacks and whites alike may continue to note the sufferings of slaves during and after the time of slavery, but they must also recognize the persistence and willpower required of slaves and white abolitionists to fight against a profoundly immoral and malevolent system. This corrupt system, now long

defunct, blatantly violated the rights of man set forth by God and enjoined into the American founding by inspired contributors.

In the novel, Royal tells Cora, “we got this tunnel right here, running beneath us, and no one knows where it leads” (272). The irony is that surely someone must know where it leads, otherwise it could not have been built at all. This simple statement conveys the important truth that Cora, or any other passenger and laborer on the railroad, was in control of her own destiny. She could determine the course her life would take and what she would choose to make of her life through her actions. The day before she escaped the plantation, Cora “furiously hacked into the earth as if digging a tunnel” that would lead to her salvation (54). Knowing fully the true nature of labor and property at the end of the book, Cora enters “into the tunnel that no one had made, that led nowhere” (309) and forged her own pathway to freedom—physical freedom and freedom from the destructive and traumatic psychological bonds she thought would always hold her hostage. Cora stopped allowing others to define her existence for her, and she traveled north through the tunnel. But, as she traveled, a central question came into her mind: “was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?” As Cora pumped the lever on the railcar to move it forward, she realized that “each time she brought her arms down on the lever, she drove a pickax into the rock, swung a sledge onto a railroad spike.” She was building the railroad, and laboring in the construction of something this “magnificent” was transformative: “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” (309–10). Cora finally completed her philosophical journey from inert place to active space by realizing her labors were valuable, meaningful, and beautiful. She attained knowledge that the true value of a person is not found in skin color or outward appearance or what is on top; the “miracle” is beneath and found in the actions a person takes and in that for which they labor. It is “the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart” (310).

Cora “was never property” (304). Americans have a responsibility and duty to uphold the promises made by America’s Founding Fathers in documents like the Declaration of Independence to ensure that no man or woman will ever again be property of anyone but themselves. The lofty philosophical establishments of America must not only be ideals from which America sprung, but living truths for which good Americans strive

every single day. Americans must always fight for equal rights and equal protections of those rights under United States law; they must retain in memory the honest labor of their ancestors, which reaffirms the right to own oneself and one's labor; they must strive to build their own futures and legacies through diligent labor, because they can—because their worth is endowed by God and should never again be regarded as inert property subject to the discriminatory whims or follies of mankind.

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