

Article

Black (W)hole Foods: Okra, Soil and Blackness in *The Underground Railroad* (Barry Jenkins, USA, 2021)

William Brown

Department of Theatre & Film, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada; wjrcbrown@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay analyses the role played by okra in *The Underground Railroad*, together with how it functions in relation to the soil that sustains it and which allows it to grow. I argue that okra represents an otherwise lost African past for both protagonist Cora and for the show in general and that this transplanted plant, similar to the transplanted Africans who endured the Middle Passage on the way to ‘New World’ slave plantations, survives by going through ‘black holes’, something that is not only linked poetically to the established trope of the otherwise absent Black mother but which also finds support from physics, where wormholes (similar to the holes created by worms in the soil) take us through black holes and into new worlds, realities or dimensions. This is reflected in Jenkins’s series (as well as Whitehead’s novel) by the titular Underground Railroad itself, which sees Cora and others disappear underground only to reappear in new states (the show travels from Georgia to South Carolina to North Carolina to Tennessee to Indiana and so on), as well as specifically in the show through the formal properties of the audio-visual (cinematic/televisual) medium, which, with its cuts and movements, similarly keeps shifting through space and time in a nonlinear but generative fashion. Finally, I suggest that we cannot philosophise the plant or the medium of film (or television or streaming media) without philosophising race, with *The Underground Railroad* serving as a means for bringing together plants and plantations, soil and wormholes and Blackness and black holes, which, collectively and playfully, I group under the umbrella term ‘black (w)hole foods’.



Citation: Brown, W. Black (W)hole Foods: Okra, Soil and Blackness in *The Underground Railroad* (Barry Jenkins, USA, 2021). *Philosophies* 2022, 7, 117. <https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7050117>

Keywords: okra; Underground Railroad; plantation; plantationocene; plant-thinking; Blackness; race; mud; earth

Academic Editor: Sarah Cooper

Received: 18 August 2022

Accepted: 7 October 2022

Published: 14 October 2022

Publisher’s Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

In the first episode of Barry Jenkins’s 2021 adaptation of Colson Whitehead’s 2016 novel, *The Underground Railroad*, we see escaped slave Cora (Thuso Mbedu) unearth and carry with her some okra seeds from the small plot of land that she and others till alongside her home. Noted by slave catcher Arnold Ridgeway (Joel Edgerton) in episode five for its ability to endure harsh conditions, okra becomes a minor theme that runs throughout the show, with fellow escaped slave Grace (played by Mychal-Bella Bowman and who does not feature in Whitehead’s novel) describing Cora reverentially as a ‘planter’ in episode three during a discussion of the seeds. Indeed, Grace (who will later be renamed Fanny Briggs, a fictional escaped slave who is reported as teaching herself to read in Whitehead’s 1999 novel, *The Intuitionist*) notes the association between Cora and soil, with earth and mud being generally prominent features of the show, which takes place on cotton plantations, cleared Cherokee territories and more. Finally, when Cora finds tentative freedom within an antebellum USA at the end of the show’s final episode, she and Molly (Kylee D. Allen), who together escape Ridgeway after the latter has tracked Cora down to the all-Black farm of Gloria and John Valentine (Amber Gray and Peter de Jersey) in Indiana, bury the okra seeds next to a tree at an abandoned farm before they climb aboard the wagon of Ollie (Troy Anthony Hogan), who is heading to St. Louis and on to California in search of a new life.

This essay, then, will analyse the role played by okra in *The Underground Railroad*, together with how it functions in relation to the soil that sustains it and which allows it

to grow. I shall argue that okra represents an otherwise lost African past for Cora and for the show in general and that this transplanted plant, similar to the transplanted Africans who endured the Middle Passage on the way to ‘New World’ slave plantations, survives by going through ‘black holes’, something that is not only linked poetically to the established trope of the otherwise absent Black mother but which also finds support from physics, where wormholes (similar to the holes created by worms in the soil) take us through black holes and into new worlds, realities or dimensions. This is reflected in Jenkins’s series (as well as Whitehead’s novel) by the titular Underground Railroad itself, which sees Cora and others disappear underground only to reappear in new states (the show travels from Georgia to South Carolina to North Carolina to Tennessee to Indiana and so on), as well as specifically in the show through the formal properties of the audiovisual (cinematic/televisual) medium, which, with its cuts and movements, similarly keeps shifting through space and time in a nonlinear but generative fashion. Finally, I shall suggest that we cannot philosophise the plant or the medium of film (or television or streaming media) without philosophising race, with *The Underground Railroad* serving as a means for bringing together plants and plantations, soil and wormholes and Blackness and black holes, which, collectively and playfully, I group under the umbrella term ‘black (w)hole foods’.

2. The Plot and the Plantation

In an interview with Michael Boyce Gillespie, Barry Jenkins explained that the okra seeds *only happened because the prop master—this guy in the art department who decides the vegetables or wine for every scene—one day showed me some dried okra and let the seeds drop on my desk. He picked one up and he held it to my eye and said: ‘No matter how dry this gets, if you plant it, it will grow.’ You’ve seen the show and what we did with that. So much of this production was just [shaped] organically from being receptive to what was happening.* [1] (p. 17; original interpolation)

Given that the prominence of okra seeds in the show came about providentially (or ‘organically’ and, thus, plant-like?), one might contend that the following argument hinges upon a contingency rather than the pre-established design of Barry Jenkins or Colson Whitehead as authors. Nonetheless, while okra is mentioned only once in Whitehead’s novel before becoming a much more sustained presence in Jenkins’s show, that mention does bear analysis and helps to strengthen the argument about okra that I wish to make here.

Early in the novel, we are told that Cora’s mother, Mabel (played in the show by Sheila Atim), took over the running of her own mother’s plot after the latter’s death and that Mabel thus ‘assumed care of the yams and okra, whatever took her fancy’ [2] (p. 14). Whitehead goes on to discuss Cora’s own stewardship of the plot, which she maintains in spite of threats from other slaves on the Georgia plantation of the Randall family, her supposed ‘owners’. However, that the plot (as a physical space) begins with her grandmother, Ajarry, who does not visibly feature in the show, helps us to understand that the okra from that plot links Cora to her African heritage, not least because a second plot, namely the plot of Whitehead’s novel, itself begins with Ajarry being kidnapped from her village by Dahomeyan raiders, who take her to Ouidah, a port town in what today is known as Benin. That is, while Ajarry clearly embodies Cora’s African past in Whitehead’s novel, the okra seeds from the plot that Cora tends signify more obliquely, but nonetheless meaningfully, this African past, not least because okra’s journey to the USA took place in conjunction with the transplantation of Africans to America as slaves via the Middle Passage [3] (p. 123); [4] (p. 140); [5] (p. 95)¹. Indeed, when Grace/Fanny asks Cora about the okra in episode three, the latter responds by saying that the seeds are hers and that ‘[m]y mama sowed ‘em... and her mama’, leading us back to the otherwise unseen and, in the show, unnamed Ajarry. Furthermore, okra is not only known as being a, if not the, key ingredient of gumbo, a speciality of the American South, but it is also central to Callaloo, a dish that has its origins precisely in the Republic of Benin [6] (p. 201).

Over the course of Whitehead's novel, Cora recalls several times the plot of land that she tilled on the Randall estate, if not the okra specifically, and towards the end, she explains to her suitor Royal (played in the show by William Jackson Harper) that her grandmother Ajarry had been 'kidnapped from her family in Africa and tilled a small corner of land, the only thing to call her own' [2] (p. 285). She then calls that plot 'her inheritance' and connects Ajarry's 'indomitability, her perseverance' to those 'three square yards and the hearty stuff that sprouted from it... The most valuable land in all of Georgia' [2] (pp. 299–300). In other words, if, in the novel, the plot is inseparable from Ajarry and, thus, from not only Cora's familial but also her wider African heritage, then we might transpose the 'African' meaning of the plot on to the okra that it, and then Cora, nurtures (with okra and Cora being of course near-homophonous and near-anagrammatical). Indeed, while Ajarry does not feature in the show, it is in the plot that Mabel also buried Cora's placenta, a ritual that not only signifies Cora's links to the land but which also means that the okra seeds are linked to her mother, who herself escaped the Randall plantation before the events of the show began and whose fate we only discover towards the end of both the novel and the show (about which, more later). In other words, the plot and the okra alike function for Cora and, by extension, for us as viewers, as what Toni Morrison calls a 'site of memory', wherein the past for which the okra stands is, even if technically unknown (as Mabel's fate is forever unknown to Cora), also treated as if real in order to forge a Black reality out of a world that has otherwise written Blackness out of the official record and, therefore, out of reality itself [7]; [8] (p. 32).

But if okra and the plot both represent absent mothers, a lost Africa, or, to employ another common plant metaphor, the otherwise subterranean and invisible African 'roots' (as well as the 'indomitability and perseverance') of Cora and African American slaves, more generally, they also carry deeper philosophical meanings that we should presently explain. For, as Jamaican philosopher Sylvia Wynter argued in an early essay, the distinction between the plot and the plantation is key to understanding the completely distinct worldviews of modernity's colonisers and slaves. Since it involves the creation of crop monocultures, the plantation sees nature become nothing more than land to be exploited. This shift in the treatment and understanding of nature to exploitable land is interlinked with, and matched by, a shift towards a globalised market economy where profitability supersedes kinship with the earth and where 'the thing made dominates, manipulates human need' [9] (p. 98). That is, rather than till the land and create a product that responds to a direct need (food to eat), humans begin to dominate the land and simultaneously to create a need that responds to the crop being produced (sugar, cotton, tobacco or indigo). Not only does this see a shift in attitude towards nature, which now is subjugated rather than nurtured (it is land and property), but it also involves a necessary shift from the human as a gardener or steward to the human as embodied labour². Since this abstraction of humans into units of labour is now necessary to the process of profit-making, humans themselves are also abstracted away from being people and towards becoming bodies or commodities; work is no longer chosen, but labour is necessary for profit and, therefore, coerced or forced. That is, slavery comes into existence, not incidentally but as a logical consequence of capital. As the earth becomes what here we are calling 'mere' land, so do certain humans, namely slaves, thus become what Hortense J. Spillers would call mere 'flesh' [11]. And perhaps we do not need to say that part and parcel of this creation of an American labour force of flesh was simultaneously enabled and reinforced by the creation of what W.E.B. Du Bois called 'the color line' [12]; that is, the institution of a racialised system of difference in which certain humans, namely Black folks from Africa, were cast into slavery, as well as being linked conceptually to the earth and dirt/dirtiness, a conceptual manoeuvre that also helps to legitimise slavery to its proponents (if a 'Black' human is 'dirt,' then they can also be exploited like dirt). The way in which slavery sees not just Black humans enslaved but also enslaved humans 'Blackened' [13] therefore helps equally to demonstrate how the shift in attitude towards the earth (from nature to land) is intimately bound together with the creation of an attitude towards certain racialised humans: the 'Blacks' as slaves

who are inferior to the ‘enlightened’ white European humans, just as the earth is inferior to the same.

As mentioned, both the Black human and the earth as land come to be notably characterised by dirt and dirtiness; ‘enlightenment’ involves a literal separation, then, of the white human from the Black other and from the earth (the white human becomes ‘light’, both in the sense of becoming white/not dirty and in the sense of elevating itself above the muddy earth, with photography and cinema as tools for writing with light, eventually becoming key instruments in this process, too, as we shall see). And both the racist and what we have come to understand latterly as the anti-planetary underpinnings of this ‘enlightenment’ are not just off-shoots of capitalist modernity, wherein profit supersedes humanity (including what Eduardo Viveiros de Castro might polemically call the humanity of the planet [14]); they are, rather, its necessary conditions. That is, anti-Blackness and anti-planetaryness, whereby both the Black(ened) race and the earth (as land)—the ‘dirty’ and dirt—are perpetually destroyed for the enrichment and ‘enlightenment’ of white people, are essential to capital. And, so, the logic of the plantation—the logic of slavery and monoculture—is the logic of modernity, or as Wynter puts it, ‘[t]he plantation was the superstructure of civilization’ [9] (p. 100), thereby indelibly linking the plant in certain respects to Blackness, not least through the transplantation of both to the Americas. The concomitant racism of plantations is not accidental to modernity, therefore, nor is it an issue that can be ‘dealt with’ through mere reflection and promises. This runs against the prevalent notion that ‘the [capitalist] system works and is capable of reform’, a position also critiqued by Steve Martinot and Jared Sexton [15] (p. 170), for racism is not just something that can disappear through an act of the will, not through ‘wokeness’ and certainly not through ‘enlightenment’, since racism is inscribed into the latter. Racism is, rather, fundamental to modernity, and capitalism cannot function without it. For this reason, Donna Haraway and others consider that modernity, or the anthropocene, might more productively be termed the plantationocene [16,17].

If Grace/Fanny expresses admiration towards Cora in calling her a ‘planter’ in episode three of *The Underground Railroad*, we can contrast this with Kenyan cultural theorist Simon Gikandi’s explanation that the ‘planter class’ was, in the European imagination of the period, ‘the ultimate expression of African barbarism’ [18] (p. xv). Perhaps as much is suggested by the way in which Connelly (Jeff Pope), one of the white overseers on the Randall plantation and a serial abuser of the slaves, urinates on Cora’s plot of land just before he realises that she has escaped in episode one; since the plot, as a space where Cora cultivates her own plants, is ‘barbaric’, for Connelly, it becomes a suitable toilet (in the process demonstrating that, if there is any ‘barbarism’ at work, it is the white man’s, as he literally pisses on Cora’s birth right). But while plantation owners and the west more widely grew rich off slavery, and while the link between ‘planting’ and Blackness served only to signify the ‘barbarism’ of the latter in the white western imagination, the relationship between Cora/slaves/Africans and the earth or, perhaps better, the kinship between them in fact demonstrates an entirely different worldview or an entirely different philosophy of life and living. In this way, the plot, as a space in which slaves cultivated their own plants, demonstrates not the view that man is separate from nature but that humans are part of nature and that, for the descendants of Africans, ‘the land remained the Earth—and the Earth was a goddess; man used the land to feed himself; and to offer first fruits to the Earth; his funeral was the mystical reunion with the earth’ [9] (p. 99).

Now, since the slave, with Cora as our example, used the plot to feed themselves, of course the plot became structurally necessary to slavery as an institution; it, in fact, enabled the slaveowner to maximise profits, because they did not have to spend as much money on feeding and, thus, maintaining the energy of their labour power. That is, plots ‘provided sustenance in a plantation regime that was hostile to life that could not be commodified’, meaning that ‘[e]ven if plantations were geared towards monocropping regimes of export-oriented commodity production, they were sustained by the cultivation of foods and animals practised by enslaved peoples’ [17] (p. 9). Nonetheless, for Wynter,

the plot stood in contrast to the plantation in being ‘the roots of culture’ [9] (p. 100), with ‘culture’ here being oppositional to ‘the history of the plantation’, which is ‘the official history of the superstructure; the only history which has been written’ [9] (p. 101). That is, the plot involves a different epistemology from white western modernity, which itself is based upon a different ontology; its mode of knowledge is ‘dirty’ and ‘imagined’ (Cora does not know what happened to Mabel; Africa is absent), and its being is not separate from the earth, as per the (claimed) ontology of the white human, but rather, it involves what I am calling, à la Haraway, a kinship between the two. More simply put, and as Elizabeth DeLoughrey explains in her Wynter-inspired work while drawing upon Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite, it was in such plots where slaves would ‘plot’ escape, revolt and other means of defying tyranny [19] (p. 44); see also [20] (p. 25). That is, it was in the plot where wholly other conceptions of reality were devised and revised, expressed and nurtured, one in which the white human was not superior to the land and the Black human alike but where the human and earth existed in, to rephrase Wynter, ‘mystical union’. Not only a Morrisonian site of memory, then, but the plot is also what Lauren F. Klein, drawing on Christina Sharpe in her analysis of the novel, calls a ‘site for imagining otherwise’ [5] (pp. 108 and 132); see also [21].

Understood in this way, the plot and the okra seeds of *The Underground Railroad* suggest that what white western modernity dismisses as unreal (a ‘mystical’ kinship between humanity and nature, an ‘otherwise’ way of being) is precisely real and that the dismissal of that kinship/that ontology to unreality (its labelling as mystical, if not as barbaric, dirty and so on) is part and parcel of a racialised program that aims to elevate the white human as superior to nature and as superior to other, Blackened humans. If to provide others with food is an act of love, as Maria Flood understands the scenes of food-giving and food-sharing in Jenkins’s earlier *Moonlight* (USA, 2016), then the plot is also a space of love, while the plantation is loveless, with no love for the land, the slave or even between the white people that own it (the Randalls, similar to the Ridgeways, seem little to love or even to like each other over the course of the show) [22] (p. 55). Small wonder, then, that a loveless white western modernity would (typically) both exploit and deny the reality of the plot and its contents. To borrow from Episcopal priest Francis X. Walter, when speaking in 1966 against attempts by white supremacists to stop the formation of the Southwest Alabama Farmers’ Cooperative Association (SWAFCA), which would see Black farmers get paid more for their crops, in turn encouraging Black people to stay in the region instead of migrating away: ‘Yes Lord, we’re subversive, vegetables are subversive[,] Lord... Okra is a threat’ [23] (p. 106).

3. Soul Food

In Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, the unnamed narrator buys a yam from a street vendor during his time in New York. It is a transformative moment for the titular ‘invisible man’, who declares upon biting into it that ‘I yam what I am!’ [24] (p. 266). While a moment of witty wordplay, however, this sequence also reveals how yam-ness in some senses replaces ‘being’ in African American life (the narrator ‘yams’ rather than ‘is’) and that this ‘being otherwise’, this ‘yamming’, is linked to an underground root vegetable that, similar to okra, has also been transplanted from Africa. Indeed, for Kimberly W. Benston, the moment suggests ‘the hope of endless renewal without denying the security of completion, and dreams of the hypostatic experience that simultaneously names and unnames itself’ [25] (p. 9). In other words, to yam takes us into new realms of existence and towards what Wynter, without reference to Ellison, proposes as ‘the basis of a [different] social order’, a chthonic existence otherwise to whiteness [9] (p. 99); see also [26] (p. 60). Now, the link between yams and Blackness has long since been explored, including by Orlando Patterson in his foundational *Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* [27] (pp. 242–245), and the link can still be found today, including in Whitehead’s novel, where yams are far more prominent than in the show, especially as a food source from Cora’s plot and which she shares while on the run with

fellow escaped slaves Caesar and Lovey (played respectively in the show by Aaron Pierre and Zsane Jhe)³.

Further salient examples of yam-thinking include the work of the late bell hooks, who, inspired by Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1992, 1980), uses the yam as a

life-sustaining symbol of Black kinship and community. Everywhere Black women live in the world, we eat yams. It is a symbol of our diasporic connections. Yams provide good nourishment for the body; yet, they are also used medicinally to heal the body. [29] (p. 23)

Indeed, yams function precisely as a medicine to heal Nettie's malaria when she is living with the (fictional) Olinka people in an unidentified part of Africa in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* [30] (p. 254). Meanwhile, yams have also featured briefly in the recent experimental film about African American history, *The Inheritance* (Ephraim Asili, USA, 2020), while also being a key feature of Kendrick Lamar's 2015 song, 'King Kunta', where the rapper proposes that '[t]he yam is the power that be'.

If, from novel to show, there is, in *The Underground Railroad*, a shift from yams to okra, we nonetheless might draw a salient point from the former before we move more closely to consider the latter. For, while okra might, similar to the yam, suggest an otherwise way of being (Cora as okra, the narrator in *Invisible Man* as yam, Black women as yams, yams as a life-giving force, and okra as the soul), DeLoughrey draws once again upon Brathwaite to chart how the yam homophonously, if not etymologically, recalls the term *nyam*, which 'derives from a number of West African languages for the word for "to eat"', and that Brathwaite's use of the word *nam*, which he defines as 'the heart of our nation language', is an 'underground resource' that is a 'secret-name, soul-source, connected with *nyam* (eat), *yam* (root food), *nyame* (name of god)' [19] (pp. 42–43); see also [31] (p. 121). For Brathwaite to propose *nam* as 'the heart of our nation language' serves several purposes, foremost being a wilful mis-spelling of 'name' precisely in order to un-name and to rename the self (former slave families in the Americas lost their original names, with many still carrying the names of their plantation owners). But more important for present purposes is how Brathwaite links *nam* and *yam* not only to *nyam* but to *nyame*, meaning God.

As can be understood from the similar spelling, *Nyame* is linked to the Akan term for the Supreme Being or God, *Onyame*. And if it is by Dahomeyan raiders that Ajarry was kidnapped in Whitehead's novel, then the chances are that they were raiding for slaves from a nearby kingdom, which could conceivably be the Akan kingdom of the Ashanti, which lay due east of Ouidah, and which stretched inland across present-day Ghana and as far north as what is now Mali. My reason for providing evidence that Ajarry might be Akan is because it allows us to perform a similar wordplay to the one performed by Brathwaite⁴. For, while Carolyn Kolb suggests that '[t]he West African term, *ukru ma*, became *okra* after slaves brought the plant through the Caribbean to southern plantations' [32] (p. 206; original italics), I also wish to suggest that, as *yam* recalls *Onyame*, so does okra even more closely recall how the same word, *okra*, in the Akan language means 'soul'. Indeed, it is hard to believe that slaves of Akan origin did not relate okra to their native term for the soul, not least because 'okra' was, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary, in use in the English language by the 1670s (i.e., long before the transatlantic slave trade came to an end), meaning that Akan slaves would almost certainly link okra to *okra*. Furthermore, the same Online Etymology Dictionary also compares okra to the Akan word *nkruma*, which loosely recalls other Akan terms such as *nkrabea*, which means 'destiny', and *nkra*, which is a message (from God). Therefore, to be clear, it is not that okra is specifically derived from *okra*; it appears not to be. But I am suggesting that there is some reason to believe that the becoming-okra of *ukru ma/nkruma* could not help but recall for Akan speakers their religious belief in *okra*, the soul given to them by the same *Onyame* that Brathwaite links to the yam. And even if not descended specifically from the Akan, Cora in *The Underground Railroad* comes at least from a family of West African origin, and her grandmother might have understood the word okra to be linked to a variation of *okra*, as Brathwaite also discusses *nyame* across 'a number of West African languages'.

Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye is perhaps the most incisive scholar of the ‘Akan conceptual scheme’, and there are numerous ways in which his work might be of use in this essay, including how he seeks to legitimise as philosophy what the west other-foolish (as opposed to other-wise) dismisses as ‘mysticism’ [33] (p. 5) and how being killed by a snakebite, which is Mabel’s fate in *The Underground Railroad*, poses a real problem to Akan thinkers, because while snakes can and do kill people, that it would happen to a specific person at a specific time would not so much be meaningless as have a meaning that is inaccessible to the Akan thinker [33] (pp. 78–82). That is, much as Cora never discovers that her mother died in the swamp not far from the Randall plantation and that she therefore did not escape to freedom as Cora hopes and as Ridgeway fears, so does Cora not know that it is Mabel’s very disappearance that, in many ways, inspires her also to escape (Mabel was about to return home after having just a small taste of freedom by going into the swamp at night; had she not died, she would have gone back to the Randall plantation, and Cora would likely never have escaped). Furthermore, Mabel’s disappearance also inspires Ridgeway to pursue Cora so doggedly, since it is a source of humiliation for Ridgeway that a mother and a daughter both might escape and elude him. In other words, *The Underground Railroad* subtly proposes to us meaning (at least in the sense of having meaningful consequences) in otherwise senseless and/or random happenings (a fatal snakebite to Mabel will eventually set Cora free and lead to Ridgeway’s downfall). Finally, Gyekye’s general defence of communalism, or a society in which the group comes before (but not at the expense of) the individual, would also seem to be reflected in the all-Black community that the Valentines build on their farm in Indiana and which is so antithetical to white individualistic existence that it must be destroyed [33] (pp. 154–162). To connect Gyekye’s work with that of contemporary Black studies, the Akan way of life involves what Fred Moten calls ‘consent not to be a single being’ [34].

More than these specifics, however, is the idea that okra, as the *ōkra*/soul, represents a different and specifically African way of being, one that is, as Gyekye outlines, not dualistic in the western sense of the Cartesian *cogito* but rather ‘dualistic and interactionist’ [33] (p. 102). That is, *ōkra* is integrated into, rather than separate from, the body (or *honam*) while also being a gift from *Onyame*, from whom *ōkra* is nonetheless separate. ‘Interactionist’ therefore suggests that ‘[w]hat happens to the soul takes effect or reflects on the condition of the body ... [and] what happens to the body reflects on the conditions of the soul’ [33] (p. 101). For this reason, illness in the Akan conceptual scheme can be understood and treated as an affliction of both body and soul, while, in the white west illness, is generally understood only to affect the body. To eat a yam, therefore, does indeed have medicinal qualities, as per the hooks and Walker examples outlined above. And so, concurrently, if okra has similar medicinal qualities, it is because it is (literally?) soul food. It reaffirms an otherwise (non-western) and interactionist soul, which itself is derived from God/*nyame* and which has a direct relationship with the earth. To return to western etymologies, it is to remember that *homo*/human comes from *humus*/mud [26] (p. 59), and that land is life, not property [19] (p. 41). In this sense, the land is indeed what Wynter calls a ‘goddess’—a living being with whom we have kinship rather than an object to be treated similar to the proverbial dirt. Similar to okra, the land also sustains us. It gives us the soul/*ōkra* (just as Cora is at, and gives to *The Underground Railroad*, its core). It reminds us that we are linked to a wider existence rather than alienated from it; it gives us roots, which, as DeLoughrey also suggests, are linked to ‘rot’ [19] (p. 54). And to comprehend this link between roots and rotting is, in turn, to give to us an acceptance of time, change and death to help us to understand that the *ōkra*/soul might indeed live on past our bodies but not as the spirit of a specific individual; rather, it is returned back to *Onyame*, whence it originally came, thereby fulfilling a ‘mystical reunion with the earth’, if not with the cosmos more generally⁵.

4. Black Holes and Wormholes

There is a tendency in the west to say that we are born into the world, rather than that we are born from it⁶. From birth, then, there is a separation in the western mindset of

human from the earth and, I might suggest, a tendency to forget and perhaps even to deny the *humus* of our humanity (western society seeks to escape death and time rather than accepting them). As a matrilineal culture, meanwhile, the Akan would seem to have a much more ‘grounded’ sense of being, while, in *The Underground Railroad*, which arguably depicts an Akan—or at least West African—diaspora, motherhood across two (the show) or three (the novel) generations is central to its organisation. If the family’s link to Africa is lost, except perhaps through okra, and while Cora does not know Mabel’s fate, meaning that, in some sense, she does not ‘know’ her mother, the above-described chthonic worldview as passed down from mother to daughter nonetheless has strong feminist components, as hooks’ ‘sisterhood of the yam’ also helps to make clear (note that the text in which Brathwaite elaborates his theory of *yam/nyam/nyame* is likewise called *Mother Poem*). And as the cultivation of a plot involves sowing seeds into the mud, from which plants then sprout, so there is a vaginal (nonpatriarchal) component to this process that I should like to let grow here. Furthermore, the dark holes in the mud that worms help to dig can be linked to what in physics are also referred to as wormholes and black holes. As the former are the source of life on Earth, so can the latter be mother-poetically understood as the source of galactic life, with cinema/television being media that can help us to understand this, as I wish shortly to explain.

Mud is ubiquitous in *The Underground Railroad*, a constant part of its *mise-en-scène*, as potentially goes without saying given that it is a show set partially on a plantation, involving farming in various capacities, and set during a period before asphalt roads and concrete. In episode five, Cora, having been recaptured by Ridgeway in North Carolina at the end of episode three, tries to kill herself by drowning in a lake as they cross a desolate Tennessee following the self-willed death of Jasper (Calvin Leon Smith), another recaptured slave. Ridgeway pulls Cora from the water, the second time that he has foiled an escape attempt in the same episode. Needless to say, both are covered in mud. As Ridgeway explains to Cora, who lies on the lake’s muddy bank, that dying is not as easy as she would wish it to be, we get a sense of how muddiness is linked to death. Notably, as the show cuts to an overhead shot of the pair by the water, Ridgeway starts to scoop water on to his clothes so as to wash off the mud; he seeks to remove traces of his earthliness, while Cora remains dirty, perhaps even abjected.

In an article-cum-interview with Jenkins in *The Atlantic*, meanwhile, Hannah Giorgis explained how ‘the show beautifully emphasizes the ways ... [in which the slaves’] bonds with the land persisted—and persist even now—beyond the specter of forced labor’. She continues:

[t]he last episode features a weighty burial scene, one of the moments when Jenkins actually cried during filming. ‘This actor ... at the conclusion of the scene, without my prompting, he got down on his knees, and he puts his forehead to the soil, and he inhales the earth,’ Jenkins recalled. ‘And I thought there was just something so, so deeply spiritual about it. And there was something so visceral, this connection between this person and the Earth; it wasn’t corrupted by the condition of American slavery’ [36].

Jenkins seems here to be discussing the moment when, during a flashback to Mabel’s last days on the Randall plantation, Moses (Sam Malone) collapses to the ground after discovering that his partner, Polly (Abigail Achiri), has killed herself and their foster children. As the camera slowly moves towards Moses, he steps from the shack where Polly lives and falls to his knees, kicking up dust and breaking down in tears. Even though Jenkins either misremembers the moment (Moses does not put his forehead to the soil) or did not include the take mentioned above in the final cut, he nonetheless affirms here how *The Underground Railroad* seeks to emphasise a relationship between humans and the earth/Earth. And so, as DeLoughrey demonstrates the way in which Erna Brodber chooses ‘to displace the yam as originary root and [to] focus our attention on the figure of the maternal, on the earth/Earth’ in *The Rainmaker’s Mistake* (2007) [19] (p. 58), so might we here think similarly about not okra alone but okra in relation to the mud/soil/earth that nourishes it. As Grace/Fanny says of the okra seeds to Cora in the attic of Martin and Ethel

Wells (played, respectively, by Damon Herriman and Lily Rabe) in episode three: '[y]ou should plant 'em, you know? Ain't no point in carrying 'em around like that. Ain't what they meant for.' That is, okra might evoke the *ōkra*/soul, but as *ōkra* cannot exist without the body/*honam* or the bodily spirit/*sunsum*, according to the Akan conceptual scheme, so okra cannot exist without mud, the 'flesh' of the Earth.

Okra, similar to many plants, sprouts from the earth, having been placed in a hole (and likely, but not necessarily, covered over). Earthworms, meanwhile, aerate and recycle nutrients in the soil. While there are no visible worms in *The Underground Railroad*, we nonetheless know that soil is more fertile when it contains a larger number of earthworms. In other words, life grows thanks to holes: the 'black' hole where seeds are sewn into the mud and the wormholes that are produced by this vital species of mollusc (a figure no less important than Charles Darwin ended his career most fascinated not by the supposedly most complex creatures of evolution but rather by the 'simple' earthworm) [37]).

Meanwhile, in physics, wormholes or the Einstein–Rosen (ER) bridges that connect distant points in spacetime, are equivalent to quantum entangled particles, which themselves are referred to as Einstein–Podolsky–Rosen (EPR) pairs, hence the formula $ER = EPR$. The latter are also thought to involve 'spooky action at a distance', Albert Einstein's description of how information between entangled particles would have to travel faster than the speed of light in order for their actions to be simultaneous, which, in principle, would contravene Einstein's understanding that nothing can travel faster than light, even though such 'spooky action at a distance' has been proven mathematically to be true. Not only is there a simultaneously racial logic at work in Einstein's thinking ('spook' as both ghost and racist slang for a Black person), but more particularly, wormholes are theorised as being the heat that black holes slowly give off and which typically is called Hawking radiation, after Stephen Hawking. In effect, for physicists such as Juan Maldacena and Leonard Susskind, every wormhole is a tentacle of Hawking radiation squiggling its way out of a black hole and re-entering spacetime as we know it at a point completely different from where it entered the black hole [38]. In this way, wormholes via black holes potentially connect together each and every point in spacetime, a notion salient both to the titular 'Underground Railroad' of Whitehead's novel and Jenkins's show, and to the editing techniques adopted by Jenkins, as we shall see.

In her analysis of *The Rainmaker's Mistake*, DeLoughrey says that the cave is a 'well-known feminized figure of Platonic allegory' and that it is 'also a foundation for subterranean human development and provides a new plot for the post-emancipation community' [19] (p. 57). However, while we might read Whitehead's and Jenkins's literal underground railroad stations in the same way, I wish also to suggest that, when in the show we see Cora and other refugee slaves descending into the spaces of the underground railroad, it is visually more suggestive of a blackhole. What is more, for the railroad's passengers, together with those who help them, to go underground and then to reappear in a completely different location or state means that the Underground Railroad, as it is signified in both Whitehead's and Jenkins's texts, functions as a sort of wormhole; it connects different and distant points in spacetime as it passes through a black hole while also being connected to racial Blackness, as per Einstein's sense of being 'spooked' by something moving 'faster' than light (i.e., darkness itself, which, if nothing moves faster than darkness, is perhaps also 'nothingness'). As the show progresses from Georgia to Indiana and onwards, and as each state charts a different take on race relations in the USA, so does it take us through wormholes, showing the interactionist nature not just of humans but of reality itself; as per my analysis of $ER = EPR$ above, all of these realities are interlinked.

The second episode of the show begins with the camera moving in towards the window of Cora's former shack on the Randall plantation. A yellow curtain blows in the wind before darkness almost completely covers the screen. While the show then cuts to Ridgeway and adopted former slave child Homer (Chase Dillon) searching for clues inside the shack as they begin their pursuit of Cora, Caesar and Lovey, this moment nonetheless

is one of many in the show whereby we see ‘black holes’. Meanwhile, the third episode with Cora and Grace/Fanny in the aforementioned attic cannot but recall Harriet Jacobs’s famous ‘loophole of retreat’, where she hid for seven years during her own journey towards freedom from slavery (Whitehead openly acknowledges Jacobs’s influence on his text, while Lauren F. Klein also explores this connection in her treatment of the novel; see [2] (p. 315); [5] (pp. 130–131)). As Katherine McKittrick points out, Jacobs’s ‘loophole’ is also a ‘dark hole’ [8] (p. 41), and we might push further here and say that it is also a ‘wormhole’, in that Jacobs passes through it and into a new reality (the same cannot quite be said for Cora and Grace/Fanny, since the former is discovered by Ridgeway and the latter is left to burn in the attic when the Wells’s house is set on fire by the white supremacist people of their unnamed North Carolina town; nonetheless, both women do eventually escape to freedom via the titular railroad). What is more, as Jonathan Beller describes Jacobs’s experience of witnessing life on her plantation from inside the loophole/wormhole as akin to being inside a camera obscura, so does this apply to *The Underground Railroad*, as Cora and Grace/Fanny both observe village life from their attic vantage point [39] (p. 101); [40].

Furthermore, we might suggest here that all audio-visual media, from the camera obscura to cinema, television and streaming media, themselves are linked to wormholes/black holes. This is not just expressed in figurative black holes along the lines of what I have outlined above, nor is it confined to the way in which the story takes us through space and time as it plays out in a linear fashion. It is also there in Jenkins’s editing more generally. Take the opening sequence of the first episode: we cut from a notably dark screen with the sound of wind whooshing to a slow-motion image of Cora and Ridgeway falling into a black hole, first shot from above and then from the side. We then cut to Mabel’s face in close up, screaming as she gives birth. At ground level, we see a placenta drop to the floor. Cora and Ridgeway continue to fall. A slow tracking shot in towards the exterior of Mabel’s shack, Mabel crouched by her plot as the camera moves left. An overhead shot of Mabel placing the placenta in the ground and then burying it in the dirt. A beam of light shines at the camera, and an Underground Railroad train approaches. In reverse-motion, we see Caesar running backwards through a field. Royal walks forwards, hands aloft. Ridgeway’s father (Peter Mullan) stands in his house. Grace/Fanny also walks backwards through the Wells’s burning house. And so on, until we fade to an adult Cora standing by a lake and a voiceover saying ‘[t]he first and last thing my mama gave me was apologies’ as she turns to the camera, which approaches and then backs away from her. Cut to an image of Cora and Caesar by a tree, giant text on the screen: Chapter One. Georgia. In this sequence of images, which cuts radically between moments in the show, we get a sense of how the cuts of cinema/television/streaming media are or, at the very least, can be wormholes, spanning vast swathes of space and time or perhaps even different realities, even if most shows and films simply cut within familiar spaces and times for the sake of ‘continuity’. Furthermore, this opening sequence spans life and possible death, as we see Cora born, falling into darkness and by the lake where she will also attempt to take her life⁷. Her regard to the viewer in the latter shot also implicates us: this is not simply a spectacle from which we are detached but an experience with which we are invited to interact.

This potential of the medium to take us through wormholes/black holes in a story that is about entering black holes and then leaving them in new realities is also, as per DeLoughrey’s analysis of the cave, constitutive of a feminised and post-emancipation reality. Furthermore, *The Underground Railroad* also chimes with the treatment of the black hole as a conceptual figure in the works of various Black feminist scholars. For example, Michele Wallace argues that ‘black holes in space are full, not empty ... black holes may give access to other dimensions’ [41] (pp. 556–558), while for Evelyn Hammonds, black holes point to how the sexuality of Black women has a ‘different geometry’ than the ‘more visible sexualities’ [42] (p. 310). That is, as a black hole is not visible (since light cannot escape it), so are Black women often rendered invisible, as per Mabel’s disappearance from and Ajarry’s nonexistence in Jenkins’s show; but also, the matrilineal line of Black women posits

a different structure/geometry to white heteropatriarchal society (being white, Ridgeway is of course locked in an oedipal struggle with his father).

Rizvana Bradley furthermore argues that ‘black w/holeness’ possesses a ‘performative potentiality’ through which it can express ‘the empty fulfilment or fulfilled emptiness of black female dispossession’, or the process whereby Black women were regularly dispossessed of their children during slavery [43] (P13). Finally, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson argues that the Black woman is, similar to a black hole, caught between negativity and generativity, between life and death, and thus an example of what physicists call superposition [44] (p. 645). And so, given that Mabel is an absent mother, fulfilled but empty, a negative presence but also generative of Cora’s life, *The Underground Railroad* exemplifies this superpositional logic of the black hole or what Bradley terms the ‘black w/hole’, a supposed emptiness or negativity that is, in fact, at the root of all that exists, just as a mammy, deprived of her own children, raises white kids and feeds the white family, and just like all American (and other) slaves whose names are erased from history but upon whose broken backs modernity is constructed.

Canadian poet M. NourbeSe Philip writes in ‘A Piece of Land Surrounded’ how ‘[f]ive hundred years ago Cristobal Colon came upon Watling Island: he enc(o)untered another world and that first enc(o)unter with the land of the Natives would be the palimpsest for Europe’s subsequent enc(o)unter with the New World. The New World would become both womb (*cunt*) and wound (*cut*)’ [45] (p. 164). If the Americas are indeed the cu(n)t from which a precisely ‘new’ world is born, then, taking into account how that ‘New World’ was also built by enslaved Black humans, Blackness itself also becomes a cu(n)t. Furthermore, the cut, the invisible (non-)space of Blackness in between shots in cinema/television, is also the cunt from which these media are born. They are, in other words, black holes/wormholes from which the ‘whole’ is born, a generative act that Fred Moten, in his analysis of improvisation in the Black radical tradition, might call ‘the image and the sound of love’ [46] (p. 122). That is, as Moten proposes that the cut lies at the heart of ‘origin and initiality, drive and energy’, so does it constitute (an) ‘Event’ [46] (p. 30). Similar to the okra seeds landing organically on Jenkins’s desk, thereby changing the shape of his show, so is to improvise an organic or, as Moten says, drawing upon Jacques Derrida, an ‘invaginating’ act of love that cuts into and through heteropatriarchal reality/loveless white western modernity [46] (p. 6). Blackness, as excluded from white western modernity, must always improvise; cast outside of white reality/ontology, it cannot ‘prove’ itself but must instead always ‘improve’ itself.

‘If you want to see what this nation’s all about’, says Underground Railroad worker Fletcher (Sean Bridgers) in the first episode, ‘you got to ride the rails. Just look outside as you speed through, and you’ll see the true face of America.’ Looking outside, what does Cora see? Pitch blackness. Underground blackness, therefore, is the ‘true face’ of America, a seeming absence or emptiness that is constitutive of, and which allows us to cut through, white western modernity. It is a black (w)hole, much like the plot, or the (im)provision ground (the improvised provision ground) that feeds the slave, is seemingly outside but is, in fact, constitutive of, modern capital. In this way, okra is a ‘black (w)hole food’, a food that springs from the earth, guides Cora to new realities, having also crossed into the ‘New World’ via the Middle Passage, and the black ‘soul’ of white modernity built out of Black bodies treated as flesh and out of the Earth treated as land.

5. Black Radical Cinema

In Nia DaCosta’s recent *Candyman* (Canada/USA, 2021), a sequel to Bernard Rose’s 1992 original film, Black artist Anthony McCoy (Yahya Abdul-Mateen III) berates white critic Finley Stephens (Rebecca Spence) for insincerely praising his work as being emblematic of the Chicago ‘hood’ where he lives. He asks her:

Who do you think makes the hood? The city cuts off a community and waits for it to die. Then they invite developers in and say, ‘Hey, you artists, you young people, you white, preferably or only ... please come to the hood, it’s cheap. And if you stick it out for a couple of years, we’ll bring you a Whole Foods.’

I include this mention of Whole Foods to highlight a tension in my use of the term ‘black (w)hole foods’ and which I wish productively to use in relation to *The Underground Railroad*. For, if Whole Foods is effectively a white grocery store, as is implied here by McCoy, then what is or can be as a ‘Black’ Whole Foods? It is not that the parenthetical (w) in ‘black (w)hole foods’ negates the link between Whole Foods and whiteness, even as it playfully tries to wrestle an otherwise/‘Black’ way of thinking from a ‘white’ brand. Rather, it points to how *The Underground Railroad* is, like the plot, in an almost impossible position in attempting to make visible something that is not just typically invisible within white hegemonic culture, namely slavery, but which rather is antithetical to the ethos of visibility that is at the core of that same white hegemonic culture. That is, white western modernity might be built upon occulted Black labour, cinema might be built upon otherwise invisible cuts, and the visible universe itself might be built upon black holes. And so, how can one use the cinema, which is understood typically as writing with light, in order to depict the opposite of light, namely darkness? To say that *The Underground Railroad* is not the cinema and that it is television and/or streaming is not, I should say, enough. For, even if a dissenting voice wanted to make a case for medium specificity, the show remains a big-budget and commercial enterprise that must, in some respects, court ‘visibility’. And even if it is 10 h in length (and, thus, not commercially viable for theatres), it is still broken up into ‘manageable’ episodes of about an hour in length.

As mentioned, the plot sustained Black life, but it also became co-opted by the plantation owners to maximise profit (knowing that the slaves were feeding themselves, slaveowners did not provide them with as much to eat). And this tension between being radical while also possibly reinforcing that same ‘superstructure’ identified by Wynter is also inscribed both into the novel and the show through their very premise. For the train, something that both Whitehead and Jenkins imagined the Underground Railroad to involve when they first heard about it as children [47,48], is a technology that, thanks to the Lumière brothers’ *Arrival of the Train* (France, 1895), was inscribed into cinema from the get-go. And to use a literal train, even if underground, therefore renders automatically ‘cinematic’ an historical event, the Underground Railroad, that otherwise deliberately eluded record and visibility in order to operate. As much as can be seen in the show’s violence, which runs consistently throughout the series, especially in the first episode in which a slave, Big Anthony (Elijah Everett), is whipped and conflagrated. If, as Frank B. Wilderson III has argued, ‘the *spectacle* of Black death is essential to the mental health of the world... our deaths must be repeated *visually*’ [49] (p. 225), then, for Jenkins to render visible a traumatic historical event that perhaps eludes visibility is also to partake in anti-Blackness. As Bradley contends, ‘the image of black death sutures a wounded nation. Black people are held hostage by the visual, whose myriad permutations are only so many entrances into a mortuary’ [50].

And so, while Jenkins’s work is considered a ‘counter-cinema’ [51] (pp. 169–190), while it does have an otherwise ‘wormhole’ logic along the lines that I have been suggesting, and while Jenkins himself suggests that *not* to depict the violence of slavery is equivalent to ‘participating in our own [black people’s] erasure’ [1] (p. 16), one might nonetheless argue that *The Underground Railroad* is not ‘radical’ enough, a position held by a filmmaker like Skinner Myers, whose work, similar to Asili’s *Inheritance*, is much more alienating and who sees Jenkins as having ‘beautified slavery in a way that was very disgusting to me’ ([52]; for a similar position about the ‘pornographic’ nature of the show, see [53])⁸. The issue is not so much who is wrong or right, nor even to acknowledge that of course there can, and perhaps should be, a multiplicity of perspectives on the show (Samantha N. Sheppard argues cogently that the show involves both a ‘narrative’ and ‘counter-narrative’ [56] (p. 19)). Rather, it is to point to the impossible position in which Black artists and filmmakers find themselves, in that a truly ‘Black’ cinema, a cinema of the cu(n)t, would not be and could not be cinema (or television or streaming media), much as Blackness as a whole cannot ‘be’ without being destroyed, since Blackness ‘is’ not (it ‘yams’ instead of ‘is’; it is okra/*ōkra*, or rather, it ‘okras’; it is improvised and improved). Put otherwise, if, [w]ith the sole exceptions of Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth, black women of the slave era remain

more or less enshrouded in unrevealed history' [57] (p. 90), then that history has to be invented/improvised, but in that very invention, improvisation and/or revelation, so is the fact of its invisibility destroyed (it is no longer a 'black hole' once we can see it). As the rendering-visible of Blackness is thus impossible, so can we understand white western modernity as being structured as (cinematically) anti-Black, beyond any specific iterations of racism (hence why it cannot be changed; for racism to end, modernity must end).

6. Conclusions: Plant-Thinking and Race

I hope in this essay to have analysed how the very visibility of white western modernity and its 'enlightenment' is predicated upon (anti-)Blackness, a black (w)hole beyond light, which, with its ongoing chthonic kinship mediated by the plot with the earth and plants such as okra, suggests a being otherwise of Blackness, perhaps even Blackness as opposite to white western 'being', which itself seeks always to steal Blackness's soul/*ōkra* and its otherwise wisdom, even though it refuses to cultivate its own.

I shall end, then, with a brief engagement with the work of Michael Marder, who is perhaps the most well-known of recent plant-thinkers, for Marder's major text on plants, namely *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, explores how 'plants are wholly other and foreign to us, so long as we have not yet encountered them, as it were, on their own turf' [58] (p. 3). That is, we do not really encounter plants when we 'instrumentalise' them [58] (p. 4) or, in the language of this essay, when we use them for profit. For Marder, the plant is thus from the perspective of modernity 'an obscure non-object' [58] (p. 20), which does 'not advocate a naïve vitalism that would insulate life and the living from death; quite to the contrary, it situates "participation in life" in an intimate relation to mortality' [58] (p. 52). If we are to understand the plant, we must understand that the plant has a soul, Marder argues repeatedly, before declaring that '[p]lant liberation is indispensable for the possibility of human liberation... While it is true that the emancipation of human beings is incomplete without the liberation of vegetal life, plants will not be free unless the political and economic conditions responsible both for their oppression and for our appreciation of them change as well' [58] (pp. 142 and 149).

Marder is not necessarily wrong in any of these assertions. However, what hopefully is clear from the foregoing essay is that Marder discusses plants in the way that this essay has discussed Blackness *in relation to plants*, especially via the plot that plays such an important role in *The Underground Railroad*. In effect, then, everything that Marder believes we must do to understand plants is what we must do to understand Blackness. That Marder discusses plants at such great length *without once mentioning race*, though, suggests that what he can understand of plant-human relations, he cannot understand or see of human-human/race relations. If the human-plant divide came about through the advent of a long modernity, during which time humans came to see plants not as kin but as 'instrumental' and without a soul, then this came hand-in-hand with the institution of Du Bois's 'color line'. If our understanding of the world is incomplete without a philosophy of vegetal life, then our understanding both of vegetal life and of the world is also surely incomplete without a philosophy of race (in his silence about race, Marder arguably reinforces the 'color line', thereby potentially allowing the anti-Blackness of modernity to continue uncriticized).

Okra functions in *The Underground Railroad* as a 'black (w)hole food' that allows us to see how plants and the plantation, soil and wormholes and blackness and black holes are constitutive of our modern world with its white and western hegemony in which Blackness is flesh, the earth is land and death and rot are to be 'eradicated' (or 'uprooted'). Whether or not it is 'truly' radical, or to everyone's taste, *The Underground Railroad* attempts towards a nourishing sense of the black (w)hole. And without a sense of the black (w)hole or cu(n)t, we will not fully understand the cinema or the black nothing, the invisible Black mother, from which we all come.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: I wish to thank Sarah Cooper for the kind invitation to contribute to this special issue and to the blind peer reviewers, whose comments and encouragement were particularly helpful.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 'Africa' features in the show's second episode, where Cora, known now as Bessie, takes a job working at the Museum of Natural Wonders in Griffin, South Carolina. Among other tasks, Cora performs as a 'savage African' for white audiences, dressed in straw clothes, wearing a face mask and carrying a spear. Indeed, it is to an image of a masked Cora that we dissolve from the Randall plantation where Ridgeway begins his search for her. This 'Africa' I place in scare quotes by virtue of its simulated nature, despite the demands of white exhibition curator Mr Fields (Christopher Berry) for 'authenticity' ('Now, Bessie, listen, I want you to work on channeling that African spirit, you see?'). During this episode, we mainly see Cora 'playing' a slave on a cotton plantation, with fellow performer Betty (Charmaine Shaw) also playing the 'African'. In the novel, Cora's performance in the Darkest Africa exhibit allows her to go 'back in time, an unwinding of America... [that] never failed to cast her into a river of calm' [2] (p. 128). In the show, however, Cora seems somewhat removed from that 'African spirit', as per her bemused look to Betty upon Fields's above request. Even if unconsciously so, perhaps the 'authentic Africa' for Cora is the okra seeds, all the more 'authentic' precisely because personal, secret and not part of a public performance.
- 2 These shifts in attitude and behaviour towards/with nature are accompanied by a logical shift in taste. As amusingly lampooned in a 2018 episode of the recurring *Saturday Night Live* sketch, 'Black Jeopardy', white tastes have become 'bland' over time. Indeed, the 7 April episode from that year saw Chadwick Boseman reprise his role as T'Challa, the Black Panther superhero of the Ryan Coogler Marvel film of the same name. As T'Challa slowly begins to understand the principle of *Jeopardy!*, in which contestants must provide a question to an answer that belongs to a certain category, so must T'Challa find a question about 'white people' that engages with the statement '[y]our friend Karen brings her potato salad to your cookout'. The sketch eventually sees T'Challa understand that Karen is Caucasian and that she does not season her food and that therefore she can 'keep her bland ass potato to herself'. Amusing as it is, though, the sketch also belies how white tastes were shifted by crop monoculture, especially a sweetening of tastes thanks to the cultivation of, and the development of a need for, sugar. This involved a concomitant shift away from more bitter, sour and other tastes, which crops did not become mass produced in the same way. The point to make here is that racial difference also functions on the level of taste, something otherwise supposed to be 'colourblind'. And that our philosophies are matters of taste. Or, rather, our philosophies are not formed in the mind as per a white western/Cartesian worldview but in the mouth and gut (for a key work on this matter, see [10]). I might add that, as our philosophy derives from what we consume, so too do the media that we 'consume' shape our philosophy, including what shows we 'binge'.
- 3 In a later work, Patterson contends that the North American yam is a misnomer and that it is rather a sweet potato and, thus, does not, 'strictly speaking', belong to 'the real yam culture of West Africa', which did manage to persist in the Caribbean (as opposed to the American South) as a result of the more similar landscape, geography and climate between the two. All the same, Patterson suggests that 'familiar, if not identical, material things [such as sweet potatoes] encouraged language retention' [28] (pp. 65–66).
- 4 Research has not unearthed the origin of the name Ajarry, which, rather than being a name chosen specifically to evoke a certain culture (it could be a variant of Adwoa/Adjoa, which is a name given in Akan culture to women born on a Monday), could be chosen to evoke a writer such as Alfred Jarry, who, through his concept of 'pataphysics', tried to undermine conventional understandings of reality and, thus, to imagine otherwise. Notably, Jarry also wrote in 1895 a play called *Caesar Antichrist*, with Caesar of course being another name that is prominent in *The Underground Railroad*.
- 5 American rapper Tyler, the Creator has a song called 'OKRA', released as a standalone single in 2018. Among other things, it involves Tyler discussing how he prefers the land to the sea ('Need a spot in the hills, not the beach, need a pool/Just to cool it, I do need the grass, not the sand') before culminating in him professing not to care about the loss of former friends or that he is materially successful "cause okra'. While he might be referring to the food, it may also be that Tyler is saying that these things (friends, enemies and wealth) are transitory and that the soul is all that remains. The split-screen video to the song also suggests a kind of 'wormhole' aesthetic along the lines that I outline in this essay; that is, two different spaces and times are seen to coexist simultaneously.
- 6 This argument recalls a well-known dictum from New Age figurehead Alan Watts: '[w]e do not "come into" this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean "waves," the universe "peoples." Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe' [35] (p. 9).
- 7 It is quite common in *The Underground Railroad* for the show to cut to 'expressive' shots of characters standing in exterior spaces and looking at or close to the camera, which, in turn, approaches and/or circles around them. In other words, Jenkins does apply a 'wormhole' aesthetic pretty consistently, although perhaps its clearest expression is in *The Gaze* (USA, 2021), a medium-length film that features the extended cast of the show in shots similar to the ones just described above: portrait shots filmed at or close to the 'magic hour' and in which the camera moves towards and/or around the characters. Jenkins provides no narrative to

connect the images, making it a much more experimental work than *The Underground Railroad* and thus, in some senses, a perhaps more ‘radical’ work.

- 8 The relatively ‘happy’ ending of the show—in that Cora, together with Molly, escapes and heads west—would seem also to involve some tension. Has there been a ‘happy ending’ for African Americans in the wake of slavery? Many of the theorists assembled here would, as per Wilderson’s proposed ‘Afropessimism’, suggest not, although an unhappy ending might further render Black suffering as a spectacle. While to head west might seem too ‘white American’ a resolution to the film, in that white American Manifest Destiny is centred around the ethos to ‘go west’, that Cora, Molly and Ollie are heading at least initially to St. Louis might, as Whitehead himself suggests, also remind readers (and, by extension, viewers) that the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson was at the heart of the recent rise of Black Lives Matter following the killing of Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in 2014. Furthermore, if an ongoing journey to California might seem to promise a life better even than St. Louis/Ferguson, one need only view Little Marvin’s brutally violent Amazon Prime show *Them* (USA, 2021), which looks at the origins of Compton as a Black community within Los Angeles, to see that Los Angeles, the cinematic destination par excellence, is equally unwelcoming to Black Americans. As Whitehead says, ‘wherever we [African Americans] go, we’re still in America, which is an imperfect place. That’s the reality of things’ [54] (also quoted in [55]).

References

- Gillespie, M.B. *The Train is Always Leaving: A Conversation with Barry Jenkins*. *Film Q.* **2021**, *75*, 12–18. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Whitehead, C. *The Underground Railroad*; Anchor: New York, NY, USA, 2018.
- Baraka, A. *Home: Social Essays by LeRoi Jones*; Akashi Classics: New York, NY, USA, 1966.
- Carney, J.A.; Rosomoff, R.N. *In the Shadow of Slavery: Africa’s Botanical Legacy in the Atlantic World*; University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 2009.
- Klein, L.F. *An Archive of Taste: Race and Eating in the Early United States*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2020.
- Walker, S.S. Redefining What Wisdom is and Who Has It. *Callaloo* **1988**, *34*, 201–205. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Morrison, T. The Site of Memory. In *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*; Zinsser, W., Ed.; Houghton Mifflin: New York, NY, USA, 1998; pp. 83–102.
- McKittrick, K. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2006.
- Wynter, S. Novel and History, Plot and Plantation. *Savacou* **1971**, *5*, 95–102.
- Tompkins, K.W. *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century*; New York University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2012.
- Spillers, H.J. Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book. *Diacritics* **1987**, *17*, 64–81. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2008.
- Jackson, Z.I. *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*; New York University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2020.
- de Castro, V.E. *Cannibal Metaphysics*; Skafish, P., Translator; Univocal: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2014.
- Martinot, S.; Sexton, J. The Avant-Garde of White Supremacy. *Soc. Identities* **2003**, *9*, 169–181. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Haraway, D. Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin. *Environ. Humanit.* **2015**, *6*, 159–165. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Davis, J.; Moulton, A.A.; Van Sant, L.; Williams, B. Anthropocene, Capitalocene, ... Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises. *Geogr. Compass* **2019**, *13*, e12438. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Gikandi, S. *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*; Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ, USA, 2011.
- DeLoughrey, E. *Allegories of the Anthropocene*; Duke University Press: Durham, NC, USA, 2019.
- Brathwaite, K. Caribbean Culture: Two Paradigms. In *Missile and Capsule*; Martini, J., Ed.; Universität Bremen: Bremen, Germany, 1883; pp. 9–54.
- Sharpe, C. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*; Duke University Press: Durham, NC, USA, 2016.
- Flood, M. *Moonlight: Screening Queer Black Youth*; Routledge: Abingdon, UK, 2022.
- De Jong, G. *You Can’t Eat Freedom: Southerners and Social Justice after the Civil Rights Movement*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2016.
- Ellison, R. *Invisible Man*; Vintage: New York, NY, USA, 1995.
- Benston, K.W. ‘I Yam what I Am’: Naming and Unnaming in Afro-American Literature. *Black Am. Lit. Forum* **1982**, *16:1 (Spring)*, 3–11. [[CrossRef](#)]
- DeLoughrey, E. Yam, Roots, and Rot: Allegories of the Provision Grounds. *Small Axe* **2011**, *34*, 58–75. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Patterson, O. *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica*; Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Madison, NJ, USA, 1969.
- Patterson, O. Language, Ethnicity, and Change. *J. Basic Writ.* **1980**, *3*, 62–73. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Hooks, B. *Sisters of the Yam: Black Women and Self-Recovery*; Routledge: London, UK, 2015.
- Walker, A. *The Color Purple*; Penguin: New York, NY, USA, 2019.
- Brathwaite, K. *Mother Poem*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 1977.
- Kolb, C. Okra. In *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 7: Foodways*; Edge, J.T., Ed.; University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, NC, USA, 2007; pp. 206–207.
- Gyekye, K. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 1987.

34. Moten, F. *Black and Blur: Consent Not to Be a Single Being*; Duke University Press: Durham, NC, USA, 2017.
35. Watts, A. *The Book: On the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*; Vintage: New York, NY, USA, 1989.
36. Giorgis, H. What Sets Amazon's the Underground Railroad Apart from Other Slavery Stories. *The Atlantic*. 14 May 2021. Available online: <https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/05/underground-railroad-amazon-barry-jenkins/618892/> (accessed on 11 August 2022).
37. Darwin, C. *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms*; CreateSpace: Scotts Valley, CA, USA, 2015.
38. Maldacena, J.; Susskind, L. Cool Horizons for Entangled Black Holes. *Prog. Phys.* **2013**, *61*, 781–811. [CrossRef]
39. Beller, J. *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital*; Pluto Press: London, UK, 2018.
40. Jacobs, H. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*; Oxford University Press: Oxford, UK, 2015.
41. Wallace, M. *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory*; Verso: London, UK, 2016.
42. Hammonds, E. Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality. In *The Black Studies Reader*; Bobo, J., Hudley, C., Michel, C., Eds.; Routledge: London: UK, 1994; pp. 301–314.
43. Bradley, R. Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)stain of Black Female (W)holeness. *Rhizomes* **2016**, *29*. [CrossRef]
44. Jackson, Z.I. 'Theorizing in a Void': Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics. *South Atl. Q.* **2018**, *117*, 617–648. [CrossRef]
45. Philip, M.N. *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays*; The Mercury Press: Toronto, ON, Canada, 1997.
46. Moten, F. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*; University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, MN, USA, 2003.
47. Whitehead, C. Stone Lecture. Available online: <https://lasells.oregonstate.edu/event/stone-lecture-colson-whitehead> (accessed on 11 August 2022).
48. Girish, D. Barry Jenkins Is Rebuilding American History with The Underground Railroad. *Sight & Sound*. 5 May 2021. Available online: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/interviews/barry-jenkins-underground-railroad-series-adaptation-slave-flight-american-history> (accessed on 11 August 2022).
49. Wilderson, F.B., III. *Afropessimism*; Liveright: New York, NY, USA, 2020.
50. Bradley, R. Picturing Catastrophe: The Visual Politics of Racial Reckoning. *The Yale Review*. 25 May 2021. Available online: <https://yalereview.org/article/picturing-catastrophe> (accessed on 11 August 2022).
51. Sexton, J. *Black Masculinity and the Cinema of Policing*; Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke, UK, 2017.
52. Hunt, A. 'Making Black Cinema "Palatable" Does Zero': Skinner Myers on The Sleeping Negro. *Filmmaker Magazine*. 8 December 2021. Available online: <https://filmmakermagazine.com/112642-making-black-cinema-palatable-does-zero-skinner-myers-on-the-sleeping-negro/#.YvVYwC2Q1R0> (accessed on 11 August 2022).
53. Laws, P.R. Crossing the Boundaries of Decency? 12 Years a Slave and the Pornography of Pain. In *Narratives of Border Crossings: Literary Approaches and Negotiations*; Fellner, A.M., Ed.; Baden-Baden: Nomos, Germany, 2021; pp. 207–222.
54. Schuessler, J. Colson Whitehead on Slavery, Success and Writing the Novel That Really Scared Him. 2 August 2016. Available online: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/04/books/colson-whitehead-on-slavery-success-and-writing-the-novel-that-really-scared-him.html> (accessed on 11 August 2022).
55. Mellis, J. Continuing Conjure: African-Based Spiritual Traditions in Colson Whitehead's the Underground Railroad and Jesmyn Ward's Sing, Unburied, Sing. *Religions* **2019**, *10*, 403. [CrossRef]
56. Gillespie, M.B. Thinking about the Underground Railroad: With Walton M. Myumba, Samantha N. Sheppard, and Kristen J. Warner. *Film. Q.* **2021**, *75*, 19–26. [CrossRef]
57. Davis, A. Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves. 1972. *Mass. Rev.* **1972**, *31:1/2 (Winter/Spring)*, 81–100.
58. Marder, M. *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 2013.