

An Analysis of Neo-Slave Narrative in *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

Colson Whitehead's novel *The Underground Railroad* is regarded as a quintessential work of the neo-slave narrative genre. This paper constructs a three-dimensional analytical framework of "inheritance innovation revision" to systematically examine the novel. The study argues that, at the thematic level, the novel inherits and deepens the traditional motifs of slave suffering and the pursuit of freedom, exposing with striking force the systemic violence and logic of bodily objectification inherent in slavery. At the stylistic level, through "temporal spatial dislocation" and intertextual writing, it dismantles linear historiography and reveals the structural continuity of racism. At the paradigmatic level, by means of a "museumizing" (mediating narrative) and the deconstruction of Mabel's escape myth, it revises the emotional immersion model and closed endings of earlier neo-slave narratives, constructing a critical apparatus for historical cognition. Through its postmodern narrative strategies, *The Underground Railroad* transcends the traditional neo-slave narrative model, offering a profound literary cognitive lens for understanding the systemic nature and historical continuity of racial oppression in America.

Keywords

The Underground Railroad; neo-slave narrative; Colson Whitehead; temporal spatial dislocation; museumization.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

The Underground Railroad is a representative work by Colson Whitehead, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 2017. The novel centers on the escape of a young girl, Cora, from a Georgia plantation to the "free states" of the North. In Whitehead's hands, the brutal realities of slavery are exposed comprehensively and deeply. The novel's meticulous depictions of the inhumane suffering endured by enslaved blacks on the plantation—such as grueling labor, arbitrary corporal punishment, and psychological humiliation—are profoundly shocking, enabling readers to viscerally experience the abyss of suffering of that era. Through its unique narrative techniques, the novel engages in a profound dialogue between this historical trauma and the persistent racial issues in contemporary American society, making the work transcend mere historical retrospection and become an outstanding literary text that connects past and present and stimulates critical reflection on the structural nature of racism.

The neo-slave narrative is an important genre in contemporary African American literature, emerging in the 1960s. Its mission is to deconstruct white centered historical views and reconstruct black subjective experience. Through the powerful weapon of literary creation, it seeks to break the longstanding suppression and erasure of black voices in white dominated historical writing, and to truthfully and comprehensively present the suffering and unyielding pursuit of freedom by enslaved blacks under the shadow of slavery. Bernard Bell defines it as "a modern narrative that preserves the oral tradition and tells a story of breaking chains and

pursuing freedom.” Salman Rushdie further expands its scope to include “various genres depicting slavery and its effects,” covering not only traditional novels and autobiographies but also poetry, drama, and other art forms. This fully reflects the diversity and inclusiveness of the neo-slave narrative in the contemporary literary context, enabling it to delve into and present, from different angles and through different means, the material and psychological dual traumas inflicted by slavery on black individuals and communities, as well as the long historical process of black resistance and self-liberation.

1.2. Literature Review

Scholarly attention has already been paid to the neo-slave narrative qualities of *The Underground Railroad*. Existing research can be roughly grouped into three foci: thematic representation, narrative strategies, and paradigmatic revision.

At the level of thematic representation, studies often focus on the novel’s exposure of the violence of slavery. Zhang Huijie (2021) and others analyze the embodied writing of discipline and resistance in the text, emphasizing how its sensory impact forces readers to confront historical truth. Sun Xin (2023), drawing on Foucault’s theory of discipline, reveals how the plantation systematically objectifies the body as a tool of production. Additionally, Huang Yilan and Lin Yuanfu (2022) interpret Cora’s escape as a form of “African American travel narrative,” arguing that her spatial displacement symbolizes the gradual construction of subjective agency.

At the level of narrative strategies, scholars have noted the formal innovations of the novel. Shi Penglu (2020) points out that the technique of “temporalspatial dislocation” reveals the transhistorical continuity of racial oppression. Xue Xiaofeng (2022) and Qiao Juan (2022) focus on its intertextual practices, analyzing the novel’s dialogue with classic texts such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and arguing that it pieces together a panoramic critical picture of slavery.

At the level of paradigmatic revision, research has begun to touch upon the novel’s reflection on the neo-slave narrative tradition. Dubey’s (2020) concept of “museumization” is highly illuminating, suggesting that the train linking various states is actually a moving display case of racial oppression. Carra (2021) further analyzes the alienation effect produced by the “station reset” mechanism and the “antinarrative strategy” that subverts the Mabel myth, pointing out that it breaks with the emotional immersion and definitive closure of earlier narratives.

However, existing studies often focus on single dimensions and lack an integrated theoretical framework to systematically explain the novel’s internal logic of “inheritance innovation revision.” There is also a lack of sufficiently deep critical interpretation of the poetic and political intentions behind Whitehead’s narrative experiments. Therefore, this study aims to construct a three dimensional analytical framework to bridge these research gaps, focusing on how the novel achieves its transcendence and revision of the neo-slave narrative tradition through the very form of narrative itself.

1.3. Structure and Significance

This study aims to conduct an indepth analysis of the neo-slave narrative characteristics of *The Underground Railroad* through a systematic three dimensional framework of “inheritance innovation revision.” The main body of the paper will first trace the literary paradigm of the traditional slave narrative, using Cora’s escape as the core to examine how the novel deepens and reconstructs the two central themes of slave suffering and the pursuit of freedom. Then, the study will focus on the novel’s innovative narrative style, exploring the deconstruction of linear historiography through “temporal spatial dislocation” and the value of intertextual dialogue with classic ethnic texts in reconstructing black subjectivity. Finally, the paper will critically examine the novel’s revision of earlier neo-slave narrative paradigms, analyzing how the “museumizing” mediating narrative constructs a critical historical cognition, and how the

subversion of the Mabel myth at the end reveals the unhealed nature of historical trauma. The theoretical significance of this study lies in its analysis of Whitehead's postmodern narrative strategies, which break away from the reliance on linear historical progression and emotional immersion models in earlier neo-slave narratives, thereby enriching the theoretical connotations of the neo-slave narrative. Its practical significance lies in using the novel's unique strategy of "historical reconstruction modern reflection" to prompt readers to examine the structural roots of American racial issues at the institutional level, providing a profound literary critical model for contemporary public discussions on racial justice.

2. Chapter One Inheritance and Deepening of Themes: The Systematization of Suffering Writing and the Subjectivity of the Pursuit of Freedom

Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* is deeply rooted in the African American literary tradition. Its contribution to the neo-slave narrative paradigm is first manifested in its inheritance and deepening of the two core themes: "slave suffering" and "pursuit of freedom." With a strikingly contemporary pen, Whitehead reactivates these themes, allowing historical trauma to resonate powerfully in the present context.

2.1. Systemic Violence and Bodily Objectification: A Contemporary Presentation of the Suffering of Slavery

In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead inherits the realist style of early slave narratives, using almost brutally graphic realism to continue and intensify the exposure of the horrors of slavery. The novel opens by portraying the Randall plantation in Georgia as an extreme "space of disciplinary violence," where "countless slaves lived in fear and resignation under the punishments of the plantation owners" (Tan & Chen, 2024: 54). Its operational logic closely resembles a bloody practice of Foucauldian panopticism in the field of racial oppression. Here, overseers with whips roam the fields, arbitrarily lashing slaves for the slightest perceived infraction; the screams of torn flesh and bloody scenes are the norm on the plantation.

"Men hung from trees, left for buzzards and crows. Women were flayed with ninetails until their bones showed. Living bodies, dead bodies, all burned together on funeral pyres. Feet were cut off to prevent escape; hands were cut off to stop theft" (Whitehead, 2016: 39). "Connell had skinned them. He started with Chester, according to the rule for transgressions: dipping a brush in pepper sauce and rubbing it vigorously into their raw backs" (Whitehead, 2016: 42). These depictions of slave suffering are not isolated incidents but necessary products of the systemic violence embedded in the economic and social structure of slavery, essential to its maintenance. This meticulous writing of suffering is not mere sensory provocation; it is a faithful record and powerful indictment of the historical reality of black slaves being completely "objectified" and reduced to "chattel property." Whitehead makes readers feel the existential state of slaves as "things" — bought and sold at will, used as wagers, their bodies treated as pure tools of production and reproduction. This profoundly echoes and reinforces the exposure of plantation inhumanity by early slave narrative authors such as Frederick Douglass. However, Whitehead's writing in a contemporary context, with its narrative intensity, graphic brutality, and revelation of systemic logic, has an even more powerful impact, forcing modern readers to confront the antihuman essence of slavery and its transgenerational spiritual legacy.

2.2. Flight as a Practice of Agency: Subject Formation on the Road to Freedom

Parallel to the writing of suffering, the novel also persistently depicts "freedom" as a core driving force, which is the spiritual essence of traditional slave narratives. The protagonist Cora's escape journey is a contemporary expression of the classic motif of "breaking chains and pursuing freedom" within the neo-slave narrative. Through Cora's perspective, Whitehead

vividly presents the absolute value of freedom to the enslaved: “It was her first time in the outside world, and there was much she did not know. She herself was in favor of leaving as soon as possible. Every mile between her and the plantation was a victory, and she treasured it” (Whitehead, 2016: 71). These simple words carry immense emotional power; spatial distance is here transformed into psychological liberation and the initial awakening of subjectivity. “In the twists and turns of her flight, she sought a loving kingdom of freedom” (Sun Mengqi, 2021: 80). Each step away from the plantation is an act of resistance against the geography of enslavement and a hardwon gain of control over her own destiny.

Cora’s flight is no romantic adventure. The dangers she faces are multiple and deadly: not only the relentless pursuit of the brutal slave catcher Ridgeway, but also the harsh natural environment, and, above all, the institutionalized racial discrimination and oppression network that, while varying in form, is essentially the same in the states along her route. Yet, amidst this encirclement, the extraordinary courage, tenacious will, and wisdom to survive in desperate circumstances that Cora displays are an inheritance, celebration, and literary resurrection of the spirit of countless real fugitives lost in the dust of history. “Cora’s personal experience depicts the historical details overlooked by grand history, reveals the Westerncentric ideology within grand history, and uses the small history of personal narrative to subvert the Western construction of Africa, countering the so-called progressive historiography from south to north, from low to high” (Huang & Lin, 2022: 57). Through Cora’s narrative, Whitehead not only continues the highest affirmation of the value of freedom but also emphasizes that the process of flight itself is a difficult construction and confirmation of subjectivity. For enslaved blacks, freedom is not only a physical relocation but also a spiritual rebirth and restoration of human dignity. Cora’s journey thus becomes an epic of action in the struggle for the right to be human under extreme oppression.

Whitehead’s treatment of the two core themes of traditional slave narrative—“slave suffering and struggle” and “the desire and pursuit of freedom”—in *The Underground Railroad* is not a simple historical retelling but a contemporary deep activation and creative deepening. Through powerfully concrete depictions of violence, he lays bare the systemic logic of “objectification” and historical trauma under slavery, exposing them to readers with a level of cruelty and systematic revelation that surpasses earlier narratives. At the same time, Cora’s arduous and sacrificial flight is not only a classic quest for the ultimate value of “freedom” but also a profound manifestation and reshaping of slave agency by Whitehead, interpreting flight itself as a dynamic process of continuously constructing, confirming, and defending subjectivity and human dignity under extreme oppression. This relentless exposure of the systemic nature of suffering and this profound insight into the formation of subjectivity in the pursuit of freedom give the dustcovered history a resonance that penetrates time and space, powerfully continuing and innovating the enduring narrative tradition of African American literature.

3. Chapter Two Stylistic Innovation and Manifestation: Narrative Strategies of Historical Reconstruction

On the basis of inheriting and deepening traditional themes at the level of content, *The Underground Railroad* further achieves a breakthrough in the style of neo-slave narrative through the narrative strategies of “temporal spatial dislocation” and “intertextuality,” the core of which is to dismantle linear historiography and reveal the transtemporal continuity of racial oppression.

3.1. “Temporal Spatial Dislocation”: Juxtaposition, Deconstruction, and the Transhistorical Revelation of Racial Violence

Abandoning the linear chronology of traditional historical fiction, Whitehead boldly employs a postmodern technique of “temporal spatial dislocation.” He juxtaposes emblematic forms of racial oppression from different historical periods within the same temporal spatial framework of Cora’s escape. The description of Ajarry being bound in chains and sold like merchandise replicates the objectifying logic of 19th century slavery—where blacks were considered private property of slave owners, to be bought and sold at will, their dignity and rights trampled upon. This depiction is not only a faithful presentation of historical fact but also a powerful indictment of the antihuman nature of slavery. The eugenics experiments witnessed by Cora in South Carolina directly allude to the “scientific racism” that flourished in the United States and the West in the early 20th century, where pseudoscientific researchers, in the name of “social progress,” implemented medical surveillance and birth control, attempting to “improve” different races through eugenics, revealing how racism could perpetuate the logic of control under slavery in the guise of “modern science,” providing a hypocritical cloak for systemic oppression. The episode where Cora is painted in grease and made to play the part of an “authentic African” in a museum is a historical reenactment of the “human zoos” of the 19th century world’s fairs. “The ‘museum of natural wonders’ forcibly inputs a discourse and logic of hierarchy and difference, expecting blacks to willingly enter a ‘tool-like’ role and be controlled by whites” (Wang & Yu, 2023: 32). At world’s fairs, blacks were displayed as exhibits, becoming tools for whites to display their “civilization” and “superiority.” This episode profoundly reflects the humiliation and discrimination suffered by blacks in whitedominated society.

This deliberate folding of time and space aims to break linear historiography and reveal that slavery was not a closed, concluded historical stage. Through this synchronic presentation of history, Whitehead reveals how racial science continued the commodification logic of slavery, thus turning ‘progress’ into a violent myth. This implies that the shadow of slavery does not exist only in a specific past period but runs like a ghost through all stages of American history. Temporal spatial dislocation forces readers to abandon simplistic periodizations of history and instead examine the essence of racial oppression from a systemic, structural height.

3.2. Intertextual Writing: Activating Literary Tradition and Reconstructing Black Experience

The novel engages in deep intertextual dialogue with classic ethnic texts. Cora’s hidden existence in the attic of North Carolina forms a profound intertext with Linda’s seven-year concealment in an attic in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. In Jacobs’s work, Linda hides in the attic above her master’s house, using the “non-space” of concealment to resist the deprivation of bodily control; her cramped living space is called by Jacobs “a worse prison than a coffin.” Whitehead represents the attic image in *The Underground Railroad*: “The space narrowed as it rose from the floor, less than three feet high and only fifteen feet long” (Whitehead, 2016: 173). This intertextuality deconstructs the single narrative model of “open resistance” in traditional slave narratives, highlighting the survival wisdom of black women under the double oppression of race and gender. The episode where Cora disguises herself as cargo to escape forms an intertext with the true story of Henry “Box” Brown, who escaped in a wooden crate in 1849. In Brown’s autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown*, the crate is depicted as a “mobile slave coffin,” its precise dimensions quantifying the process of bodily objectification into a measurable scale of oppression. When Whitehead reconstructs this detail, he gives the box more complex symbolic dimensions: as Cora curls up inside, “The rushing air turned the ride into a stormy ordeal. Cora had to twist her body from time to time to catch a breath” (Whitehead, 2016: 166). Cora’s and Brown’s strategy of “commodification”

is actually a tactical appropriation of white objectifying logic. When blacks actively transform their bodies into commodity signs, they expose the absurd essence of slavery's "human as property." This narrative strategy breaks with the pathos frame of "bodily suffering" in early slave narratives, instead using the paradox of "objectifying resistance" to reveal the deep connection between racial oppression and the capitalist economic logic and body politics. The physical underground railroad network in *The Underground Railroad* also forms an intertextual dialogue with the sewer system of New York City where the protagonist Daniels hides in Richard Wright's *The Man Who Lived Underground*. In Wright, the sewer is an "underground kingdom" that Daniels uses to flee white society and practice existential resistance, an extreme space of modern alienation. Whitehead gives the underground railroad a double metaphor: it is both Cora's escape route and a "mobile apparatus of resistance," its iron tracks symbolizing the hidden black historical veins obscured by mainstream historical narratives. When mainstream society forces blacks into the physical and cultural underground, that space instead becomes a heterotopia nurturing resistance consciousness. Through this intertext, Whitehead extends the theme of modern alienation that Wright explored into the historical dimension, making underground space a narrative hub connecting the oppression of slavery and modern racial segregation, thereby breaking the linear historiography that fragments black experience.

The intertextuality of *The Underground Railroad* with classic ethnic texts is essentially a creative activation of the black literary tradition. Using "intertextual montage," it pieces together discrete historical fragments into a panoramic picture of slavery, forcing readers to examine the continuity of racial oppression across texts.

The narrative innovations displayed by Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad* achieve a profound reinterpretation of the historical experience of slavery and its continuity. Through these pioneering narrative experiments, Whitehead weaves historical fragments into a panoramic picture, deepening the understanding of slavery while accomplishing, through a unique literary form, a contemporary expression and historical rewriting of black trauma, resistance, and subjectivity, thereby expanding the argumentative scope of the neo-slave narrative.

4. Chapter Three Paradigmatic Revision and Breakthrough: A Critical Reflection on the Early neo-slave Narrative

While thematic deepening and stylistic innovation provide content and formal support for the neo-slave narrative, Whitehead goes further by adopting a "museumizing" mediating narrative and deconstructing the Mabel myth, thereby revising the emotional immersion and closedness of early neo-slave narratives and constructing a critical historical cognition.

4.1. "Museumizing" Mediating Narrative: Constructing a Critical Apparatus for Historical Cognition

One of Whitehead's most subversive innovations is the literal materialization of the metaphorical "underground railroad" into a real railway system with physical tracks and stations. This premise constructs a mediating historical narrative based on a logic of "museumization."

In traditional historical writing and literary creation, the presentation of slavery is often relatively onesided or fragmentary, making it difficult to fully capture its complex structures and diverse forms. Whitehead, by taking the physical train system as the core, transforms it into a "moving museum" that "reveals how slavery is museumized, presented as a static exhibit" (Dubey, 2020: 122). Its tracks, like historical veins, connect discrete spatial scenes across the Southern states and transform the diverse, heterogeneous forms of slavery into "specimens of

social forms” available for “gazing.” “Each state that Cora passes through on her flight displays the nation’s different atrocities against blacks and its entrenched racism” (Cheng Hua, 2018: 39). The Georgia plantation becomes a quintessential site of violence, where slaves suffer brutal physical torture and psychological oppression, and the planter’s atrocities nakedly display the barbaric essence of slavery. The “Museum of Natural Wonders” in South Carolina stages the pseudoscientific farce of living exhibition, treating blacks as exotic exhibits—an objectification of the black body and a trampling of personality and dignity. The “Freedom Trail” in North Carolina, on the surface a path to freedom, conceals the bloody spectacle of racial massacre, mercilessly piercing the false illusion of freedom. Finally, the train arrives in Pennsylvania, which appears to be the shore of freedom but still holds the reality of racial discrimination, further revealing the continuity and complexity of racial oppression.

The “reset” mechanism at each station is an important feature of this narrative system. It refuses the reader’s immersive emotional empathy, instead creating a “critical estrangement” that forces the reader into a cool, observational position, confronting the structural characteristics of slavery as “systemic violence.” Through this device, Whitehead guides readers away from passive feeling of phenomena toward a structural analysis of the institution, accomplishing an epistemic reconstruction of the system of racial oppression.

4.2. Deconstructing the Mabel Myth: Subversion of Narrative Closure and the Opening of Historical Trauma

Another important revision of the neo-slave narrative tradition by the novel is embodied in its structural subversion of narrative closure and historical certainty, the core of which is the shocking revelation of the fate of Mabel Randall.

Traditional slave narratives tend toward some form of narrative closure, where the protagonist successfully reaches a symbolic “Promised Land” of freedom or dies heroically in resistance. This closure provides readers with an emotional outlet and a narrative basis for “settling” historical trauma. However, Whitehead completely dismantles this supporting narrative logic. In the novel, Cora’s spiritual support and motivation for flight are rooted in the legend of her mother Mabel’s “successful escape.” This narrative of “successful escape” forms the selfevident “real” background of the first half of the novel; it is the cornerstone upon which readers understand Cora’s tenacity, measure the “utility” of the underground railroad, and pin their hopes for the faint victories under slavery. However, the novel’s epilogue hits like a narrative earthquake. With an almost abrupt shift in perspective and temporal leap, Whitehead takes the reader to the last moments of Mabel’s flight, mercilessly revealing that she did not reach freedom but died drowning in a swamp, bitten by a snake, within sight of it. “Her story becomes a subversive narrative of ‘impossibility,’ rejecting endings and victories” (Carra, 2021: 49). This revelation is by no means a simple “plot twist”; it is a radical undermining of the entire preceding narrative foundation. It not only announces the tragic failure of Mabel’s personal fate but, more fatally, shakes the core narrative supporting Cora’s actions, the reader’s empathy, and the novel’s internal world’s understanding of the “possibility of escape.” Mabel’s myth is shown to be a huge illusion built on accidental death.

Through this, Whitehead accomplishes a double subversion. First, he rejects the closure model common in neo-slave narratives, which symbolically “overcomes” historical trauma through individual success, replacing it with a cruel, open rupture that forces readers to confront the extreme fragility of the road to freedom under slavery and the uncontrollability of history. Second, he deconstructs the reliability of narrative itself, exposing the deceptiveness of historical memory and the great risk of pinning individual hopes on another’s success narrative. Mabel’s drowning breaks the redemptive teleology of the underground railroad. It not only ends a life but symbolically destroys the “spiritual pillar” that readers relied on to understand

the novel and find emotional comfort, forcing a reexamination of the true meaning of “freedom” and “escape” in the context of slavery’s extreme violence and their unbearable weight.

The Underground Railroad, with its double narrative revolution, completes a critical reconstruction of the neo-slave narrative tradition. Together, these two elements constitute a postmodern historical writing paradigm: refusing to heal historical trauma with symbolic redemption, they instead transform the brutal ontology of slavery into a site of reflection that readers must actively enter, through the construction of a cognitive apparatus and the dissolution of narrative certainty. Whitehead thus goes beyond the neo-slave narrative’s desire to restore historical subjectivity, pointing directly to the irresolvability of historical violence itself and its continuation in contemporary cognitive structures. True historical reflection begins with the abandonment of comforting narratives and the confrontation of unhealed wounds.

5. Conclusion

Through the construction of a three-dimensional analytical framework of “inheritance innovation revision,” this study has systematically examined the neo-slave narrative characteristics of Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad*. The study finds that, at the thematic level, the novel deepens, in a strikingly powerful manner, the systematization of the writing of slave suffering and the dynamic formation of subjectivity in the pursuit of freedom. Its naked exposure of the objectifying logic of slavery and its reconstruction of Cora’s flight as a process of constructing dignity under extreme oppression transcend the pathos framework of earlier narratives. In terms of neo-slave narrative style, Whitehead, with the revolutionary technique of temporalspatial dislocation, juxtaposes emblematic forms of oppression from different historical periods, completely dismantling linear historiography and forcing readers to confront the transhistorical continuity of racism as structural violence. Its deep intertextuality with classic ethnic texts activates and reconstructs obscured black experiences. Most subversively, it revises the paradigm of the early neo-slave narrative. The “museumizing” mediating narrative turns the materialized underground railroad train into a moving critical site. The “reset” mechanism between stations creates critical estrangement, blocking emotional immersion and guiding readers toward a structural analysis of institutional violence. And the cruel deconstruction of the Mabel escape myth subverts narrative closure, revealing the unhealed nature of historical trauma. Whitehead abandons the traditional path that relied on linear progress and symbolic redemption, replacing it with the construction of a cognitive apparatus and the dissolution of historical certainty, transforming slavery and its contemporary echoes into a site of reflection that must be actively engaged. This greatly expands the theoretical depth of the neo-slave narrative. Its strategy of “historical reconstruction modern reflection” sharply reveals the structural genes and contemporary variants of American racial oppression, providing a literary cognitive lens for understanding and challenging systemic racism.

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