
A Neo-slave Narrative Reading of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016)

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Abstract: Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) is a narrative that carries the reader to the historical context of the abolitionist movement of the nineteenth century United States of America. More than two (2) centuries after, Whitehead re-imagines this episode of African American history in a skillful readership that deserves critical attention. Why does Whitehead retell the history of the abolitionist movement known as the Underground Railroad in fiction? Why does he choose a twelve year girl, Cora as the central character? Is the theme of slavery still relevant in today's social discourses? These are some questions that call on a literary analysis of this masterpiece. The paper relies on the Neo-slave Narrative approach to analyze the rationale behind this historical novel.

Keywords: Neo-slave narrative, the Underground Railroad, Abolition, Slavery, Neo-Slave Narrative Approach.

Résumé : *The Underground Railroad* (2016) de Colson Whitehead est un récit qui transporte le lecteur dans le contexte historique du mouvement abolitionniste du XIXe siècle aux États-Unis d'Amérique. Plus de deux (2) siècles après, Whitehead ré-imagine cet épisode de l'histoire afro-américaine dans une lecture habile qui mérite une attention critique. Pourquoi Whitehead retrace-t-il l'histoire du mouvement abolitionniste connu sous le nom de chemin de fer clandestin dans une fiction? Pourquoi choisit-il une jeune fille de douze ans, Cora, comme personnage central? Le thème de l'esclavage est-il toujours d'actualité dans les discours sociaux d'aujourd'hui? Autant de questions qui font appel à une analyse littéraire de ce chef-d'œuvre. L'article s'appuie sur l'approche du récit néo-esclavagiste pour analyser la logique de ce roman historique.

Mots-clés: Récit néo-esclavagiste, le chemin de fer clandestin, l'abolition, l'esclavage, approche narrative néo-esclavagiste.

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Introduction

Reimagining the past in contemporary literary creation is not new, especially if the whirling effects of this past have lasted throughout the time. For instance, in the American context, black slavery and its consequences much fueled literary imagination known as the Slave Narrative genre. This literary genre accounts for the evils of bondage, written either by former slaves or scholars outside the slavery system. Ruth Miller and Peter. J. Katopes write about Slave Narratives that, they:

have their roots in Puritan writings, particularly in journals, diaries, autobiographies, and narrations, all designed to record the Puritan experience of the "walk with God." Slave narratives use a similar form to record the flight to freedom; they are chronological in structure, episodic, and provide little, if any, transition. Events are drawn from common experience; incidents that dismay or horrify or repel are frequently recounted with a lack of passion usually associated with literature designed to demonstrate the truth. There are auction blocks, lashings, escapes, and recaptures; there are tears and prayers and exhortations; there are special providences recorded, coincidences, suspenseful moments in flight, tricks to outwit captors, all of this presented in a tone that is pervasively sober. If there is a preponderance of gloom, there is also optimism; despair mingles with joy. And the overriding purpose of the narrative is to activate the will of the reader to abolish first the slave trade and finally slavery. (21)

Miller and Katopes provide a comprehensive definition of the Slave Narrative literary genre, which emerged at the post-Civil War America as a medium of slaves' accounts of their lives in bondage. Many decades after slavery, writers still frisk in the memories of the antebellum South to bring out some untold stories with contemporary expectations. The imagination of slaves' accounts to make them relevant in contemporary context is what is known as Neo-slave Narrative, and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) is an example. Ashraf H. Rushdy in his book *Neo-slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* declares that "Neo-slave narratives are modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the

experience or the effect of new world slavery” (533). Rushdy argues that the contemporary world exhibits some forms of enslavement typical to the historical black slavery in the Americas, and creative writers address such issues by using the slave narrative tradition. These slave narratives in contemporary literature are qualified as neo-slave narratives, since they carry the traditional slave narrative features, but have contemporary implications. Marta Frątczak opines that “... saving from oblivion the memory of the dispossessed, and conveying their historical experience through fiction, has always necessitated finding the way to reconcile undocumented histories with the practical demands of novelistic narration”(33). According to Frątczak, the necessity to retell slave narratives today resides in the writers’ commitment to keep the slaves’ memory alive and exhume untold stories in order to heal the black people’s bitter past. Colson Whitehead released *The Underground Railroad* in 2016, and Michael Szczechowski argues that:

Whitehead uses the simple premise of a slave girl’s odyssey through a hellish, early 19th century southern United States and conveys his thoughts and concerns for modern-day America, specifically of the lingering effects that slavery and racism has had on Americans, and bravely paints an honest picture of the people we are.

Szczechowski is then suggesting a contemporary interpretation of Whitehead’s fiction which addresses modern day societal concerns from a Slave Narrative perspective. Bernard W. Bell argues that Neo-slave Narratives “combine elements of fable, legend, and slave narrative to protest racism and justify the deeds, struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people” (289). Bell’s definition takes into account black people’s frustrations born from the antebellum South tradition, and that justifies their behavior among other ethnic groups in America. Bell seems to argue that, in a Neo-slave Narrative, there are some ashes of the past brought in the present to understand the behavior of the descendants of slaves in contemporary America. Angelyn Mitchell refers to the genre as “liberatory narratives”, since they mostly focus “on the enslaved protagonist’s attainment of freedom” (4). Mitchell’s assertion is much complex when she uses the term “liberatory narratives.” She seems to refer to stories, in which the protagonist forcibly attains freedom, softening by then the atrocities and inhuman conditions he had to face before reaching freedom.

The reading of Whitehead’s historical novel goads me to venture on the field of Neo-slave Narrative. From the preceding critics’ views, my work argues that, Colson Whitehead’s creative work not only refreshes slaves’ conditions of the antebellum South, but also seems much allegorically to address contemporary social injustices and how to cope with them. The paper focuses on the contemporary meaning that Whitehead’s novel carries and which makes it a Neo-slave Narrative. The interest of this analysis resides in the novelist’s choice of plantation Slave Narrative tradition to address contemporary racial issues in the United States. If black people still fight for freedom up to this twenty first century, it means that the ghost of slavery still haunts them and they should get rid of it. Obviously, the study is conducted from a Neo-slave Narrative perspective, which deals with contemporary creation of Slave Narratives. The Neo-slave Narrative theory helps in this context draw a contemporary meaning and relevance of Whitehead’s antebellum South narrative. Apart from Whitehead’s novel which is the primary source of this work, additional information will be drawn from articles, books, and other relevant materials to strengthen the point being made. The work first overviews the Neo-slave Narrative genre with reference to Whitehead’s novel by discussing the meaning of the title, the thematic approach and the characterization. Further, the paper analyses the relevance of reimagining Slave Narratives in the twenty first century as a form of resistance.

1. *The Underground Railroad: A Neo-Slave Narrative*

Colson Whitehead’s novel is published in 2016, when the Black Lives Matter movement was already rallying thousands of people to the cause of innocent and defenseless black male victims of white police murderers. Nikita Carney writes:

The BLM movement began in 2012 when George Zimmerman was acquitted after shooting and killing 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida. Three Black women activists, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, started the movement that subsequently engaged many, including many youth of color, in social justice activism across the country (181).

The movement evolved as an outcry for justice to the innocent victims of police harassment. It is quite arguable that Whitehead’s novel

finds a fertile ground for debate, since it is all about a struggle for freedom, just like the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement. Whitehead's novel opens with the account of Ajarry, the grandmother of Cora, the protagonist. Ajarry is arrested and sold to slave traders at the port of Ouidah, and eventually shipped to the New World⁶⁸ where she was sold many times to different plantations owners. Cora was resentful to escape slavery when Caesar brought the idea for the first time, (TUR 9) but when she remembered Mabel, her mother, she decided to flee. The story evolves through Cora and Caesar's hard journey northwards, stopping times to times at railroad stations, where some secret agents helped them with food and accommodation until they reached north. Ridgeway, a slave catcher was to bring Cora back to Georgia, but was ultimately defeated in a fight against Cora in a railroad station on Valentine. *The Underground Railroad*, though published in the twenty first century tells the story of a runaway slave girl, bringing the reader centuries back in the South American slavery tradition. Bringing back fugitive slaves' narratives in the twenty first century is Colson Whitehead's concern in *The Underground Railroad*, and he must have strong motives to refresh the old slavery tradition in a contemporary American society where the descendants of the former slaves are still oppressed. Colson's novel which is classified as a Neo-slave Narrative genre is part of many fictional works produced by non former slaves and out of the context of slavery, but which vividly depict the lives of black slaves on the southern plantations.

The debate around this literary genre has gained interest since its rise in the second half of the twentieth century, and according to Ashraf H. Rushdy, the Neo-slave Narrative genre is about the "contemporary narrativity of slavery" concerning "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (3). Rushdy refers to writers, who did never experience slavery, but deal with the plantation narrative style, of course with a specific purpose in mind. Valerie Smith observes that, the Neo-slave Narrative genre mostly refers to:

texts set during the period of slavery as well as those set afterwards, at any time from the era of Reconstruction

⁶⁸ Colson Whitehead. *The Underground Railroad*. (New York: Doubleday, 2016), 9 The subsequent quotations from this edition will be marked (TUR) followed by the page number.

until the present. They approach slavery from a myriad perspective [...] from realist novels grounded in historical research to speculative fiction, postmodern experiments, satire and works that combine these diverse methods (168).

Smith contends that, the Neo-slave Narrative genre is a writing style that alerts on the still rampant residues of bondage and injustices in America. The Neo-slave Narrative is a genre that links the past slavery pains to contemporary ones and Saidiya Hartman argues “If the ghost of slavery still haunts our present, it is because we are still looking for an exit from the prison” (133). Bridging past slavery traumas to the present forms of injustices (especially done to black people) is not only an outcry to end social injustices, but an opportunity to reveal some untold stories about slavery, and make them fit the modern social calamities. This is an alternative reception of slave narratives which were supposed to end with the last survivors of slavery. Timothy A. Spaulding observes in his work *Re-forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* that, modern narratives on slavery “create an alternative and fictional historiography based on a subjective, fantastic, and anti-realist representation of slavery” (2). Conclusively, a Neo-slave Narrative is the blending of Slave Narrative genre storyline with contemporary paradigms that serve as clues to draw meaning. Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* better fits the Neo-slave Narrative genre from its third person narrative point of view, where the reader is well informed about characters challenges and their inner thoughts. The traditional narratives by former slaves have mostly involved adults struggling to free themselves from the grids of bondage, but Whitehead’s novel spots a fifteen years old Cora, a defenseless girl who is fighting alone against the whole slavery structure. Whitehead’s choice of a vulnerable character foreshadows the degree of hardship ahead on the journey of freedom. Ridgeway, the villain is defeated in a close fight with the young Cora, and this implies that, the oppressed must stop running away from the evil, but he must definitely fight and cancel it from his existence. The contemporary meaning of the Slave Narrative genre is its still recurrent theme of injustice done to the most vulnerable people of the society, and which requires their own investment for total liberation, in the image of Cora.

2. *The Underground Railroad*: Struggle against Institutionalized Injustice

Colson Whitehead may have enough reasons to name his fictional work after the historical anti-slavery movement known as the Underground Railroad. Junior Ranger in his article “Discovering the Underground Railroad” writes:

The “Underground Railroad” is not actually a train operating along hidden railroad tracks. Instead, it refers to an idea. The Underground Railroad refers to the efforts of enslaved African Americans to gain their freedom through escape and flight—and the assistance of people who opposed slavery and willingly chose to help them to escape—through the end of the U.S. Civil War.

This anti-slavery movement was according to slave holders an illegal movement and this is in response to their assumptions that the title is given to the novel, to keep a close watch on social injustices and fight them. In this perspective, it is arguable that the title of Whitehead’s novel is to remind the readers that, in contemporary societies, there are still many forms of human subjugations, and philanthropists must rally with victims in their search for liberation as was the case of abolitionists. The title of Whitehead’s novel is to be understood beyond the context of African Americans’ bondage, which in fact provides much of the meaning to the narrative. Addressing to the Underground Railroad in the twenty first century may suggest that, there are new tales about the movement (the untold ones or the new interpretation the former ones embody today). There are hidden forms of injustices which politics fails to notice, and even when the victims raise alert, they are repressed by laws that seem too old to contemporary realities.

Colson Whitehead’s novel finds place in contemporary discourse because of the continuous subjugation of the masses by a handful of powerful people. Though the institutionalized black slavery is legally abolished, it had left much stain on the victims’ psyche. Their past trauma still springs whenever justice is twisted. In this part of my analysis, I consider the struggle for freedom, which is the main idea of Whitehead’s novel as a relevant topic in contemporary discourse. In her research work titled *Modern Representations of the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia* Eldra D. Walker investigates what remains of the antislavery movement in

Philadelphia and comes to the conclusion that, for the sake of memory and what it represents today, it must be preserved.

There are many ways to preserve the UGRR. One way of preserving the story of the UGRR is to preserve the documented ‘stations’ where fugitives sought aid. Another method is re-telling the stories of those fugitives who escaped bondage. In recent years, Congress has created laws to determine if the story of the UGRR can be preserved and how to honor the story of the UGRR. However, to truly commemorate and interpret the story of the UGRR, it must be reframed with the preservation of the stories of slavery, antislavery, and other forms of resistance (24).

In the center of Walker’s argument stands the imperious need to retell or reframe the stories of those who were involved in this philanthropic system. In Whitehead’s fictional context, the scenes of atrocities inflicted to black slaves meet the sympathy of Sam, one of the white conductors of the Underground Railroad. Sam’s job is to feed and host fugitive slaves, and upon Cora’s and Caesar’s arrival at the station, he declared: “This is my job,”... “You wait here until they come and fetch you”... “You made it,”... “You’re really here”.... “You’re a long way from Georgia,”... “South Carolina has a much more enlightened attitude toward colored advancement than the rest of the south. You’ll be safe here until we can arrange the next leg of your trip. It might take time” (TUR 73, 74). Still in the hands of the conductors of the Underground Railroad, Cora and Caesar are not safe and this accurately shapes the novel’s vibrant quest for freedom. Conclusively, Lander, one of the slave catchers remarks on the Valentine farm that, “Here’s one delusion: that we can escape slavery. We can’t. Its scars will never fade” (TUR 217). The novel finds its contemporary relevance in Lander’s words, which much bend on the psychological everlasting scars of slavery, that still exist in twenty first century under various forms, and much exercised against the descendants of black slaves. *The Underground Railroad* is a readership that serves as a reminder of the right of all human beings, regardless any difference in the pursuit of happiness, as stipulated in the preamble of the Declaration of Independence. It is because the handful of people on power position marginalizes the right of the masses that protests and discomforts of all

sorts are regularly expressed in modern societies. Whitehead displays the constant search for freedom in modern societies through the repetitive advertisements of reward (that begin some of the chapters of the narrative) for he who brings back a runaway slave to his holder (TUR 15, 68, 112, 155, 183). These advertisements are the very insidious facet of the unconstitutionally institutionalized black slavery, since runaway slaves are never safe, even once in antislavery territories. Cora, the heroine of the narrative did never rest, she was always held in motion, most of the time hiding from Ridgeway, the slave catcher and his crew. Her endless run much illustrates the unsafe human conditions, which need to be permanently improved regarding the new contexts.

The plight of the black characters in the novel is visible through the author's use of some paradigms embodying contemporary interpretation: the Griffin Building which is twelve stories high and the hob, which represents a modern psychiatric asylum or a ghetto. The Griffin Building is the highest building of the town and it hosts many businesses, among which Mr. Anderson's office of contracts in cotton (TUR 69-70). The Griffin Building with its high-tech features and the businesses its hosts represent modernity and the American capitalism, which has much developed from slaves' labor. By purposely inserting modern symbols in a story that is supposed to occur in a far remote time, the author is foreseeing the endless black slavery in the context of modern progress. The hob on Randall plantation is the cabin of the outcast women slaves (TUR 33-34), and it quietly fits a psychiatric asylum of modern times. This also helps understand how social ostracism worked on black people at the post-Civil War reduced them into psychologically disabled people overcrowded into ghettos and slums.

3. *The Underground Railroad: Empowering Women*

Colson Whitehead gathers appropriate and efficient materials in the hands of his heroine for her project of running for freedom. Cora is described as a fragile and a strong female character, much lucky enough to overcome all the adversities on her way to freedom. The narrator recalls that Cora has inherited the capacity to cope with difficulties from her grandmother Ajarry and resistance from Mabel, her mother (TUR 18). Cora's odyssey from the Randall plantation in Georgia to her encounter with Ollie the last conductor of the Underground Railroad heading to

California (TUR 232) is much like a fairytale. It seems that all the gods are with her and assist her whenever trouble comes. Cora represents all these social disinherited and unprivileged who struggle to achieve an average living in the midst of social challenges. Cora's young age, contrasted with the enormous challenges she faces quietly determines the strong moral character that hosts her innermost. Cora has to be empowered in one way or the other in order to endure the brutalities of plantation life and the dangers of the flight. Depicted from the image of Harriet Tubman, the well-known female figure of the historical Underground Railroad movement, Cora's omniscient thoughts guide her along her journey. She temporally lived in South Carolina under a fake identity: "BESSIE Carpenter was the name on the papers Sam gave her at the Station" (TUR 72). Sam is one of the white agents operating on the Underground Railroad, and his assistance allows Cora to temporally enjoy freedom before her hunter Ridgeway erupted in the city. Cora's permanent flight from one station to another well illustrates the unrest state of the contemporary marginalized, who demonstrate from various forms to have their requests heard and satisfied. She is a modern emblem of protest as she embodies many social representations like gender, race, age etc. Visibly, by choosing Cora as the protagonist, Whitehead enhances the discourse of struggle for freedom, which has formerly involved adults and much more male characters. Current protests around the world are much rallied on social networks platforms where the youth stand as key actors. Commenting on the central role played by the youth in contemporary social movements discourse, Nikita Carney observes in "All Lives Matter, but so Does Race: Black Lives Matter and the Evolving Role of Social Media" that, "While the public sphere is not universally accessible, the rise of social media appears to be increasing accessibility to national discourse, particularly for youth who are coming of age with the rise of this technology" (184). The rapid control of the internet by the youth, who ask for much freedom and justice all across the world, may have weighted on the Whitehead's choice of Cora as the central freedom fighter. Cora's early awareness about the unconstitutional aspect of slavery from now on strengthens and fuels her behavior:

The whites came to this land for a fresh start and to escape the tyranny of their masters, just as the freemen had fled theirs. But the ideals they held up for themselves, they

denied others. Cora had heard Michael recite the Declaration of Independence back on the Randall plantation many times, his voice drifting through the village like an angry phantom. She didn't understand the words, most of them at any rate, but *created equal* was not lost on her. The white men who wrote it didn't understand it either, if *all men* did not truly mean all men.... Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood (TUR 91).

For Cora, the Declaration of Independence rightly stipulates that: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (XLV). Cora better understood the controversy of the institutionalization of slavery after reading the above passage, and started searching for ways to readjust it. Being endowed with such great ingenuity, Cora is able to play her card through the manacles of the system, but still she is hunted by Ridgeway, the unrest slave catcher and his crew, who symbolize modern structures of hindrance to human fulfillment. Cora's final encounter with Ridgeway is a close fight in which the slave catcher is severely wounded, watching helplessly Cora run away. The scene of their fight is recalled as follows:

Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance... She waited until the slave catcher was on the third step. She spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron. The candle dropped. He attempted to keep his footing with her weight on him, reaching out for leverage against the wall, but she held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness. They fought and grappled in the violence of their fall...Cora untwined herself from Ridgeway and crawled toward the handcar, left leg in agony. The slave catcher didn't make a sound. The big bone in the man's thigh stuck out of his trousers and his other leg bent in a gruesome arrangement (TUR 229).

Obviously, Cora could not stand her hunters' assaults and Whitehead has to get her miraculously out of danger. Her victory over

Ridgeway and his men makes her a heroine of black protest, and furthermore an emblem of universal freedom fighter. Nihad M. Farooq argues that “Ridgeway hunts Cora with a particular vengeance because he had lost track of her mother, Mabel, who ran from Randall six years earlier” (88) and this explains his ferocious assaults on Cora. She has to be more than an ordinary character, doubly assisted by the Providence and the sympathy of strangers she met on her northward journey to freedom.

4. *The Underground Railroad*: Reimagining the Slave Narrative Genre in the Twenty First Century

The reader may be inquisitive about the relevance of Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* in the twenty first century beside the emergence of new trends in creative literature. I hold it that, reimagining a Slave Narrative genre in the contemporary context may imply an articulation of resistance against modern forms of injustices. The then plantation slavery that subjugated black people is translated into modern context of injustice, ranging from the fight for human rights to the engagement into ecological causes. Exhuming the Slave Narrative genre today in creative literature is to relight the flame of hope among desperate people, because it is a story of hard struggle to remain alive and afterward free in a country where minorities struggle to make a safer place for themselves and their descendants. Especially, for black people, a Slave Narrative genre in the twenty first century is a reminiscence of their endless journey to freedom. In Whitehead’s novel, slavery is not to be solely considered as the historical Trans-Atlantic trade and servitude of Africans in the Americas, but all hindrances (mostly man made) to human fulfillment. The contemporary context of violation in human rights suggests to think of slavery beyond the historical enslavement of Africans on the American soil. It would be much incoherent if Colson Whitehead had told the story from a stereotype black slave point of view, without inserting contemporary paradigms (the high tech Griffin Building, the women hob, the clinical tests on black people) to make it meaningful for his readership. In other words, Whitehead’s novel displays some features “which were not typically reflected in the slave narratives of the nineteenth century” (Von Rönn 17). If the Slave Narrative genre is still meaningful today, it is because of the various shapes slavery has taken according to Saidiya Hartman who argues that:

If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment (6).

These are in Hartman’s words the new forms of subjugation which refresh the dark memories of the nineteenth century black enslavement, and harboring towards equal rights for all, will help cure the psychological wounds of the past trauma and turn a new page to write the common history. The American country that claims itself democratic and an example in matter of human rights enforcement is contrastively the field of many injustices toward non-whites from the colonization to the recent demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement. The black people’s plight started when the illegal slavery system was institutionalized as a compromise to the southern states’ request to save the Union. Royal, one of the free black characters operating on the Underground Railroad in the novel remarks: “And America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes—believes with all its heart—that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers. This nation shouldn’t exist, if there is any justice in the world, for its foundations are murder, theft, and cruelty. Yet here we are” (TUR 217). Royal then captures the illegal way used by the nation to dominate and oppress its own people and much more other countries on the international level. As long as African Americans and other minorities are forced on the margins of the American Dream, the Neo-slave Narrative genre will continue growing as a contemporary great literary form of resistance. The genre, then, becomes the cornerstone of the fight against racism, discrimination, and other forms of oppression exercised on the most vulnerable social groups by some people holding power.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated some characteristics of the Neo-slave Narrative literary genre in Colson Whitehead’s novel *The Underground Railroad*. The argumentation stems from this question: how relevant is an

antebellum Slave Narrative in the twenty first century? At the end, the analysis has revealed that Whitehead's historical novel, though released in 2016 tells the story of Cora, a fugitive slave girl. The Slave Narrative genre, which emerged at the post-Civil War era, did not fade because of its central issue which is the slaves' struggle to survive and make their stories known to their descendants. The genre has evolved with the writers' reference to modern paradigms in their works and it became a Neo-slave Narrative genre, but did not lose its plantation tradition aspect. Fundamentally, this work has argued that, Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* departs from the Slave Narrative tradition to address contemporary forms of injustice that prevent African Americans and other minorities to achieve the American Dream. It is quite illusory to ignore that, though the historical slavery is abolished, other forms of enslavement and alienation are well marshaled by the hegemonic white dominant voice to keep the rest under control. The historical slavery in the novel is symbolic to any obstacle (usually man made) that threatens human happiness. The storyline that channels the ghost of slavery from Ajarry to her granddaughter Cora well illustrates the endless inhuman treatments faced by African Americans, and which are currently expressed through the demonstrations of the Black Lives Matter movement and other forms of protests. The novel is relevant in the contemporary context where human rights are being rudely violated under the conspiracy of some heartless decision makers. The paper has also argued that, Whitehead incisively attacks injustice through Ridgeway's brutality on the young and defenseless Cora. The Slave Narrative genre (which deals with the protagonist's endeavor to achieve freedom) finds its relevance in contemporary context because it addresses the same issue of freedom, but under other forms, and with other actors, which not forcibly black people. This is to say that, no one is spared from the social oppression, and even the most vulnerable must stand up like Cora and fight, if they aspire to survival. Moreover, the study has argued that, by reimagining the slaves' hard struggle to freedom in the context of current challenges, Whitehead simply reminds that slavery still exists, but under various shapes, and Cora's fight must incite optimism in people who have lost faith in the possible attainment of the American Dream.

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