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Neo-Slave Narratives: Intergenerational Embodied Resistance in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract

The study examines intergenerational embodied resistance through the matrilineal lineage of three major protagonists: Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. It reconceptualizes resistance as historically diffused and materially inscribed across successive generations of Black female bodies. Rather than considering embodied resistance as a discrete historical episode, the neo-slave narratives consider enslavement as an endless institution. The interlocking defiance of the characters in the novel across generations reveals resistance as inherited and cumulative, shaped by systemic slavery. In this regard, the study employs theoretical concepts of Michel Foucault's "biopower," Hortense J. Spillers's "the flesh" and Christina Sharpe's "the wake" to explore the persistent counterforce that the black protagonists embody in historical continuity and their transformative mode of obtrusiveness. Spillers's notion of flesh exposes the primordial violence through which Black subjects, particularly women, are ungended and commodified while Foucault's concept of biopower elucidates how enslaved bodies are surveilled, disciplined, and controlled. Sharpe's concept of the wake reveals slavery as an ongoing condition that continues to rupture and shape contemporary Black female life. In light of the analytical concepts, the study shows how trauma, dispossession, and resistance are transmitted across generations through Black female bodies. Thus, it contributes to scholarly literary discourse reconceptualizing resistance as an embodied, intergenerational process rather than an episodic one that features the Black female body as a critical site of violence, trauma, and agency.

Keywords: Biopower, embodiment, intergenerational resistance, matrilineal, neo-slave narratives

Introduction

The African-American writers often revisit the history of slavery interrogating its enduring impact on identity, memory, and resistance through the neo-slave narrative, a crucial emerging literary genre. Unlike the nineteenth-century slave narratives, neo-slave narratives reconstruct slavery through imaginative engagement, exposing its persistent psychological, social, and corporeal consequences in the present. Where the 19th-century slave narratives serve primarily as autobiographical testimonies, aiming at abolitionist audiences, Madhu Dubey notes that the neo-slave narratives “emerged in response to historical amnesia about slavery . . . preceded by a heightened public attention to slavery during the late 1960s” (333). Consequently, the genre showcases the legacy of slavery that reshapes contemporary realities rather than presenting it as a closed historical episode. Against this backdrop, Colson Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* (2016) reconfigures resistance not as a singular act of rebellion but as an integrated, embodied intergenerational process, transmitted through the lived experiences of the protagonists from three generations: Ajarry, Mabe, and Cora.

The narrative in *The Underground Railroad* presents the evolving prototypical embodied resistance across three generations. Ajarry, the grandmother, epitomizes the foundational inception of enslavement—her capture from an African village “in the port of Ouidah” (3). The subsequent commodification of her body: “so many times she was sold and swapped and resold” (6), establishes the Black female body as a site of exploitation and control. Yet, her strength to survive frequent sales and dislocation in unprecedented plantations constitutes her body as a bedrock of defiance against systemic racism. Black women’s subjective experiences of bodies, as Maxine Leeds Craig argues, “were the objects of ridicule and celebration” (6). The enslaved body of Ajarry is not only subjected to domination, but it also operates as a constructed site through the exercise of power. On the contrary, Mabel, her daughter, displays a more explicit and contested form of embodied resistance through her act of escape. While her absconding from the Randall Plantation disrupts the logic of slavery to assert bodily autonomy, it is referred to as abandonment for complicating the ethical dimension of resistance. The ambiguity brings into line Gene Andrew Jarrett’s argument that neo-slave narratives foreclose “the persistence, permutations, and complications” (7) of racial struggle rather than presenting a linear narrative of liberation. Cora, the granddaughter, synthesizes inherited legacies of her mother and grandmother, transforming survival and escape into an endless fight for the liberation. As Stephanie M. H. Camp argues, “enslaved and formerly enslaved women used their bodies as sites of resistance” (541). Cora’s body serves as both the carrier of ancestral trauma and a means of corporeal resistance. She also illustrates how defiance gets transmitted and reshaped across generations in distinct forms and styles.

In light of neo-slave narratives, Ashraf H. A. Rushdy relates the genre to “palimpsest narratives” in contemporary African-American fiction. The protagonist gets forced to adopt a bi-temporal perspective that shows the continuity and discontinuities from the period of slavery” (5). The narratives layer the past and present to reveal the persistence of racial violence and historical memory in which “the present is always written against a background where the past is erased but still legible” (8). In a similar line, Joan Anim-Addo and Maria Helena Lima argue, “Neo-slave narratives, whether literary, poetic, performative, or visual, not only demand that we re-evaluate a vexed history of trauma and violence but also urge us to re-consider the modern history of the representation of black bodies and selves” (3). It signifies that the neo-slave narratives re-imagine the slave narrative tradition to recover marginalized voices and challenge dominant historiography. Thus, Whitehead highlights forms of resistance often erased from official history through the fictional representation of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora, which serves as a narrative reclamation of Black female subjectivity through their bodies.

Although neo-slave narratives are dedicated to reclaiming the history of slavery, they are intricately composed of tensions and contradictions. According to Gabriella Friedman, they are “rooted partially in the US sentimental traditions,” often employing “lyrical language” and emphasizing “the emotional experience of enslaved characters” to “evoke the reader’s sympathy and empathy” (115). Consequently, the representation is far from real—stylized and mediated—rather

than independent historical intervention. Nevertheless, *the Underground Railroad* encapsulates embodied resistance not as something beyond the curvature of historical limits, but as a contemporary inheritance of past legacy. The spatio-temporal contexts of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora envision resistance not as a singular act of confrontation, but as an ongoing process constituted by the interplay of individual agency and structural constraints. In this sense, the neo-slave narratives prioritize the legacy of slavery, which continues to feature present realities and demands ongoing reinterpretation retrospectively.

The existing scholarship underscores formal innovation and reconfiguration of historical temporality in the present context. Scholars argue that Whitehead breaks from conventional realism by assimilating speculative and anachronistic elements to blur temporal boundaries and foreground the historical legacies of slavery as a structural condition rather than the closure of a historical epoch. In this, Thomas Knowles contends that the railroad in the novel operates not as a physical mechanism but as a device that makes the protagonists undertake “journeys on the railroad shuttling passengers backwards and forwards in America’s troubled history” (162). The railroad symbolically links past and present structures of racial violence. Similarly, Kaylie Anne Ward asserts that Whitehead’s novel demonstrates that “freedom and equality for black people have not been accomplished” (2). The argument aligns with the broader critical argument of Dubey, who asserts that neo-slave narratives utilize speculative strategies to show the emotional and structural perpetuity of slavery. James Mellis also foregrounds African-based spiritual tradition, contending that the novel invokes “African-based spirituality in order to create literary sites of resistance both within the narrative of the respective novels, but also within American culture at large” (1). The affirmation connects historical trauma to contemporary identity and resistance. The scholars in unison position *The Underground Railroad* as a reimagination of history, not as a closed past but as an ongoing and recursive institution.

In the tradition of slave narratives and neo-slave narratives, Wards argues that Whitehead reconstructs conventions through experimentation and innovations in forms and style. He claims that *The Underground Railroad* “can definitely be read as a neo-slave narrative. Dealing with the life of Cora, a fictional character, whose story is a product of imagination, makes that clear” (7). The depiction of plantation life, violence, and escape in the slave narrative changes into neo-slave narratives from “the imaginative device of time travel” (10). The dual-narrative strategy in historical realities expands expressive potentialities of the genre. In this respect, Mellis further argues that spiritual practices operate alongside these formal experiments, asserting, “while allusions to African spiritual beliefs exist as a frame of reference for Cora and other runaway slaves from the south . . . true ‘magic’ lies in the promise of an educated, interracial society living in harmony” (13). Mellis emphasizes an idealized future risk, overlooking the novel’s focus on embodied and ongoing practices of resistance. The critical focus also shifts to the issue of freedom, memory, and historical continuity. Ward contends that *The Underground Railroad* discards the conventional slave trajectory from bondage to liberation, suggesting that a “free place . . . has yet to be built” (18). By refusing closure, the analysis unsettles the idea of progress; it reveals the illusion of accomplished equality, echoing Knowles’ idea of the novel as a feature of provisional and weak social formation.

Despite the range of scholarship on *The Underground Railroad*, a clear research gap remains in the sustained analysis of intergenerational racial embodiments. While the critics have extensively examined trauma, memory, and continuous racial oppression, they prioritize the inherited suffering over bequeathed agency. The study, however, argues that *The Underground Railroad* foregrounds a matrilineal lineage of resistance that moves from Ajarry’s endurance to Mabel’s escape and Cora’s fight for self-determination. The genealogical embodied dimension implies that resistance, like trauma, is transmitted, adapted, and reconfigured across generations. The existing criticism rarely theorizes the transgenerational embodied resistance, particularly in relation to black female subjectivity and agency through black female bodies. It also reveals how the novel shows not only a history of oppression in slavery but also a lineage of evolving resistance. Thus, the study examines how the novel rearticulates resistance through the matrilineal trajectory of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora, focusing on the transmission and transformation of embodied resistance across generations. In light of the concern, the study is delimited to exploring the forms of embodied oppression and resistance that

emerge in *The Underground Railroad*, particularly through the intergenerational experiences of the major protagonists—Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora—to show the way embodied resistance is transmitted, accumulated, and transformed across these matrilineal lineages.

Theoretical Framework

The study utilizes qualitative research design based on the interpretive literary analysis method to examine the representations of Black female bodies in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. As it is text-based study, it employs close reading paired with thematic and contextual analysis to explore how the novel represents oppression, trauma and resistance through the matrilineal embodied experiences of Ajaary, Mabel and Cora. As a theoretical framework, it integrates Michel Foucault's theory of "biopower," Hortense J. Spillers's theory of "the flesh," and Christine Sharpe's notion "the wake" to examine the intergenerational, embodied oppression and resistance. Foucault's ideas of bio-power offer a lens to observe the power structure that shifts overt violence into the regulation of human life. Foucault argues that modern power operates through "permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life" (149) to expose how control becomes normalized and embedded within the institutional structure. He stresses that such power is sustained through "diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations, marking the beginning of an era of the biopower" (140). This demonstrates how governance functions through intimate and bodily regulations in assisting to analyze slavery not merely as a historical institution but as a precursor to contemporary mechanisms of governance that discipline and control black bodies. In this sense, Spiller's notion of the 'flesh' aids in deepening the analysis as it foregrounds the ontological violence of slavery. She argues that enslavement functions as "a theft of the body—a willful and violent . . . severing of the captive body from its motive will" (67), reducing human beings to an existence outside recognized subjectivity. She further states, "The captive female body locates precisely a moment of converging political and social vectors that mark the flesh as a prime commodity of exchange" (75). This reinforces the violent inscription on the body as the bodily captivity bears "undecipherable markings . . . a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh" (67). This framework sheds light on how the violence of slavery in both physical and symbolic levels erases kinship and identity while inscribing trauma onto the body.

In addition, Sharpe's the concept of the "the wake" help to expand the insights, situating Black existence within the ongoing aftermath of slavery. She maintains that "the semiotics of the slave ship continue" (21), linking historical captivity to contemporary structures of control. She further states that the notions of wake consist of "the track left on the water's surface by a ship . . . [and] consciousness" (21), to emphasize both material and psychic continuities of displacement. The insights reveal that resistance does not emerge in a singular act; it rather unfolds in a continuous process shaped by historical persistence. In this, the Foucauldian concept explains how the systemic regulation of life takes place through dispersed mechanisms of power. Spillers exposes the foundational violence that reduces the enslaved to flesh. In conjunction, Sharpe situates both insights within the enduring temporal condition of the wake. In short, the combined insights help to investigate the oppression and resistance that exist simultaneously at structural, corporeal, and temporal levels. Hence, the embodied resistance and struggle in the narrative do not function as isolated historical moments but as part of perpetual negotiation with the enduring logics of slavery, culminating in survival and resistance being inseparable from the lived experiences of Black female bodies.

Inscribing Biopower onto Black Female Bodies

Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* presents Black female bodies as sites where power is inscribed, regulated, and reproduced as what Michel Foucault theorizes the concept of biopower: "diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (140). Through intergenerational embodied experiences of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora, the novel illustrates that the historical legacy of slavery operates not merely as corporeal domination but as a system that controls, regulates, and commodifies Black female bodies at both individual and structural levels. Ajarry's commodified body marks the foundational moment of the inscription on the Black female

corporeality. Her body is defined as being “part of a bulk purchase, eighty-eight human souls for sixty crates of rum and gunpowder and the price arrived upon after the standard haggling in Coast English” (3). The assertion dehumanizes human life to a transactional value, exposing the relationships between slavery and the global economic system. Saidiya Hartman contends, “the theft, regulation, and destruction of black women’s sexual and reproductive capacities would also define the afterlife of slavery” (166). The frequent sale of Ajarry shows, the operative structure of coercive force operates through fetishism, being in line with Foucault’s argument that “it is because power is situated and exercised at the level of life, the species, the race, and the large-scale” (137). In this sense, Ajarry does not own her body; instead, the systemic market continuously recalibrates to determine her worth.

Whitehead exposes the commodification of the black female body, which gets internalized as discipline when Ajarry makes “a science of her own black body and [accumulates] observations” (7). Through lived experience, Ajarry recognizes that value determines existence itself: “if you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities” (7). The narration demonstrates that the external force not only controls the body but also regulates it in accordance with the imposed hierarchy. As Ajarry absorbs the logic of docility, it reverberates Foucault’s argument that disciplinary power produces “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (138). Similarly, Ajarry’s act of embodied knowledge reflects complete submission, underscoring the embodiment as a site of subtle defiance. Moreover, Ajarry’s mechanized bodies reveal biopolitical regulation of reproductive control. Recounting that she “bore five children by those men, each delivered in the same spot on the planks of the cabin,” and trained them “to obey her [so] they will survive” (8), Ajarry uncovers how the enslaved female body is reduced into a reproductive machine, prolonging slavery across generations.

Institutional power transforms Ajarry’s maternity into a survival mechanism, shaping her body into an instrument of labor and reproduction for others. As Spillers argues, “Under these conditions, one is neither female nor male, as both subjects are taken into ‘account’ as quantities” (72). Extending this argument, Emily West and Erin Shearer argue that “enslaved women should be both reproducers and laborers, hence grew more entrenched over time” (118), reducing reproductive capacities into an economic apparatus for sustaining slavery. Within this regime, Mabel recounts how “Old Randall sold off Kate once her arm went numb. . . . Moses’s first whipping for stealing a potato . . . and when Connelly had the boy’s wound washed out with hot pepper until he howled” (350). Mabel’s narration reflects what Achille Mbembe conceptualizes as “necropolitics,” the system in which the “contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death . . . reconfigures the relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror” (39). Sovereign power thus retains authority not only to inflict suffering and death, but also to determine the conditions under which life persists and ends. The harsh corporeal punishment Cora underwent: “stripped naked for her whippings, the blood pouring over her skin” (53) reveals the nature of violence that turns into an expected and normalized praxis. Her articulation, “That’s what they do” (53), signifies internalized terror as a daily mechanism of coercion.

Flesh to Agentive Body: Reconfiguring Originary Violence through Embodiment

The embodied narratives of *The Underground Railroad* reconfigure the enslaved Black bodies from a site of originary violence, what Spillers defines as the “flesh” as an entity before the “body” (67), a dynamic locus of agency, defiance, and self-agency. The narratives expose the protagonist’s embodied experiences, constructing the foundations for resistance. The lived experience of Mabel and Cora demonstrates the archaeology of agency constructed within. Their transformations echo Spiller’s argument that the captive body encodes violence as “hieroglyphics of the flesh” (67). Mabel’s escape demonstrates a crucial transition from a defenseless body to an agentive body capable of self-determination. The psychological burden of the slavery system does not hinder her from reclaiming the capacity to desire and to act. As the narrative unfolds: “Mabel was not going to die on Randall. . . . One midnight she decided. . . . I am going to survive—and the next midnight she was in the swamp, tracking after the moon in stolen shoes” (351). Moreover, her declaration, “I am going to survive,” refers to a shift from imposed obedience to self-directed expediting. In this regard, Sharpe’s

concept of “wake work” illuminates Mabel’s escape, as survival itself becomes a form of resistance within the ongoing “afterlife of slavery” (15). Mabel’s escape through the racial boundaries signifies a symbolic rebellion and a reorientation of the body toward self-autonomy.

However, the agency is forged through vulnerabilities that oscillate between stable and detached premises. The battle Mabel continues for freedom, staggering “through the reeds . . . flattened on the ground. Didn’t know how long she had been running. Panting and tuckered out” (352), justifies the prospect of the body even in harsh conditions. The physically exhausted body, affected by fear, violence, and constraint, enacts and propels resistance. In this, Hartman argues that the enslaved subject’s agency is marked by “maintaining the domination of the enslaved and cultivating the pained and burdened personhood of the enslaved” (84). In this sense, the acts of resistance do not entirely transcend the conditions that reproduce them, indicating that Mabel’s escape epitomizes both empowerment and precarity, showing the tension between agency and vulnerability. The transformative journey of Cora follows a similar trajectory that reconfigures labor and violence into acts of resistance. On the last day in the field, she “furiously hacked into the earth as if digging a tunnel. Through it and beyond is your salvation” (64). Cora’s physical act makes her body rehearse for liberation, transforming bodily defiance from compliance to subversion.

During her escape trajectory, Cora’s transformation becomes increasingly evident when she confronts violence with multiplied violence. For instance, as Cora reaches out and comes up with “a rock that she slammed into the boy’s skull. . . . She repeated her assault. His groans ceased” (71). Cora’s attack on the slave catcher boy reflects a decisive break from submissive agency, revealing her body as a spot of resistance rather than a compliant vehicle. The consciousness inherited from the matrilineal lineage transforms her into “too accustomed to escaping unscathed from encounters with white authority” (135). Such inherited awareness enables her to negotiate the system of power strategically. It suggests that agency functions on the physical plane and on cognitive levels through coercion and authority. In this sense, Foucault’s concept of power as “relational” illuminates Cora’s development. Her awareness marks a contingent stage to imbue conscious resistance. Cora’s transformation saturates as she confronts Ridgeway, a notorious slave catcher. When Cora jumps “on Ridgeway’s back and strangled him with chains, twisting them tight against his flesh. . . . Her scream came from deep inside her” (272), the scenario dramatizes a symbolic reversal of power and crossing of the conventional boundaries. The bondage becomes a tool of transformation and resistance, reconfiguring the material condition of oppression into a means of agency and power.

The sexual violence Cora frequently experiences reveals the gendered discrimination of disciplinary regulation. When Terrance “slipped his hand into her shirt and cupped her breast. . . . She did not move. Nobody had moved” (56), the scenario exposes a system in which Black female bodies are rendered vulnerable, violable, and inhuman. As Sharpe notes, “This is Black life in the wake; this is the flesh, these are bodies, to which anything and everything can be and is done” (16). This episode shows how power disciplines black people, particularly black female bodies, through the normalization of fear and regulated discrimination. The state-sponsored sterilization program similarly targets “colored women who have already birthed more than two children . . . in the name of population control” (135), signifying a shift from overt brutality to regulatory governance. Foucault argues that modern power structure operates through “permanent interventions at the level of the body, conduct, health, and everyday life” (149), suggesting that control becomes normalized through medical discourse. Despite such control mechanisms, whether in classical or modern contexts, the enslaved protagonists retain partial agency in power dynamics. Ajarry’s premeditated ‘science’ and the existence of “small freedom” indicate a fragile space of resistance and autonomy within an oppressive structure. Collectively, these embodied narratives unveil how the power inscribes onto the Black female bodies through commodification, institutional regulation, reproductive control, and violence.

Inherited Legacy: Intergenerational Matrilineal Transmission of Embodied Resistance

Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* not only recounts the violence of slavery but also a persistent lineage of embodied resistance of Black women across generations. The interconnected

lived experiences of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora showcase the embodied and matrilineal inheritance of oppression and resistance. This framework of embodied resistance, however, contradicts the critical approach of privileging trauma as the primary way of inheritance rather than foregrounding what Sharpe forwards as “new ways to live in the wake of slavery, in slavery’s afterlives, to survive (and more) the afterlife of property” (18). The way of survival and existence retains the perpetual practices of adaptation and response. The resistance in the narratives develops along with violence-embedded in memory, inscribed onto the body of the Black women, and reactivated through active actions and reactions. The inner speech of Cora expresses the denial as: “The first time Caesar approached Cora about running north, she said no. This was her grandmother talking” (3). The refusal Cora made does not indicate merely an individual decision but an act of inherited caution transmitted by her grandmother. In this regard, Camp argues, “As much as women’s bodies were sources of suffering and sites of planter domination, women also worked hard to make their bodies spaces of personal expression, pleasure, and resistance” (561). Hence, Ajarry’s voice epitomizes a historically grounded mode of resistance—one that emphasizes survival through compliance. However, the inherited resistance does not function in static mode. When Cora later consents to escape: “Three weeks later she said yes. This time it was her mother talking” (9), the narrative implies a transformation within the matrilineal line. Cora’s mother’s escape sheds light on a distinct mode of shifting resistance from endurance to movement.

Mabel’s rebellion illustrates the way of transformation she embraces as she “reoriented . . . and resumed her escape through the black water. Kept her eyes forward because when she looked back, she saw the faces of those she left behind” (349). The action and agency she retains closely align with the memory of the inherited systemic slavery, similar to Sharpe’s concept of the wake that underscores: “we insist Black being into the wake” (11). What Mabel refuses to reflect is not an erasure of history, but a survival technique to reinforce resistance, both remembered and deliberately detached. The oppositional relationship between history and futurity shows Mabel’s wavering struggle between the past and the present. Her rebellion through escape not only hints at a singular act but also at the perpetuity of the inherited collective rebellion, leading to an intergenerational resistance that operates through cognition and physical actions. As a part of physically forced action, Cora escapes the plantation, leaving her endeared objects of ancestral lineage: “a comb, a square of polished silver that Ajarry had scrounged years ago, the pile of blue stones. . . . Her farewell” (65). The objects of the ancestral values Cora leaves align with Hirsh’s concept of “post memory,” which “signals more than a temporal delay and more than a location in an aftermath” (106). The goods and embodied narratives inherent in Cora that develop the inherited consciousness of slavery, symbolizing both rupture from and a continuation of her matrilineal lineage.

In the meantime, the embodied narratives and lived experiences of the protagonists, nevertheless, challenge the idea of matrilineal inheritance, posing an alternative perspective of defiance. In this regard, Brother Valentine recounts, “We rise and fall as one . . . one colored family” (342) to underscore the role of collective campaign of the community instead of the familial lineage. His idea closely synchronizes with the Black communal traditions grounded in the shared initiatives and mutual collaboration. Paul Gilroy associates his idea with Valentine’s insistence on collective efforts, asserting “critical accounts of the dynamics of black subordination and resistance have been doggedly monocultural, national, and ethnocentric” (80). For Gilroy, resistance is not limited to generational inheritance but operates through collective national and ethnocentric struggles. Despite Valentine’s contestations on the specificity of matrilineal transmission, the communal solidarity does not entirely disagree with the pivotal role of matrilineal embodied defiance. In this, Spillers argues, “the African-American woman, the mother, and the daughter, become the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis” (80). Her assertion reports that the Black female bodies play a key role to defying the racialized tradition as Cora’s body functions. Inheriting the resistive character from her matrilineal lineage, she reveals that Black women’s bodies not only transmit trauma but also inherit a strategy of survival and defiance.

The transmitted embodied legacy does not transfer in a linear or uniform order rather it transmits in the adaptive mode as that of Ajarry’s endurance, Mabel’s escape, and Cora’s autonomy.

Across the intergeneration, each of them responds and negotiates to their own historical conditions by adapting the inherited strategies and facing the challenges. Judith Butler defines this context as the “iterability” of practices, relating with “performance” not a singular “act” or event, but a ritualized production (95). Along the same line, Cora performs her action, repeating her foremothers’ legacy that functions as a dynamic weapon for defiance. She inherits memories and strategies of survival and struggle from her grandmother and the mother, characterizing continuity and transformation. The way of inheritance Cora adapts echoes with James C. Scott’s concept of “hidden transcripts,” comprising “those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript” (4-5). As a result, the resistance of Cora emerges from the overt confrontation with the racist authority and covert form of inherited persistence through the matrilineal lineage. In this way, the fictional representations of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora in *The Underground Railroad* demonstrate that resistance not only means an act of rebellion but also everyday confrontations with power across generations.

Conclusion

In summary, the study contends that Whitehead’s *The Underground Railroad* exhibits slavery system as a historical institution that perpetuates to frame Black life across the generations. The interconnected lived experiences of Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora in the novel expose how oppression and resistance materially embed into Black female bodies and transmitted through matrilineal inheritance. Based on Foucault’s notion of bio-power, Spillers’s theory of “the flesh” and Sharpe’s concept of “the wake”, the analysis shows how systemic slavery since its inception operates through the surveillance system, discipline, reproductive exploitation, commodification, and institutional violence on Black women’s bodies. Regulating Black life on both physical and psychological levels, they treat enslaved bodies not simply as laboring objects but as subjects, leading to the design of the mechanisms to erase autonomy and humanity. The study reveals how the system of slavery strips Black women’s gendered identity and reduces them to dehumanized bodies. However, the embodied narratives of the protagonists not only depict Black female bodies solely as passive sites of victimhood but also as active agencies to transform into spaces for perseverance, selfhood, and resistance. The distinct journeys they undertake show that resistance does not always emerge from the rebellion alone, but from survival, movement, secrecy, and persistence. This is how the resistance becomes embodied and an endless chain of back and forth within the oppressive regime. In this way, the study articulates the oppression and agency exist deeply intertwined as two sides of a coin in the lived realities of slavery and its aftermath.

The embodied narratives in the novel blur the border between past and present to portray racialized violence, social exclusion, and institutional control as the perpetual structures for engendering the logic of slavery across generations. The intergenerational lived experiences Ajarry, Mabel, and Cora undergo in the distinct temporal phases demonstrate that trauma and dispossession get inherited intergenerationally, functioning as the crucial mechanism. In this frame, the black bodies of the protagonists from the same matrilineal continuity serve as living archives that transmit memories of suffering and resilience. Hence, the study develops an alternative insight that vocalizes the resistance is not an isolated movement, but it is a historically cumulative and matrilineally transmitted series of actions and reactions. The analysis suggests that resistance means not only the overt acts of defiance but also covert everyday struggles. In this way, the study contributes to the scholarship of neo-slave narratives and Black feminist discourse, exposing that the slavery system continues its scope beyond its historical border as an enduring structure. The afterlife of systemic slavery continues to shape the contemporary racial experiences and structures of inequality. Nevertheless, as a qualitative literary study based on the novel, the analysis/finding cannot be generalized to all African-American literature. Despite this, the study will assist future researchers to delve deeper into the comparative examinations of embodiment, memory, trauma, and intergenerational resistance in other neo-slave narratives and Black diasporic literature.

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