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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*:

The Trajectory of the Neo-Slave Narrative

Minami Michimoto

This thesis compares Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* to examine the evolution of the Neo-slave narrative. Chapter I of the thesis defines Neo-slave narratives and explores their relationship with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Whereas slave narratives were written by former slaves, Neo-slave narratives were written by a generation of blacks who had never experienced slavery. Neo-slave narrative refers to black literature from 1960 to the present that recovers the history of slavery from the perspective of slaves, restoring Black humanity and identity through imagination. BLM is a contemporary movement that seeks to create a just society for all by addressing the systemic discrimination and violence against black people by the police and creating safe spaces for marginalized communities to be themselves. The artists behind the Neo-slave narrative and BLM question America through their work. Today, the Neo-slave narrative is associated with BLM and explores what the United States is.

Chapter II focuses on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which is a masterpiece of Neo-slave narratives, incorporating oral traditions that are typical of African Americans into the slave narrative. Additionally, Morrison employs the literary technique of magic realism in *Beloved*. Through magic realism, black readers can reconnect with their ancestors and rediscover their lost identity. Non-black readers can also learn about the truth of slavery through multiple perspectives. In short, Morrison's Neo-slave narratives aim to reclaim the history and culture of the black community while also restoring black identity.

Chapter III discusses Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, published in 2016. Whitehead wrote the book inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement, which highlights issues such as racism, police brutality, and labor exploitation in America. The novel combines science fiction and realism to depict slavery with his unique satire. This not only informs readers about the truth of slavery but also encourages them to reflect on the essence of America. E. F. Sunland argues that it lacks an emotional portrayal of the main

character, Cora, and that her feelings are poorly represented. However, Whitehead intentionally avoided a detailed portrayal of the protagonist's emotion to give the work a visual realism and to offer readers multiple perspectives. Additionally, the unrealistic science fiction setting within the novel might confound Cora and shake the foundation of the work, which is why Whitehead avoided describing the character's feelings.

Chapter IV examines the differences between *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad*. The dissimilarities between the two works can be attributed to the historical context of the period in which they were written. Morrison's main focus in *Beloved* was to restore the humanity and existence of black people, which was undermined by the prejudice and discrimination blacks faced from whites after the Civil Rights Movement. She employed the techniques of magic realism to express the depth of African-American history and experience. On the other hand, Whitehead's use of science fiction and realism in *The Underground Railroad* revealed the structural issues that persist in contemporary American society. He portrays the plight of black people, specifically the black poor, and highlights the ways in which American society continues to oppress black people. Throughout the work, he also emphasizes that black people must continue to fight for absolute freedom and equality in light of the Black Lives Matter movement.

This thesis characterizes Morrison's *Beloved* and Whitehead's *Underground Railroad*, two representative Neo-slave narratives. Both novels are Neo-slave narratives representing a new form of political and pioneering protest literature that differs from earlier slave narratives or Neo-slave narratives. Both writers, in their own ways, make the reader think about what racism is and, by extension, what it means to be human.