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Rethinking the Past: *The Underground Railroad* and *Beloved* as Neo-slave Narratives of Escape, Memory, and Haunting

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Abstract

This paper interrogates how the theme of escape, haunting, and the long-term impact of traumatic memory redefine historical memory in The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead and Beloved by Toni Morrison. Through the use of speculative features, Whitehead's real underground railroad and Morrison's depiction of the ghostly haunting in the Black people's lives in America, both books undermine the conventional representations of slavery and the weight of the past, both historical and psychological. The characters in these novels mirror the struggle of physical escape and the inescapable impact of painful memory and how the trauma of the past still lingers with them in the generations of their descendants. By combining realism with speculative aesthetics, Whitehead and Morrison focus on the spectral influence of the past in the construction of identity, and social memory by reversing the direction of historical narratives. Grounded in trauma theory and Afro-pessimist thought, the paper challenges the readers to reconsider the way the legacy of slavery continues to plague even the contemporary society, inviting them to evaluate these two novels not only as an act of historical reappropriation but also a critique of the shortcomings of the traditional historiography..

Keywords: *Past, Slaves, Black, Trauma, Identity.*

Introduction

The revival of the slave narrative at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of 1930s is the more complete renewal of African-American culture after the World War I. The Harlem Renaissance provided a powerful impetus to reviving a usable past although such tales were no longer popular after the Civil War. This was a literary movement that was initiated by such leaders as Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. DuBois, and this movement was centred on establishing identity, dignity, and self-respect by using literature and history as their key leverage.

Unlike the more passive or romanticized pictures of pain depicted in older nineteenth-century novels, aggressive opposition to oppression is the focus in the modern African-American novels. It is interesting to note that in her neo-

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slave narratives, Toni Morrison employs the living informants who have the firsthand experience of the horrors of slavery just make it sure that the past suffering cannot be concealed or kept hidden. Morrison, with this approach, revitalizes the slave narrative tradition, in which history and memory as factors of change affect the collective identity.

Similarly, Colson Whitehead wrote *The Underground Railroad* at the time when racial tension in the US was high. The book written in 2016, representing bigger sociopolitical issues, analyses the topic of slavery through the prism of whiteness. The urgency and tone of the novel was affected by the racial debate which was dominated by the rhetoric of Trumpian racist violence, the rise of Black Lives Matter as a reaction to institutional violence, and the presidency of Obama. The election of Trump symbolized a revival of racial isolation that was similar to Jim Crow times when the blacks had been released, but the reign of Obama was a symbolic victory among the African American race.

The novel by Whitehead explores the role of fear in white supremacy and promotion of violence against the black people as a historical inquiry and as a satirical attack. Thus, it breaks the myths of an America that is post-racial and reveals a more acute racial crisis that echoes the injustices of the past. The examples of the change in the language of black literature include Morrison and Whitehead, and it is the conscious effort to reclaim the past, resist erasure, and implement the potent narrative intervention to challenge repressive formations.

In 1987, Toni Morrison authored the award-winning novel *Beloved*, and in 2016, Colson Whitehead did the same with *The Underground Railroad* . Both novels examine the spectre of slavery in the American South. In *Beloved* by Morrison, a book based on a true story, the pain of slavery is explored psychologically and spiritually. Morrison deals with racism and misogyny and challenges the erasures of the history by blending the myth, social commentary, and spectrality. Similarly, *The Underground Railroad* by Whitehead confronts national stereotypes that equate escape with utter freedom by taking *The*

Underground Railroad literally and disrupting stereotypical images of the slavery abolition.

Both works subvert traditional historiography by applying speculative elements in rewriting historical events. Through its revelation of the complexity of freedom and movement, the literalized railroad used by Whitehead undermines easy notions about emancipation. Through its spectral representations, *Beloved* by Morrison emphasizes the existence of the trauma as well as the inability to forget the past. Through the clash between the psychological and physical freedom of their characters, these novels reveal the lasting impacts of slavery across the generations.

By combining realism with speculative aesthetics, Morrison and Whitehead destroy historical accounts and reclaim lost voices. Their works force one to reconsider how the past constructively shapes our present racial consciousness, being at the same time historical interventions. Trauma theory makes us see how the characters in both works such as Sethe or Cora are carrying not only personal but also collective wounds that can affect the lives of their descendants. This is intensified by Afro-pessimist thought that reminds us that slavery is not history but a situation, an institution that still gives Black life its meaning. It is evident in both novels that escape is never perfect: the body can escape, but the shadow of violence, the life of slavery that comes after, will still haunt the reader and must be addressed as the inseparability of pain and survival as a key component in identity and in shaping the social memory. The argument presented in this paper is that *Beloved* and *The Underground Railroad* , in their focus on the spectral weight of history, transcend the literary norms of their eras and reinterpret the perspective on the legacy of slavery and its understanding.

Revisiting the Past and the Imprints of Slavery in Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison, in *Beloved*, which is set in 1873 in Cincinnati after the Civil War, is an excellent example of how the temporal distance is not able to eliminate the salience of slavery. Instead, the trauma persists, redefining and distorting the lives of Paul D., Sethe, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid and Ella who must all bear the

cost of shame and suffering. Their broken memories are a multi-layered and dynamic portrait of slavery whereby no episode has been left to be unrecorded. The rhythm of going back and forth in time creates a dense net of voices that creates a sense of the emotive aspects of slavery being embraced fully. On top of being just an account of Sethe and her state of suffering, *Beloved* is a mosaic of memories that was created by Paul D., Baby Suggs, Denver and *Beloved* herself. These stories challenge the validity of historical reality by showing how personal accounts empower and also complicate the shared memory, enhancing the reader's understanding about the experiences of Sethe (Viji and Girdhar 63).

In *Beloved*, Morrison challenges the validity of official history, pre-empting the shortcomings of that history by considering them in reflective moments that accentuate the process of constructing the past over its mere recovery. Even though the newspaper itself appears to be factual, the way it portrays Sethe's crime is a valid example of how textual accounts often create a misrepresentation of lived reality. Although illiterate, Paul D. can read the lie hidden within the description of Sethe: "that ain't her mouth" (Morrison 181). Here, Morrison can unmask the hollowness of official documentation as this scene betrays the unabridged gap between lived reality and its presentations in texts or visuals. Against archival information, which has been moulded due to deeply ingrained ideas, Morrison argues that fiction especially those that explore the inner world of the ex-slaves can present a deeper historical truth. *Beloved* challenges the readers to rethink the process of remembering and rebuilding the past bringing it in disjointed texts and varying voices that both preserve and dismantle the notions of authenticity.

Beloved is an act of collective memory recovering the past both on the artistic and the historical levels. The novel represents an immense, densely-located, question that reinstates ancestral pain and strength that transcends a simple reconstruction of history. This understanding of the importance of memory is fulfilled by Baby Suggs who insists that death is not equal to forgetfulness (Morrison 4). The statement by Amy Denver, "Anything dead coming to life

hurts," points out the painful experience of reminiscence and facing the past (Morrison 42). In *Beloved*, a formation of memories is performed by the means of remembering and erasing, denouncing and reinstating, obliterating and healing, and swings between disruption and healing. Morrison looks for an engagement beyond mere recollection, defining history as not the archival artifact but a living dynamism that can only be maintained through suffering and perseverance.

In a bid to reconstitute a historical discourse of the marginalized groups, Morrison resorts to magical realism, which is an aesthetic strategy that assumes the presence of the realities which go beyond the structures of the ordinary linguistic representation. Through anticipating the views of the enslaved persons in *Beloved*, she tries to rewrite the narratives of the slaves and provides the African Americans readers with the medium to reflect on their collective history. West African mythic structures and African-American oral traditions are incorporated into the narrative structure and symbolic echoes of the novel, and they all serve to support the project of historical recovery. Thus, Morrison challenges the traditional historiography through the combination of historical memory with supernatural forms, opening up a past that manifests as a dynamic lived experience.

By emphasizing that it is not a story to pass on, Morrison enacts a dual movement, maintaining the past and abandoning it at the same time: "It was not a story to pass on" (Morrison 324). The unclear nature of the statement foreshadows a conflict between remembrance and oblivion because the term 'passing on' can also be taken to mean a conscious renunciation of historical encumbrances or alternatively the passing of the encumbrances onto the next generations. Although the novel, *Beloved*, promotes an experience with the historic pain, Morrison admits that excessive absorption in the past can prevent the ability of any person to move on. The story seems to suggest that the past has to be rebuilt in the present, as demonstrated by the violent conclusion reached by Sethe so that healing can take place.

The schoolteacher Sethe repeats her trauma in an example where she misunderstands Bodwin as her previous persecutor but instead transfers her anger to her children hence pointing out that she has a different relationship with the past. Morrison uses this example to show Sethe not only as a victim but as an agent, who is going through the complicated landscape of memory and survival. Since the subversions and complicities of Sethe co-exist and bring light on the impossibility of individual agency to deal with an irreducible historical continuum, the postmodern form of the novel is difficult to close in a conclusive way.

Historical Shadows and Echoes of Enslavement in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Like Morrison's *Beloved*, Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* plays with the tropes of the historical fiction of the realist tradition, playing with fantasy divergence and strict historical accuracy. Whitehead attempts to challenge the prescriptive values of historical fiction by purposely including ahistorical or fantastical elements into his novel, though a large part of the novel accurately describes the life of the American people during the mid-nineteenth century. This intentional non-realism highlights the gaps of the historical narrative, especially the gaps of historical accounts on the lived experience of enslaved Black individuals, who were actively disenfranchised, deprived of the ability to write their accounts. Addressing the discomforting truth in the ugly reality of slavery of the Black people, Whitehead instils into his work the elements of fantasy and speculation that make the described realities stranger—and probably more terrifying—than fiction. Such an approach makes the reader rethink the composition of historical facts and the possibility of creative imagination to revive the voices that were excluded in the history.

Slavery is not just a historical relic but it still has its toll in contemporary society. Instead of presenting the United States during the period of the mid-nineteenth century, the experiences of Cora in South Carolina are viewed through the prism of future racial violence, such as the Eugenics movement of the early twentieth

century, the Tuskegee syphilis experiment (1932-1972), and continued forced sterilization initiatives which target incarcerated Black women only. Whitehead manipulates the utopian understanding of slavery coming to the end with the legal act of abolition by integrating these subsequent crimes into his fictional history and therefore highlighting their long-term viability on the current racial discrimination systems. His approach defies current historical accounts by allowing readers to see the unhealthy continuation of racial exploitation.

The reorganization of the symbolic web of escape routes into a physical underground railroad that Whitehead has done is a conspicuous violation of historical truth. His work challenges existing understandings of historical realism by reimagining that *The Underground Railroad* was an actual railway system despite the fact that the real Underground Railroad was a complex system of safe houses and underground tunnels, managed by specific agents of the station. Although historical fugitives used both diverse methods of transportation wagons, horseback, and walking, the historical sources reveal that they did occasionally utilize the use of railway infrastructure, thus refuting the argument that no such thing as a railway infrastructure ever existed. Whitehead is asking the question of how far the metaphor can be animated, and this foreshadows the idea that Black emancipation has been traditionally made to seem unrealistic within the context of a white supremacist culture. The fact that the novel criticizes the issue of racial oppression as an ever-perpetuating continuum that remains unresolved, is supported by the fact that Ridgeway pursues Cora and Mabel indefinitely, and this process helps to realize the idea that the race as a whole will never accept the Black agency.

The Underground Railroad challenges the continuing mythologisation of American history by critiquing how white characters abide by an artifice of national narrative, even though it shows glaring inconsistencies. The proclamation of Independence declaring the postulates of equality and universal liberty which are heavily negated in the institution of slavery and in the process of juridical dehumanisation of Black people, is referred to several times

throughout the novel. Using such dissonance, Whitehead attempts to show that America was built around racial inferiority and forced displacement instead of democracy, which reveals the hypocrisy of the American myths about its founding. Reactive to white supremacist delusions, the Black characters had to practice a different form of myth-making, that of the perceived possibility of freedom, which is a representation of how fantasy mediates the national boundary between historical reality and construction, being both an oppressive tool and a form of resistance at the same time. Thus, Whitehead highlights the incompatibility of the Black life itself with the fabric of white historical fantasies to show his readers the disturbing realities behind the ideals that America claims to uphold.

Ineluctable Past in the Haunted Present in Morrison's *Beloved*

The artistic pursuits of Morrison are focused on recovering histories that are lost in cultural amnesia and silence. In *Beloved*, Morrison crafts a story based on African cosmology, where memory and history have the ability to cross time constraints, and the boundary between the living and the dead turns unclear. Even though the spectre of the murdered child of Sethe is apparently the character of *Beloved*, the character serves as a metaphor of the many lives that were lost in the process of Middle Passage– whose absence lingers even in the modern world of slavery regardless of whether the names of those victims are found or not in historical books and records. Morrison identifies memory with re-assembling broken bodies, invaluable transaction of social accounting and re-defines recollection as a restorative process. *Beloved* is, therefore, not simply a ghost but it is a voice of the disremembered, calling on the modern African-American readers to deal with the erasures of history and reclaim histories of victimization and resistance. The author, thus, presents recollection as a compulsion as well as a tool to fight historical oblivion with the disturbing effect of intertwining the past and the present.

The titular character of *Beloved* is a complex, multidimensional character who is the lost daughter of Sethe as well as a psychosomatic medium through which

Sethe repressed slavery memories. Being a figurative representation of lost histories, *Beloved* makes a viewer interact with traumatic experiences that were repressed or considered to be unwise to be remembered (Morrison 274). The character is there to make the American culture face the witness of slavery that lives to this day hence making remembrance a necessity to have a way of interacting with the past. Paradoxically, *Beloved* also stresses the need to forget history (Morrison 274), which also shows the conflict between the need to connect with the past and the need to eliminate its modern hold. The novel states that memory is an unavoidable power of influence on history and identity. The haunting finally fades away with the story's end only when the remembrance is replaced by conscious forgetting and past exists without overpowering the present. Thus, the character of *Beloved* in Morrison's novel embodies the delicate balance emotional survival and historical authenticity.

Although *Beloved* looks a girl of around eighteen, she has not matured emotionally and psychologically because of the trauma of being severed from her mother Sethe. She is a symbol of unresolved agony, sorrow, and a transitional character who is torn between childhood and adulthood, life and death. In addition to the aspect of ghost presence, her appearance on 124 Bluestone Road is a desperate bid to restore the feeling of belonging and parental love that institutional injustice has taken away. Being the representation of the unrecognized historical trauma, *Beloved* shatters the precarious efforts of Sethe and Paul D. to repair their relationship through intimacy-based healing, dubbed by the author as their mutual talking cure, proving that love is not enough to fully overcome the consequences of past atrocities (Morrison 99). Thus, Morrison introduces *Beloved* as a parallel of the past that cannot be easily reconciled, but requires a deeper accounting of the memory and loss.

In *Beloved*, Morrison challenges the existing conflation of freedom and emancipation and introduces freedom as a problematic state, which involves a perpetual suffering. The novel shows that the former slaves still found it difficult even after official abolishment of slavery, which is reflected in the Black

experience in the world. Morrison dwells on the psychological terrain of slavery relying on the Black historical accounts and thus demonstrates that oppression is not limited to one system and continues to exist in various forms. She bases her story on personal, internal narratives of the oppressed and thus creates a graphic portrayal of the traumas caused by oppression. Besides documenting the horrors of slavery, *Beloved* also explores the years of cruelty that followed with its revelation of gears of disgrace, and the dehumanizing nature of chain gangs of the American prison system, as well as the rotten heritage of a slave mindset that was pressed upon successive generations. This uncompromising examination is the reason why Morrison makes the story resistant to the effects of historical closure by highlighting the sufferings of Black life after enslavement (Pun 18).

Unyielding History in the Troubled Present in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Whitehead uses satire as a powerful tool to reveal most forms of White fear across the ages, irony and exaggeration to tear down the established stories. Unlike other forms of representation that emphasize either the melancholic attachment or the idea of the historical closure via the healing process, the African American satire, and especially the kind of satire that Whitehead uses, provide other modes of interacting with the past and the present. Whitehead's approach is based on the fact that, since their root causes have not been well resolved, historical racial injustices allow the resurgence of slavery and segregation to reoccur in grotesque or absurd forms. In this background, satire is a weapon of disputing the existing myths and structural injustices. Through the criticism of the literary and cultural conventions limiting Black authors, the new approach to the representation of slavery and segregation is an innovative idea that makes the readers see the unresolved racial injustices, which are still at home in the American land.

The Underground Railroad is a scathing critique of racism and its historical constructions that breaks essentialist notions of Blackness and Black literature.

The role of satire in the novel is that of a critical prism, one that allows the investigation of historical accounts to be reconsidered, allowing them to be understood through White lenses. The imposed movement of the White gaze that spawned the compulsory repression of the Black subjectivity was such that Blacks were not considered as free agents rather as objects. This tension is reflected in the vision of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry, whose own interpretation of slavery becomes the cornerstone of the American society and its economy (Heneks 138). Whitehead does not just criticize White supremacy in a structural sense, but rather uses sight as a tool of violence, revealing the identification of systems that justify and maintain horror. Through the comparison of the antebellum slave markets and cotton gins with modern-day symbols like skyscrapers and subways, the novel makes the readers question the myths about the racial superiority that the white Americans have crafted about themselves, claiming that the phenomenon of the White supremacy is not only prevalent and widespread, but also grotesque and insidiously violent.

The irony and absurdity in *The Underground Railroad* are far too many; when Cora is given a position in the Museum of Natural Wonders, the satire of racial representation in the novel becomes adequately evident. The various racialized roles that she and other Black women are obliged to play in the exhibit on the history of the living include a slave lady, a captive on a ship, and an African in the jungle, and in the rest of the museum, there are White dummies standing still and the taxidermized animals. This sharp contrast aims to highlight the critique of the fact that the White civilization degrades the Black existence to a spectacle forging slavery as an inseparable part of the Black identity. This uncomfortable situation reveals the means by which racial oppression is perpetuated in the name of education and historical record keeping, and demonstrates that even the museums, which are generally linked to objective knowledge, are not responsible to do away with racial myths.

The Underground Railroad critically examines how history is selectively erased and reconstructed, specifically how the concept of slavery masks the Whiteness.

The museum protects the Whiteness and at the same time allows it to preserve its ability to influence the history by replacing dummies with real Whites. Because of this strategic omission, the institution can manipulate historical racial facts and present history as aesthetically edible display to the White audiences. When Cora is a part of a museum exhibition called the 'living history', she doubts the authenticity of the exhibits, as shown by her asking the dummy sailor, "Is this the truth of our encounter?" (Whitehead 116). Already aware of the solution, she realizes that the truth of history is evasive, fabricated, shifting, inaccessible and like a false storefront display.

The American history as portrayed in the museum is a whitewashed story meant to streamline the White supremacy instead of addressing the violent history of the country. The description of these by Whitehead highlights how race and racism is not just a historical phenomenon, but it is being created and recreated to suit dominant ideologies. Locating Cora in the centre of this performative historical reconstruction emphasizes the dynamism of the past and how the narrative of the past can be easily deleted and modified. Cora comes out as a serious mouthpiece of the criticism of Whitehead in this framing, as she represents the conflict between historical reality and fiction in a country that is still struggling with its racial history.

The Underground Railroad provokes the optimistic assumptions of progressive history by erasing the belief that the attainments of freedom rely on geographic evasion or that equality between races would become synonymous with the legal abolishment of slavery. When applying this type of criticism to the modern-day situations, Whitehead posits that the major events, including the election of a Black president, do not necessarily mark the beginning of the post-racial society. The claim that the legacy of slavery is a living process, as opposed to a thing of the past, is also supported by his narrative design that plays with time and combines historical and contemporary types of oppression. Just as chronological boundaries are crossed with erasure, Whitehead contrasts slavery with racial persecution today- this can be slavery, forced sterilizations, anti-black laws,

White supremacy violence at Valley Farm, and historical manipulations degrading the suffering of Black people. These injustices of the system do not exist as fossils of slavery, rather they are its immediate descendants, and the same forces of power and fear keep them alive. Whitehead challenges the reader to acknowledge the fact that racial oppression is a dynamic system that is formed part of American culture and not an isolated phenomenon of the past.

Finally, in *The Underground Railroad* , the concept of freedom is also questioned, and through this approach, the reader is left wondering whether it is possible that Cora, the African Americans, and the nation of America in general can be free. It argues that in order to understand Black history, one needs to deal with the reality of slavery, just as one needs to understand America and deal with the reality of its inception on racial servitude. Whitehead illustrates the contradictions of the very essence of the American identity: the country commodified and betrayed the same principles of the liberty that it was supposed to protect, based on the stolen land and supported by threatened labour. This criticism on slavery discredits the illusion of progress, which suggests that slavery still lingers in the fabric of the country and that it still shapes the past, as well as the present.

Conclusion

The legacy of slavery, as evidenced by neo-slave narratives, is not limited to those who are directly affected by it, but rather permeates the American identity broadly and perpetuates a loss of humanity across all racial distinctions. The literary oeuvre of the post-Civil Rights era where stories are no longer about the abolition of slavery but rather about the continued attempt to erase the slave trade through the collective memory of people can be used to highlight the conflict between historical slavery and the uncertain idea of liberty. An example of this is *Beloved* by Toni Morrison in which she asserts that the past needs to be addressed as a way of ensuring that the future is secure since Sethe can only move forward after she has addressed the suffering of her past. A politics of recognition can also be seen in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

which predicts the resiliency of the marginalised and makes the readers face the harsh truths about the American history. As a result, these kinds of narratives rewrite the history of slavery as a proactive intervention in modern discourse of democracy instead of making it a nostalgic activity. The very process of storytelling is a democratization project by including those marginalised or suppressed voices to be part of the collective memory. The neo-slave histories argue that slavery is not an event of the past that should be eliminated but a persistent state that still determines the Black lives and that the master-slave relationship is a structuring force in African-diasporic identity. These accounts do not focus on history as a closed chapter but instead reveal the long-term consequences of history and how the state of bondage continues to shape the current and future liberation movements.

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